

## **Response Sheet #5**

**Title:** The Big Sleep

**Director:** Howard Hawks

**Date Composed:** 1946

### **Setting: Place and time**

The story itself is set in Los Angeles during the 1940's. The film opens at Sternwood Manor and the film is also set in Geiger's Book Store, Geiger's residence (460 Laverne Terrace), Randall Place Apartments (Joe Brody's unit), Eddie Mars' gambling house, Marlowe's office and Art Huck's Auto Repairs & Painting.

Other action also takes place in Marlowe's car, the DA's office and off the pier at Lido.

All the action gives a sense of the various faces of Los Angeles. This is particularly evident in the scene where Marlowe walks down a dark street, past a sign reading "Fresh Vegetables Daily."

The mis-en-scenes of these various locations are often extremely detailed and shot from the same angles. This allows the viewer to get a deep insight into the world they are viewing in a short space of time but also allows settings that occur more than once to be quickly re-established.

### **Context & Values: Cultural and societal influences**

The text is set in the 1940's, so it is a time when the idea of 'The American Dream' was still continuing. It is a society that values alcohol, gambling and generally having a good time (for those that can afford it).

It is also a time of vast social divisions. The rich get richer, drink, gamble and have a good time whilst the poor struggle and are largely ignored in the film. Marlowe takes a shot at this society when Agnes Lozelle tells him that she got "a raw deal," to which Marlowe replies "your kind always does." Agnes is a victim of that society's 'get rich quick' ideal.

But even the totally incorruptible Marlowe turns a blind eye to General Sternwood's corruption because Sternwood is the one paying Marlowe.

Flowing on from the society's fascination with money was the issue of police corruption. The rich people of the society had the wealth and influence to control the local police agencies when it came to certain issues. This is evident in the

film when the DA's office is told to take Marlowe off the case when they are paid to do so by Vivian, General Sternwood's daughter.

But possibly one of the most important aspects of the context of the time is the Hays code. The Hays code spelt out what could and could not appear in movies and was enforced between 1934 and 1966.

Some of the rules in the Hays code that are relevant to *The Big Sleep* are:

- Nudity and suggestive dances were prohibited. This was an issue because in the novel by Raymond Chandler, General Sternwood is blackmailed by Geiger because of pornographic photos. In the film, Carmen is wearing a "Chinese dress" and sitting in a "Chinese chair." To the society of the time, this was an obvious clue that the photographs were pornographic, but today's audiences may not make that association.
- References to homosexuality were not allowed. This is because the society of the time was generally a very homophobic one where homosexuals were not recognised as acceptable. Once again, this was an issue because Chandler's novel portrayed Geiger as a homosexual who was involved in pornography. Audiences could only really make that connection by Geiger's mannerisms or by deduction if they put one and one together. Geiger is blackmailing Carmen over a photograph and his bookstore workers knew nothing about books.
- Any murders portrayed were not allowed to be violent or encouraging one to do so in real life. This is evident when Marlowe is beaten up in the alley. From a modern audience point of view, this was relatively mild, yet to allow it to fit within the Hays code it was toned down and is made up for by Jones' comments "that was the best working over I've ever seen, and I've been around."

It was also a time when ethnic groups were generally excluded from mainstream society. No ethnic people or people from other races are portrayed in the film at all.

It was also very much a patriarchal society, where men were seen as superior to females. This comes through in the film as Marlowe is always seen as inherently superior to his female co-stars.

### **Form, Purpose and Audience:**

The text is in the form of a feature film and is black and white due to the limitations of technology at that time. For this reason it falls under the heading of film noir, which is dependant on black and white effects.

The film is designed for the general cinema going public of the time and was released just after the conclusion to World War II, a time when society was looking for an idealistic hero such as Marlowe. The purpose of the film is to provide the society with exactly that, an idealistic hero.

It was also released; just as many movies are today, to make money. The producers used the star appeal of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. As a result of giving Bogart and Bacall more screen time together, some aspects of the noir had to be compromised.

### **Mystery:**

*The Big Sleep* has one of the most convoluted plots of all time and there are many mysteries evident in the film.

The first mystery in the film is the one that Marlowe is initially asked to investigate, the blackmailing of General Sternwood. From this, many more mysteries unfold including the disappearance of Sean Regan, Geiger's murderer, the identity of the photographer and Owen Taylor's mysterious death.

