

RAYMOND CHANDLER: *The Big Sleep*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1939. 231 p.

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1. Some novelists write one and only one great novel. Only one *masterpiece*. The question some people ask (I ask this, anyway) is why? Why just one? After all, if you're good enough to do it *once*, why aren't you good enough to do it *twice*? And sometimes an answer is possible. Like with Raymond Chandler; like with *The Big Sleep*.

A great novel? A *masterpiece*? Well, it's true that there are no hard and fast rules about what makes a novel *great* or a "masterpiece." But admitting this *isn't* to say that the issue is up for grabs—that it's a subjective matter that *anyone* can weigh in on (regardless of how clumsy that person's thinking is).

Okay, these truisms out of the way, let's focus on what's *bad*—even awful—about this novel. Just to get these points out of the way.

- Chandler has real difficulties depicting scenes between men and women, that's one problem—and his dialogue (in particular) suffers when this happens, turning remarkably clunky. Especially if they're trying to *flirt* with one another. (The reader's ear—if the reader *has* an ear, of course—twists up in total agony.) The dialogues between Marlowe and Vivian (in just about every scene) are, for example, just painful to read (or listen to): they're stilted and clichéd—even embarrassing. (The quality of Chandler's dialogue-prose varies by a *lot*. This is surely a flaw, a *big* flaw.)

(Here's one of my favorite worst lines I've ever read: "My God, you big dark handsome brute! I ought to throw a Buick at you." Here's another one of my favorite worst lines I've ever read. It's uttered by Vivian when she's placing a bet: "Everything I have on the red. I like red. It's the color of blood.")

- Chandler has real prejudices, *stupid* prejudices—against homosexuals, in particular—but also his world view exhibits lots of ordinary racial prejudices as well: both positive and negative ones. Although these are largely shared with the narrator, Marlowe, the important point is that they leak out beyond Marlowe's *perception* of the world to the novel's *depiction* of that world. In this sense, Chandler's prejudices affect his novel—they literally affect how the novel is structured: in particular, what kinds of insights characters are capable of having (or not having) about their world.

(Example: In the fight with Carol Lundgren, Marlowe anticipates several things correctly based on Lundgren being gay; among them that he isn't going to have trouble in a fight with Lundgren because "a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like.")

A lot of people praise Chandler's "complex character studies" but really they *shouldn't*. A great deal of his depiction of character is built on simple cliché—racial and otherwise. What's true is that Chandler often creates characters that are memorable; but with only a few exceptions the fact that *we* find certain characters memorable is something *we* should be embarrassed about.

(Sometimes something is memorable precisely *because* it's trashy—*only* because it's trashy. We should recognize that about ourselves. Be aware of it, watch out for it.)

A lot of people praise Chandler's realistic depiction of gritty L.A., and more broadly for his realistic depiction of Southern California during the time of the novels. They *shouldn't*. For the most part, there's nothing realistic either in his depiction of the people in this novel or the sociology of the time (for example, how police departments at that time were hierarchically structured, how criminals of that time and of various sorts managed their scams) or even the architecture. What Chandler has (as a writer) is an ability to coin *memorable language*: witty turns of phrase that are simultaneously *imagistic* characterizations that stick in the mind—ones that put *little pictures* in our minds as we read. These are strengths, evident strengths, but they shouldn't be confused with an ability for *realism*: to see (and depict) aspects of the world as they *really are*.

(This point is entirely compatible with the fact that Chandler, to some extent, researched his novels, studying what he could about police procedure, walking around in certain areas, reading newspapers. There's nevertheless a difference between verisimilitude—the resemblance to truth—and realism. There are some nice recent examples of what realism requires, for those who aren't sure: Cormic McCarthy's novels and some of Elmore Leonard's work. In both cases I'm speaking of how they describe and depict objects, e.g., guns, and procedures, e.g., police procedures.)

A lot of people praise Chandler's invention of the *character Marlowe*. That praise ought to be a lot more *nuanced*. Because, although there's quite a bit to admire about Marlowe and about Chandler's inventiveness (as I'll indicate shortly), it's important to recognize how much *isn't* fresh or particularly admirable about Marlowe. In particular, that Marlowe is a morally-upright "knight" wandering through a seedy world is a fictional motif that's as, um, old as the hills. (It dates back to *Jesus Christ*, of all people.) And this aspect of Marlowe is both the least realistic and the most annoying: it's the source of his irritating disgust towards most of the women in the novel.

