



Private Investigations: The Novels of Dashiell Hammett

Sinda Gregory

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Gregory examines each of Hammett's novels—*Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Glass Key*, and *The Thin Man*—in terms of their form and theme to make clear their twofold appeal. She shows that they succeed not only as popular fiction but as literature. Through literary analysis she shows that within each of his works there are intricate literary strategies to be probed and analyzed symbolically, metaphysically, and metafictionally to yield the sharp vision we expect of art.

His first novel, *Red Harvest*, provides an excellent example of his strategies. Filled with action, vivid characters, and remarkable colloquial dialogue, *Red Harvest* is a study of personal systems, of ethical responsibility, of the individual's impotence against an overwhelming destructiveness of corruption, chaos, and death; yet all of this is subtly woven into dramatic action that thrilled audiences of sensationalized fiction.

This dual structure provides an ongoing sense of revelation. Once a reader discerns that there is meaning beyond the action-filled maelstrom of motion and death that marks Hammett's works, a pattern of increasing complexity appears. Thus not only is *The Dain Curse* an exciting story of murder and a family curse, it is a metafictional survey of detective fiction styles. Gregory shows that Hammett uses the conventions of detective fiction in this novel as a means of addressing epistemological issues that bring into question the basic premises of the genre. Indeed, in his most famous work, *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett creates a work that is itself a testament to the unknowability of human conduct, for in it he manipulates details, characterization, and plot until the very concept of mystery emerges as the central point of the book. For Hammett the greatest mystery was always the complexities of human consciousness.

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