Published in 1929 by hard-boiled crime writer Dashiell Hammett and adapted as a film in 1941 by director John Huston, *The Maltese Falcon* is more than just a thriller about a stolen bird statue. It can be read as a starkly critical examination of the Modernist worldview. It outlines the efforts of a single consciousness (that of detective Sam Spade) to make sense of a flurry of contradictory and confusing information, to shore up the crumbling structure of reality (or try to) with the beams, girders, and framework of his own rational intellect. The atmosphere is dark and mendacious; the people are liars and swindlers (trickster figures of a sort), and the moral atmosphere is cloudy at best.



*The Maltese Falcon* belongs to the genre known as "hard-boiled," a class of tawdry, lurid crime thrillers aimed at mass audiences and taking as subject matter the kinds of gritty, seemy, sensuous, and low-class things happening on the streets of all the big cities in the world during the '20's and 30's and '40's. In short, this and works like it are responses to the same kind of cultural desiccation and debasement that Ezra Pound is lamenting, T. S. Eliot is elegizing, and Wallace Stevens is lyricizing. You might call *The Maltese Falcon* an example of "low modernism."

You'll find these characters responding to a lot of different kinds of chaos, mostly moral chaos, identity-chaos, political chaos. It's the job of the private detective, Sam Spade, to navigate this chaos and try to make some order out of it.

In addition to this general framework of amorality, ambiguity and disorder, Hammett salts the story with the trappings of imperialism and the collapse of empire. The bird itself is a kind of mystic artifact of a dead aristocracy, and the cast of characters reflect a kind of diseased multicultural pantheon.

Some key characters to think about are:

* **Sam Spade** (What does the name mean? What kinds of ideals does this character represent?)
* **Ms. LeBlanc/Wonderly/O’Shaughnessey** (What about these names? These ideals?)
* **Caspar Gutman** (Again, what about the name? The values? The morality?)
* **Joel Cairo** (Name &c?)
* **Wilmer** (my favorite)
* **Effie Perrine** (Sam’s faithful secretary)

Between them these characters map out a pretty stark moral and ethical universe. *What kind of world is this? What kinds of values are reflected in these characters’ actions and words?*

**Discussion Questions**

1. What kind of person is Sam Spade? Would you call him especially moral or ethical? Why or why not? Do we admire him?
2. How do we respond to Brigid O’Shaughnessey? More to the point, how do we respond to the way Sam responds to her? Is she duping him? Is he playing her? Do they really love each other? How could we tell?
3. How do we feel about Sam’s relationship with his partner, Miles Archer? How do we feel about Sam’s relationship with Miles’ wife, Iva?
4. Assess Sam’s relationship with the Law. Is he on the right side or the wrong side? How does this affect the way we assess his character?
5. How does the Maltese falcon itself, the actual object, function as a focal point for all these people’s efforts? That is, what about it—its history and its specific qualities, as well as what we discover about it at the end—makes it the center of this story?