(Towards Carmen especially who, let's admit it, is neither nymphomaniac nor particularly morally corrupt nor drug addled—at least not all the time. She's mentally-damaged, mentally impaired *in more than one way* (among other things, epilepsy is a possibility). So she's not just stupid, she's not just a "dope," as Marlowe puts it at one point. I'm not criticizing Marlowe for his short-sighted evaluation of Carmen, by the way; after all, he isn't a trained health-professional.)

Anyway, this knightliness that so many critics find appealing in Marlowe is mostly indicated in the novel by Marlowe's bizarre loyalty to his clients. These short-lived relationships, however, are purely pecuniary in nature: they're based neither on genuine affection towards his clients (who mostly don't deserve any), nor on a previous history with them (like a common childhood, for example), nor even on an appreciation of their virtues (which is a good thing since most of them don't *have* any virtues). Think of General Sternwood who, by no stretch of the imagination, can be regarded as a "good" man deserving of *any* loyalty.

On the other hand, a lot of people complain about Chandler's handling of plot: the plot of *The Big Sleep* is often described as labyrinthine and overly complex; it's thought to have dangling elements ("who the hell killed Owen Taylor?"). They *shouldn't* complain about any of *this*. Because, actually, the plot isn't very complex at all, and there are *no* dangling elements. What's complex is how the plot reveals itself to Marlowe over time. Indeed, the way the plot unravels (reveals itself to Marlowe) is actually central to why the novel is a great novel, and why Chandler was incapable of doing *that* twice.

(Saying there are no dangling plot elements isn't to say that there aren't implausibilities or plot weaknesses in the book. There are, of course. But that's a different matter.)

2. Let's start with an important scene, *the* one where Marlowe talks about his *epistemic methodology*. It occurs at the end of the novel—just where it should. Because if a character is going to talk about his epistemic methodology *in a novel*, then it should have been illustrated for quite a while already. And it has. But in a critical piece (like this thing *you're* reading), the right move is to start with the methodology first, and to give the illustrations *afterwards*.

It's the last scene with General Sternwood. He wonders if it's ethical that Marlowe has misled Captain Gregory—the head of the Missing Persons Bureau—into thinking Sternwood had hired Marlowe to find his son-in-law Regan. Marlowe says that it *is* ethical, and General Sternwood says: "Perhaps I don't understand."

Marlowe responds:

Maybe you don't. The head of a Missing Persons Bureau isn't a talker. He wouldn't be in that office if he was. This one is a very smart cagey guy who tries, with a lot of success at first, to give the impression he's a middle-aged hack fed up with his job. The game I play is not spillikins. There's always a large element of bluff connected with it. Whatever I might say to a cop, he would be apt to discount it. And to *that* cop it wouldn't make much difference what I said. When you hire a boy in my line of work it isn't like hiring a window-washer and showing him eight windows and saying: 'Wash those and you're through.' *You* don't know what I have to go through or over or under to do your job for you. I do it my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favor. The client comes first, unless he's crooked. Even then all I do

is hand the job back to him and keep my mouth shut. After all you didn't tell me *not* to go to Captain Gregory.

*There's always a large element of bluff connected with it.*

And Marlowe says this:

Well, what have I done wrong? Your man Norris seemed to think when Geiger was eliminated the case was over. I don't see it that way. Geiger's method of approach puzzled me and still does. I'm not Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance. I don't expect to go over ground the police have covered and pick up a broken pen point and build a case from it. If you think there is anybody in the detective business making a living doing that sort of thing, you don't know much about cops. It's not things like that they overlook, if they overlook anything. I'm not saying they often overlook anything when they're really allowed to work. But if they do, it's apt to be something looser and vaguer, like a man of Geiger's type sending you his evidence of debt and asking you to pay like a gentleman—Geiger, a man in a shady racket, in a vulnerable position, protected by a racketeer and having at least some negative protection from some of the police. Why did he do that? Because he wanted to find out if there was anything putting pressure on you. If there was, you would pay him. If not, you would ignore him and wait for his next move. But there was something putting a pressure on you. Regan. You were afraid he was not what he had appeared to be, that he had stayed around and been nice to you just long enough to find out how to play games with your bank account.

