

## Essay

Certain texts have aspects about them that ensure they will always be valued. These texts remain popular due to the way any audience can take enjoyment from them, and the way they reflect the values of the society of the time.

Howard Hawks' film, The Big Sleep, along with Tom Stoppard's play, The Real Inspector Hound, Michael Mann's film Collateral and Arthur Conan Doyle's short story, The Red Headed League, all fit the bill as texts that will be valued for generations.

Howard Hawks' 1946 feature film, The Big Sleep, is valued due to the way modern audiences can enjoy it and the way it reflects the values of the society it was produced.

Hawks' film was recently voted by renowned film critic Roger Ebert as among the top 100 films of all time. One reason behind its lasting appeal is due to the entertainment that modern audiences can get.

One reason for the film's lasting appeal is its star vehicle angle. The film contains two of Hollywood's biggest names of the time in Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and the film is a great 'on-screen' representation of their relationship.

Another reason for its lasting appeal is its use of wit and humour. The line by Marlowe, "my, my, my, such a lot of guns around town and so few brains" is a witty one that can still draw a laugh from modern audiences. Considering that comedy is of an era, for a film's dialogue to still be witty sixty years on is quite an achievement.

The film is also one of the best examples of film noir and this contributes to its long lasting appeal. Hawks continually uses lighting and shadows to illuminate or hide parts of Marlowe's and Eddie Mars' faces. The gritty, urban setting, deep characteristic shadows and dim images confront the viewer, and allow them to be engaged in a startling representation of the crime world. This is also achieved through the use of non-diegetic and diegetic sound, where thunder is mixed with dramatic, non-diegetic music to suggest rising action.

Another main reason why The Big Sleep is still valued is due to the way it reflects the values of the society in which it was produced. The noted genre critic John Fiske stated that a text will "embody the crucial ideological concerns of the time in which they are popular." The society in which the text was produced, and in which Marlowe operates, is a greed-filled, capitalistic one that is rife with corruption.

The film was released just after the conclusion to WWII and the society of the time would have been crying out for an idealistic, incorruptible hero like Marlowe. Police and societal corruption is alluded to by General Sternwood at the beginning of the film using a metaphor when he describes the orchid's flesh as being "too near the flesh of men. Their stench has the wicked smell of corruption."

The motif of doors is also another way that Hawks managed to ensure his text will always be valued. Doors have a symbolic role in the film as they represent barriers between Marlowe and the truth. This culminates with Eddie Mars' murder and he falls back through the door, only to have it closed behind him by Marlowe, who is effectively closing the case.

Another issue evident in the film is that of the patriarchal society. Marlowe is also framed higher than his female co-stars and this is always evident in the mis-en-scene of their numerous car trips. Vivian is always slumped in a submissive position and Marlowe is portrayed as superior. This patriarchal element to the film gives an insight into the time for modern audiences and is another reason why we value the text. This attitude culminates at the end of the film when Vivian tells Marlowe that there's "nothing you can't fix."

Tom Stoppard's play, The Real Inspector Hound, creates a parody of embryonic and golden age text's perfect crime solving universes. For a long time, crime fiction unravelled formulaically. As Lindy Cameron put it, the "pleasure of crime fiction is that it brings order out of

disorder.” Stoppard challenged this formulaic complacency by creating a text where the criminal gets away with the crime.

The play was written during the 1960’s, when society was beginning to question whether crimes actually unfolded like the clockwork presented by Christie and Conan Doyle. It was a time of changing paradigms.

Stoppard gives his play the Christie-like setting of Muldoon Manor, a large house located near a vicious coastline, “treacherous swamps” and “deadly fog.” The fog becomes a metaphor for the mystery in the play and builds up as the plot thickens. This detail may initially lead audiences to believe the text is a traditional one. But instead of the fog clearing, and order being restored, it lingers and, unlike its generic predecessors, no order is pulled from the chaos. Stoppard also uses dramatic irony to send up the conventions of the genre. The corpse of Higgs is lying in plain view to the audience yet despite it being the ‘dead centre of attention,’ the characters are oblivious to its presence. Stoppard’s text will always be valued because it was marking the beginning of a new era in crime fiction. Stoppard has created a parody of the stereotype of cosy crime, and has given his characters dialogue that reinforces this send-up. When Mrs Drudge answers the telephone she states that she is answering from the “drawing room of Lady Muldoon’s Manor one morning in early spring.” The detective in the novel, Inspector Hound, is also a parody of Sherlock Holmes and he states in very Holmes-esque manner that the body lying on the stage is undoubtedly Albert Muldoon, despite Albert’s wife Cynthia’s repeated assurances that it is not her husband. This send up of conventions is but another way that the text will always be valued. Stoppard also uses the melodramatic elements of overused clichés to entertain the audience as is evident in the lines “a murderer in our midst” and “the killer will strike again.”