*I'm not Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance. I don't expect to go over ground the police have covered and pick up a broken pen point and build a case from it.*

3. Sherlock Holmes has been mentioned explicitly. We can treat the novelist (Chandler) as deliberately invoking the detective genre and saying something explicit about how his approach is different.

Sherlock Holmes, and *all* of his descendents, live in an epistemically magical world. Indeed, the detective genre and everything influenced by it (and I include *almost everything* on television and in the movies *as* influenced by it) requires that *any* crime, any action (for that matter), leaves *traces* in the world. If you are smart enough (obsessed enough, *aspergerish* enough—whatever), and/or if, anyway, your brain is stuffed with enough trivia about different kinds of mud, styles of shoe in post-war India, recent mutations of fish in Iceland, details about winecorks produced in Ireland from 1917 to 1921, etc., then when faced with the puzzle-solving details of who-did-what-and-how that crimes in fiction pose, *you will be able to solve the case*. And notice: solving the case doesn't just mean figuring out who did it, but how it was done and what the motive was. All of this is to be neatly wrapped up (often in a half hour to an hour, or in the course of a fairly thin novel).

I shouldn't have to tell *you* how *false* to reality this is, how *hard* it actually is to figure *anything* out about what real people have done, how they did it, or why. (I shouldn't have to tell *you* how much our entertainment *lies* to us about this.) Read some good history if you have doubts about this (notice how much has to be *left out*); read some biography and notice how often the biographer is *speculating*. (Speculation in biography should be recognized for what it is: a clever cover-up for an epistemic *failure*: we just don't know, so let's make something up and try to make it sound plausible.)

And I suppose I shouldn't have to dwell on *this* point either: that this tendency of the detective genre to demand that *all* the loose ends get wrapped up—by the villain conveniently confessing, if necessary—is a demand that goes well beyond the detective genre. The appeal of the omniscient point of view in fiction, not to mention how at ease we are with the camera-eye view of the world that film provides turn precisely on the illusion that what's going on around us can, in principle, be figured out by the right sort of (obsessive/compulsive) person. *We want our world to be like that*. A place that smart obsessed people can figure out.

People who write about Chandler, and about his main character Marlowe, often talk about how influential Chandler's invention was. Maybe that's true—in some sense or other—but it's clear that “brainy” but otherwise psychologically-disturbed Sherlockish characters rule the media today. Think of the character *House*. But don't stop there. Think next of all the detective knock-offs on television, past and present. God knows (and as I've already mentioned *too*), there's something *very* soothing about this aspect of the genre. The puzzles *can* be solved. (Someone, if they're persistent enough, or don't have any personal life to speak of, is going to be able to figure it all out.)

4. Okay, okay. That's *not* the world of *The Big Sleep*. This world is epistemically treacherous. It's hard to find things out—the traces have all been picked over by the police and so if the case is still open, a successful private detective is going to have to use different methods. Aristotle once claimed that the plot comes first (in one-act plays, anyway) and character comes second. I don't know whether that's right or not, but something like that is true here. Marlowe's character fits *very well* with the epistemic situation he's in; because of who *he* is, he can succeed.

*Marlowe's character*. A *lot* has been written about Marlowe. But my take is different. The question is, what's needed to extract information from a world like the one *The Big Sleep* depicts, a world in which no one and nothing wants to be particularly informative. First off, Marlowe has to be intelligent. Well, *sure*: but the particular form of intelligence is important. He has to be good at *reading people*. It's here that Chandler's (and Marlowe's) racism and homophobia are structurally important to the novel: because Marlowe's insights often piggy-back on those prejudices.

But being good at reading people doesn't mean that Marlowe engages in Sherlock-Holmes-style ratiocination except that he directs it towards what the people around him are up to, rather than at the objects that have been left at the scene of a crime. Rather, *Marlowe has to manipulate people*, based on his reading of them, in order to *extract*

information from them. Here is where bluffing skills come in: Marlowe has to be good at pretending to know more (or less) than he actually does. Furthermore, since this manipulation has to be done while interacting with people who can (in principle) recognize what he is up to, he has to be flexible and quick—ready to change strategies as soon as the situation changes. Finally, he has to be opportunistic: ready to be lucky about learning something. (It's *only* sheer luck that enables him to find out that General Sternwood's daughter, Carmen, murdered Regan.)

Notice: Marlowe can't reason his way to the answers he needs. So he can't induce the perpetrator of a crime to confess because his sheer ratiocination reveals how all the clues point to that perpetrator. Marlowe, instead, has to bluff and trick these answer out of the world (out of the people in the world). That's the kind of world Marlowe lives in, and that's the kind of transformation that Chandler has induced in the detective genre.

Notice: Of course, Marlowe has to be pretty aggressive and pretty thick-skinned to do this. He has to be "hard-boiled" as so many commentators describe him. *But that's a character trait that's needed in a world that hides what it's really like from the characters that live in it.*

(Someone once wrote that Marlowe isn't a genius like Sherlock Holmes, he's just an underpaid drudge .... This seriously underestimates the unusual qualities of mind Marlowe needs to succeed. If Sherlock Holmes were dropped into the world of *The Big Sleep*, he would fail to solve the case because the clues just wouldn't *behave* the right way. They wouldn't point in the right directions.)

5. When Marlowe's epistemic strategy works, it works like a charm; it looks like *magic*.

(And the literary critic who doesn't realize how often in *The Big Sleep* Marlowe is just bluffing and guessing will think when it works: This isn't realistic. The way that Peter Wolf (*Something more than night: The case of Raymond Chandler*) thinks it's a flaw in the novel that Marlowe realized ahead of time that Carmen killed Rusty Regan. When, of course, Marlowe didn't realize this ahead of time; when at best he was running on a half-baked hunch, just as we'd seen him do so often by this point in the novel—trying to provoke Carmen and seeing what she would do.)

When Marlowe's epistemic strategy *doesn't* work, it can be disastrous. At least that's what we should *expect*, if the novel is to be realistic about the pluses and minuses of this epistemic strategy. *And this is exactly what Chandler delivers.* We see Marlowe's maneuvers sometimes working (and looking pretty miraculous when they do), and sometimes failing to work (and getting him into bad trouble as a result).

Chapter 14 and Chapter 16—Marlowe's extracting information from Joe Brody—are small illustrative gems of the Marlowe technique. I'll discuss Chapter 14 (although there's plenty of successful bluffing in Chapter 16 too). Marlowe sizes up Joe Brody immediately: "... he had dark brown eyes in a brown expressionless face that had learned to control its expressions long ago. Hair like steel wool grew far back on his head and

gave him a great deal of domed brown forehead that might at a careless glance have seemed a dwelling place for brains.” Marlowe immediately downplays his own knowledge (a trick he plays repeatedly in their exchange) by saying “Geiger?”

Marlowe is *guessing* that Brody is involved (somehow) in the event of Geiger’s death—because Brody moved Geiger’s books—and Marlowe has to get Brody to tell him what his role was. So he starts by deliberately overdescribing Brody’s role to Brody—in particular, describing Brody as Geiger’s killer. (He’s *guessing*, though, that Brody isn’t.) Brody says Marlowe is lucky he didn’t kill Geiger (and he is!). We then read:

“You can step off for it just the same,” I told him cheerfully. “You’re made to order for the rap.”

Brody’s voice rustled. “Think you got me framed for it?”

“Positive.”

“How come?”

“There’s someone who’ll tell it that way. I told you there was a witness. Don’t go simple on me, Joe.”

He exploded then. “That goddamned little hot pants!” he yelled. “She would, god damn her! She would—just that.”

I leaned back and grinned at him. “Swell. I thought you had those nude photos of her.”

Marlowe is *still* bluffing. He’s relying on Brody being stupid enough *not* to realize that his outburst doesn’t *prove* he has the nude photos, or at least, on his being stupid enough not to see a way to talk his way out of having the photos despite knowing Carmen was there. After all, *all* he’s admitted to is that he knew Carmen was there—which is something Marlowe *already* knew.