Another reason why the play continues to be valued is the way it sends up every aspect of society that seemed ordered. Stoppard sends up hierarchies through his use of the critics Moon and Birdboot. Moon, who himself is a second-string critic dreaming of being number one, states that he yearns for the day that “entire cricket teams will be wiped out by marauding bands of twelfth men.” This also becomes quite ironic as both he and his superior, Higgs, are killed by the third-string critic, Puckeridge.

This attitude also gives an insight into the movements of the time, when underdogs and marginalised groups were taking a stand. The 1960’s were a time when women, ethnics and homosexuals, who had been marginalised and suppressed in the past, were beginning to take a stand. Stoppard’s third-string critic, Puckeridge represents these marginalised groups and for that reason Stoppard’s play will be valued for a long time.

Another text that it already shaping as a possible long-lasting one is Michael Mann’s film, Collateral.

The film looks at the differing social classes and its themes reflect the values of its society. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a time remembered for its war on terrorism. The film itself, which was made just three years after 9/11, explores the theme of anti-terrorism raids.

In the film, there is an apparent serial killer on the loose being investigated by the LAPD. This serial killer, Vincent, hijacks a cab driven by Max, a black American who dreams of owning a limo company. The detective on the case, Ray Fanning, realises that Max is not the “meat-eater super assassin” the “Feds” are after.

The FBI, on the other hand, act extremely quickly due to society’s fear of terrorism, often without proper judgement. As the FBI plan to take Max down, Fanning is the only one who realises Max’s innocence and ventures to the nightclub *Fever* to save Max at the expense of his own. This is one of the main alterations to generic conventions that Mann employs.

In a traditional text, the detective would solve the case and bring the killers to justice, but in Collateral, Fanning is killed by Vincent and an impromptu sleuth in Max is forced to solve the case. It is these sharp twists and alterations to conventions that ensure refinement age texts are valued by modern audiences.

One of the other reasons why the film will always be valued is due to its startling filmic features. Michael Mann uses the repetition of a shot to allow audiences to connect to Max's situation. We continually see Max and Vincent in the cab from a view through the front windscreen. This becomes representational of square one. Every time Vincent stops to take out a "nuisance" for his client, Max tries to escape. When he fails, the first shot we see of them in the cab is the shot through the front windscreen.

Mann also uses intertextual references to convey meaning. After Max helps Vincent cover up his first murder, Max tries to clean his cab and Vincent refers to him as "Lady MacBeth." This gives added meaning to the scene without taking up precious screen time.

Mann also uses motifs to ensure his text will always be valued. When Max and Vincent are on their way to *Fever*, a limousine pulls into the driveway next door. This limousine acts as a metonym for Max's dream of owning a limo company, a dream that is slowly slipping away.

The fourth text that will inevitably be valued for a long time is Arthur Conan Doyle's short story, The Red Headed League. It would be impossible to analyse crime fiction texts that have been valued for generations without looking at why we still value the texts that started the genre.

The League was written in 1890 and is an embryonic crime fiction text. Yet despite the text being over a century old, it is still valued for its insight into the society of the time.

The text is set in London during a time when England was confident in its industrial and imperial might. Any crimes that did occur could be solved by rational means.

This attitude is reflected in the text as Sherlock Holmes is extremely precise in all his methods. When presented the case by Mr Jabez Wilson, he states to Dr Watson that it is a "three pipe problem" and asks not to be disturbed for "fifty minutes."

The other noticeable issue in the text that gives an insight into the values of the time is the socio-economic divide present during that era. All of the characters in the text are either of high standing in the community or want to be. Mr Wilson desperately wants to become part of that high society and this is shown when Holmes notes that Mr Wilson bore "an arc and compass breastpin," despite it being "quite against the strict rules of the order."

The patriarchal society portrayed in The Big Sleep is also evident in The League as the only female character in the text, a 14 year-old girl who does "a bit of simple cooking and cleaning," is not regarded by Holmes as a potential suspect. Whilst this value has changed nowadays, it gives an insight into the values of the time it was produced, allowing it to remain valued.

So as each of these texts continues to be valued for their insights into the societies of the time they were produced, it becomes clear that they are indeed classic pieces of the genre that will be valued for generations to come.