Another neat example of bluffing—that Marlowe admits to—occurs during Marlowe’s conversation with Harry Jones. He suggests to this man that he knows nothing about that, “maybe you knew a fellow called Joe Brody.” Jones is amazed, asking: “How’d you tie me to Joe?” Marlowe says: “Don’t mind me. I was just guessing. You’re not a cop. You don’t belong to Eddie Mars’ outfit. I asked him last night. I couldn’t think of anybody else but Joe Brody’s friends who would be that much interested in me.”

*Don’t mind me. I was just guessing.*

During this very same conversation with Harry Jones, we see how Marlowe’s “sizing up” people can misfire. Literally. Marlowe apparently has a major prejudice against short men. As a result, he underestimates both Harry Jones’ intelligence and his ethics. But Harry Jones is someone who keeps his word. Harry Jones is brave, he’s smart, he’s insightful, and he’s honest. And all these things Marlowe has to *learn* about him. (We see this happen.)

We see other (similar) failures (for example, when Marlowe says to Brody: “Where did you hide Geiger’s body?”). A simple rule of thumb: If you *guess* (if you bluff), you’re

sometimes going to guess *wrong*. Most of Marlowe's gaffs are quite small: he often jumps to conclusions in reconstructing a story, and subsequently learns that he's got it wrong. But one of his more important blunders is a failure to see that Art and psychopathic killer Canino in the garage are onto him. That nearly gets him killed. The fact that he takes a chance telling the gangster Eddie Mars that he's being followed (to find out if Eddie Mars is behind it) is what *does* get Harry Jones killed.

6. *Plot*. I suppose I need to get this out of the way, if only because so many readers (and critics) seem confused about it. There are two aspects to the plot. There is the background situation that's already in place. But there is something else that's as important: these are the plot developments that occur *as a result* of Marlowe coming into the picture. Marlowe is *not* an idle element. (A detective in the epistemically-difficult world of *The Big Sleep* can't be idle: he wouldn't learn anything.) And because Marlowe has to prod and push and bluff in order to "solve the case," there are knock-off effects that change what happens—that raise obstacles or set in motion events that (by luck) enable the solution, or (as I've mentioned) get people killed.

*Background*. Carmen has murdered Regan. And General Sternwood's other daughter, Vivian Regan, has used Eddie Mars (and Lash Canino) to cover up the murder. As a result, she is paying Eddie Mars whatever she can until her father dies and he can get a lot more. To keep the cops from investigating Regan's disappearance (and ruining his current and future income), Eddie Mars has engineered the appearance that his wife has run off with Regan by keeping his wife hidden, and guarded by Canino. This has been discovered by Joe Brody and his girlfriend Agnes.

*Foreground*. Eddie Mars is somewhat impatient. Using a smut book-seller, Geiger, who pays him rent, he tries to determine if the father, General Sternwood, knows about the murder by seeing if he will pay off gambling debts of Carmen's that are uncollectable. This is why Marlowe is brought into the picture—because General Sternwood hires him to investigate Geiger, to see what he is up to.

Because Marlowe is investigating Geiger, he is outside Geiger's house when, *coincidentally*, the Sternwood's chauffeur Owen Taylor (who is angry about what Geiger is doing with Carmen) murders Geiger. At that moment Geiger is taking nude photos of a drugged Carmen. After Taylor shoots Geiger, he runs off with the photographic plate. Brody, who is also watching Geiger's house, chases Taylor, saps him, and takes the photographic plate from him. The car Taylor was driving is later found washing around in the surf off Lido Fish pier. Owen Taylor with a bruise on his temple is dead in it.

*Who killed Owen Taylor?*

Gene D. Phillips (*Creatures of Darkness*) describes this aspect of the plot as left dangling by Chandler. According to the filmmaker Howard Hawks (who—it should be pointed out—can be remarkably untrustworthy when he reminisces in published conversations), he wired Chandler, asking who killed Taylor. The novelist (presumably invoking a



cliché) said: “The butler did it.” Phillips tells us that Chandler subsequently wrote his British publisher: “Dammit. I don’t know either. Of course, I was hooted at.”

*Does* the text leave this aspect of the plot dangling? Phillips thinks so. He writes:

Little wonder ... that Chandler candidly admitted to Hawks that he did not know Owen’s ultimate fate when Hawks inquired about it, since both murder and suicide are presented as possible explanations of Owen’s demise in the novel and the question is never settled. More specifically, in the book, when Marlowe visits the Lido pier ... one plainclothesman states, “Ask me, and I’ll call it murder.” Another cop asserts, “Ask me, I say suicide.”

Well, not exactly. Their *reasons* for their differing opinions matter. The conversation starts out with Ohls (the D.A.’s chief investigator) asking “Drunk?”

And the plainclothesman says: “Drunk, hell. The hand throttle’s set halfway down and the guy’s been sapped on the side of the head. Ask me and I’ll call it murder.”

Good reasoning, right? But when Ohls asks the other man, he says:

I say suicide, Mac. None of my business, but you ask me, I say suicide. First off the guy plowed an awful straight furrow down that pier. You can read his tread marks all the way nearly. That puts it after the rain like the Sheriff said. Then he hit the pier hard and clean or he don’t go through and land right side up. More likely turned over a couple of times. So he had plenty of speed and hit the rail square. That’s more than half-throttle. He could have done that with his hand falling and he could have hurt his head falling too.

(Notice Chandler’s *strengths* here with the dialogue.)

*Ohls compliments the other man on his good eyes.* This theory has trumped the previous one precisely because of the speed of the car hitting the pier “hard and clean” (so no one put him in the seat, put the throttle half-way down, and let the car go). It wasn’t an accident either because it occurred after the rain. He’s even explained the blow to the head.

But it won’t work as a theory because on the next page we learn from the coroner’s man that the bruise couldn’t happen by falling: “That blow came from something covered. And it had already bled subcutaneously while he was alive.” “Blackjack, huh,” Ohls asks. “Very likely,” the man replies.

So we have a puzzle—a Holmes-style puzzle. But it’s not that the novel leaves both suicide and murder as options (an accident having been ruled out since the rain had stopped). It’s that *neither suggestion* handles *all* the clues. Murder doesn’t work as a theory because of the way the car hit the pier; suicide doesn’t work because of Owen Taylor’s head injury.

If Owen Taylor was murdered, then he was murdered by Joe Brody. (Because later in the novel Brody admits to Marlowe that he sapped Taylor and took the plates from him.) Phillips agrees with Kawin that in the movie, as in the novel, “it is suggested, but not proved, that Joe Brody killed the chauffeur.”

Indeed, Phillips writes:

There is a basis in the novel for thinking that Joe Brody murdered Owen .... In the novel, when Marlowe interrogates Brody in the racketeer’s apartment, he catches Brody in one implausible lie after another. Finally, Brody admits to Marlowe that he followed Owen from Geiger’s house, after Owen had rubbed out Geiger. Brody caught up with him, after Owen recklessly drove the Sternwood limousine into a ditch in his haste to escape from the crime scene. Brody further confesses that he zapped Owen with a blackjack and took the negative of the compromising photograph of Carmen, which Owen had snatched from Geiger’s camera. ... Brody insists that Owen suddenly came to and delivered a Sunday punch that “knocked me off the car.”

Summarizing, Phillips writes:

Still, Chandler leaves the possibility open in this passage in the book that Brody is telling yet another lie. In fact, Marlowe intimates that it is much more plausible that Brody knocked Owen out, grabbed the negative, and drove the limo to the Lido pier while Owen was still unconscious. Brody, in Marlowe’s version of the incident, then pushed the car off the pier before Owen regained consciousness and left him to drown.

This all gets (this part of) the novel pretty wrong. What’s actually suggested in the novel is that Joe Brody *didn’t* kill the chauffeur. I go on to *prove* this.

First off, Phillips misdescribes the dialogue between Joe Brody and Marlowe. Joe Brody doesn’t tell lies—plausible or otherwise—his technique (as Marlowe intimates in his very first description of Brody when he opens the door—“brown expressionless face that had learned to control its expressions long ago.”) is to try to leave information out. He’s not smart enough to make up stories—implausible or otherwise. And Marlowe already knows this about him. So Marlowe’s technique is to goad Brody into admitting things, and then tricking him into thinking he’s admitted more than he has. This is in Chapter 14. Chapter 15 has Brody being rattled because he’s almost killed by Carmen. In Chapter 16, Marlowe resumes interrogating Brody who (perhaps because of shock) has become much more forthcoming—Marlowe saying at one point: “When you open up, you open up.” Marlowe bluffs him again by suggesting (again) that Brody will be charged with murder. When Brody takes the bait, Marlowe springs on him the fact that Owen Taylor was found dead off the pier.

We read:

Brody was breathing hard. One of his feet tapped restlessly. “Jesus, guy, you can’t pin that one on me,” he said thickly.

This description gives good reason to think Brody didn’t know Owen Taylor was dead. But if that’s true then he couldn’t have killed Owen Taylor. In any case, Marlowe explains to Brody why this murder *can* be pinned on him. (It’s the same trick—again—that he used in Chapter 14 when he suggested Geiger’s murder could be pinned on Brody. And Brody, who’s not even smart enough to learn from his own mistakes, reacts in both cases *the same way*: he spills out the truth because he can’t think of anything else to do.)

After Brody finishes telling Marlowe his story, Marlowe says: “That seems reasonable. Maybe you didn’t murder anybody at that. Where did you hide Geiger’s body?”

Now Marlowe is doing it again: springing information on Brody and watching his reaction. And Brody is taken by surprise again. We read:

He jumped his eyebrows. Then he grinned. “Nix, nix. Skip it. You think I’d go back there and handle him, not knowing when a couple of carloads of law would come tearing around the corner? Nix.”

“Somebody hid the body,” I said.

Brody shrugged. The grin stayed on his face. He didn’t believe me.

There’s another bit that’s relevant. Later, after Brody is killed, Marlowe is talking to Ohls, Wilde (the District Attorney) and Cronjager (a city cop) about the murders of Geiger and Brody. And Wilde asks:

“What makes you so sure, Marlowe, that this Taylor boy shot Geiger? Even if the gun that killed Geiger was found on Taylor’s body or in the car, it doesn’t absolutely follow that he was the killer. The gun might have been planted—say by Brody, the actual killer.”

(This question is natural because no one actually saw Geiger get killed except for the killer, Carmen—who can’t be trusted to know what she saw—and Geiger who’s, um, dead.)

And we read:

“It’s physically possible,” I said, “but morally impossible. It assumes too much coincidence and too much that’s out of character for Brody and his girl, and out of character for what he was trying to do. I talked to Brody for a long time. He was a crook, but not a killer type. He had two guns, but he wasn’t wearing either of them. He was trying to find a way to cut in on Geiger’s racket, which naturally he knew all about from the girl. He says he was watching Geiger off and on to see if he had any tough backers. I believe him. To suppose he killed Geiger in order to get his books, then scrambled with the nude photo Geiger had just taken of

Carmen Sternwood, then planted the gun on Owen Taylor and pushed Taylor into the ocean off Lido, is to suppose a hell of a lot too much.”

Marlowe says more—but we can stop here. Marlowe can't *prove* that Brody didn't kill Geiger; for that matter, he can't *prove* that Brody didn't kill Taylor. But his forte is psychology, and that's what ruling both these theories out. Actually, something more is ruling out Brody killing Taylor that isn't available to rule out Brody killing Geiger. This is the original puzzle posed by Taylor's death—that what ruled out suicide was the fact that he had been most likely sapped by a blackjack. That's been resolved, however, by Brody's confession. *Therefore*: The man that Ohls described as having good eyes has the best theory: suicide. The one piece of evidence against his view has been discounted.

(So what about Chandler's reported remarks to Hawks, and what he wrote to his publisher? This is a biographical question. Was Chandler good at remembering what he had done? Was Chandler—an aging alcoholic—someone who read his old work over carefully? Was he capable of remembering something that he'd put in the original novel, but not *explicitly*? Are these episodes being interpreted the right way? Did they even actually happen as reported? Remember: it's always hard to figure out what really happened *in the real world*.)

*It's all rather strange, isn't it?* I've been looking through the original reviews of the novel, and at much of the subsequent critical literature. It seems to have become a *truism* in that literature—one often made rapidly in passing—that either the solution of the *murder* of Owen Taylor is left dangling in the novel or that the novel is ambiguous on whether he committed suicide or was murdered. Given that the text is so clear on this, I can only speculate that Chandler's own remarks in the letter to his publisher (which I've found to be reported in different ways—but amounting to the same claim that he doesn't know) have thrown *everyone* off.

7. Anyway, here's something you can only do *once*. Transform a literary genre by undermining its conventions, and replacing it with something new. Chandler did that in *The Big Sleep*. That's what I've argued here, and that's enough all by itself to make the novel great. It's even better that Chandler recognizes what he's pulling off: he has Marlowe explain it to another character *in the novel itself*.

Peter Wolf writes: “Chandler ... failed to revolutionize mystery writing.”

Well, no. Chandler did “revolutionize” mystery writing. At least in his first book he did. And I've just told you *how* he did it.

But this *really is* something you can't do twice. Unless you desert the genre you've just transformed altogether, and find some other genre to transform. (Someone who did exactly that—*repeatedly*—is Edgar Allen Poe; but that's something I should talk about *somewhere else*.) Chandler wasn't going to manage anything like that; instead he continued to write in the genre he created. And of course, what he produced wasn't as good.

More accurately, the later work was as good but it wasn't original, it wasn't groundbreaking. Because, after all, you get to break particular ground *once*. If you want to break ground again, you have to walk over to some other ground. (Okayokay, so I've just said this twice. Sort of a joke, maybe.)

More accurately still, the later novels aren't entirely in the genre Chandler created in his first book. In *The Lady in the Lake*, for example, Marlowe does several Holmes-like investigations of physical evidence to advance and solve a case. And there are other examples of this. So Chandler actually backtracks in his later novels, loses touch with how he'd been original to begin with, instead falls back on the tired old tricks of the detective trade to push his later novels along.

You almost want to say: He's gotten *tired*. (And why not? Being original takes a lot of *work*.)

Well maybe this *is* the explanation: One thing that's striking when you compare *The Big Sleep* with Chandler's later novels is that Chandler's striking metaphors and turns of phrase decrease in density: fewer of them occur on each page in the subsequent novels. (If you don't believe me, try counting them.) It was part of Chandler's writing process that he wanted striking phrases to show up regularly. But perhaps this was a rule he relaxed later.

But there's a different way to think about what happened to Chandler with respect to his later novels. That *in any case* Chandler was never going to be great in at least two respects: he was never going to manage very much psychological depth and he was never going to be continuously innovative with respect to his prose—despite his official obsession with “style.”

To illustrate the first point, think about Vivian Regan, General Sternwood's daughter. Who is she? She is supposed to be a smart woman who is trying to protect her sister. She is in her late twenties, however (she's pretty young), and she's in way over her head—having to deal with the likes of psychopathic killers like Lash Canino and seasoned gangsters like Eddie Mars. There is plenty of room, therefore, for the presentation of psychological complexity: the depiction of a panicked but very smart young woman trying to handle something quite beyond her.

You might think: the *detective genre* Chandler was working in prevented him from developing any character (let alone this character) that far. His readers wouldn't stand for it; the publisher wouldn't stand for it.

But wait. There really isn't much reason to think that *Chandler* had any capacity to develop characters to a depth that goes beyond what's found in these kind of crime novels *in any case*. The reasons for this are ultimately psychological—his incredibly bad taste (in certain respects), his weird obsessions, his nearly-total absence of “people-skills.”

What about stylistic innovation? Chandler's idea of "style" was restricted to capturing (and varying) ordinary-language speech-rhythms and to the turning of wisecrack phrases. But this will only take you so far. (If you're trying to be original, I mean.)

To admit all this isn't to deny that even Chandler's later novels are better than others in the genre. It's to explain why Raymond Chandler, even though showing a powerful kind of originality in this first novel of his, wasn't going to ever exhibit anything more—wasn't *capable* of doing so.