Marlowe also sets out to solve the mystery of how Vivian and Carmen are mixed up in the mess? Who keeps moving Geiger's body around? Who is tailing him in a grey Plymouth? And where is Mrs Mona Grant, Eddie Mars' wife.

### **Conventions:**

As this text was made during the golden age of crime fiction, the vast majority of conventions of the genre hold true.

The text contains a detective, who in line with the conventions of the genre is superior to those around him and is able to always solve the crime.

The text also contains a crime, or crimes that are solved by the detective. The crimes in the text include the blackmailing of the Sternwoods, the murder of Arthur Gwynn Geiger, the murder of Joe Brody, the murder and robbery of Owen Taylor, the disappearance and murder of Sean Regan and the assault on Marlowe.

The text also contains a series of clues that the sleuth follows and uses to solve the case. These include the gambling debts, the photographs, the camera and performance between Vivian and Eddie Mars.

The text also has vivid settings, which add to the overall appeal of the film and give the crime a foundation on which to occur.

Marlowe is also placed in danger. He is beaten up by goons in a dark alley, tied up and shot at by Canino and surrounded in a house by Mars and his goons.

The crime is also unravelled by Marlowe in a delayed denouement.

### **Sleuths: Appearance, location, methods, traits, flaws**

The sleuth in the text is Philip Marlowe, a private investigator who is 38 years old and previously worked for the District Attorney's office before being fired for insubordination.

He is always meticulously well dressed with a grey suit, black hat, tie and neat hair. He is always on top of a situation or conversation and has a dry but witty humour. He also seems to have a way with women.

His office is a simple one that reflects in many ways the values of the time. He has pictures and statues of baseball players, horses and various other sports related images.

In terms of his methods he is rather sneaky, preferring to use trickery and false fronts as opposed to more aggressive methods. He always seems to be one step ahead of his opponents.

When he is pondering a crime he fiddles with his ear. This usually precedes some definite action that will lead him down a different track. He also has a habit of clicking whilst he is thinking.

He also puts solving the case before earning money and admits it when he is scared. He admits to Vivian before the final confrontation that he is scared when she points out he is shaking.

### **Suspects or Criminals: crime, appearance, traits and methods**

The main criminal in the film is Eddie Mars. Mars is a successful businessman who owns a gambling house. He wears a grey suit and black hat and is married to Mrs Mona Grant. He also has his finger in a number of organised rackets.

His office is quite simple. It has pictures on the walls of dogs and birds and the inside of the door is painted to look like a vault door. The pictures are symbolic of hunting, with the bird representational of the prey and the dog representational of the hunter. This is a reflection of the way Mars views his work, hunting down animals for enjoyment or because they are nuisances. He also has a secret door that is painted in with the wall that leads him out behind the tables.

He is renowned for his hired goons, Sidney and Pete, and employs the vicious Lash Canino. Marlowe describes Mars as a “killer by remote control.”

Another criminal in the film is Mars’ hired killer, Lash Canino. Canino has this evil slime feel about him. He speaks in a slimy, untrustworthy voice. He wears a grey suit over a black shirt and tie. Canino is the one responsible for the murder of Harry Jones.

### **Issues:**

The main issue addressed in *The Big Sleep* is that of the socio-economic divide evident in society. The police are corrupt and can be told to do anything if the price is right and this reflects the attitudes of a society that values monetary wealth over everything else.

Another issue addressed is that of the male being superior. Marlowe is always shown as superior to any female characters around him. When Vivian and

Marlowe are in Geiger's house waiting for Mars to arrive, Vivian makes the beads shake noisily but is totally oblivious to this. It is Marlowe who has to point this out. Another instance of this is when Marlow is tied up in Art Huck's house. Even though he is trapped, he tells Vivian what to do and even reminds her to "cut away from her hands" when cutting him free.

In these instances, Marlowe is demonstrating typical patriarchal behaviour in that men are cool, rational and calculating while women are vulnerable, emotional and impulsive.

### **Alterations to Generic Conventions:**

In a traditional crime fiction text, the detective would solve the crime and the criminals would come to justice.

In this film, however, Marlowe decides not to send Carmen to jail for the murder of Sean Regan, but instead decides to send her to a hospital for the mentally ill.

Another alteration is that part of the crime, the murder of Owen Taylor, is never fully resolved and the audience never knows for certain just who killed him and pushed him off the pier.

Marlowe also gets romantically involved with one of the characters, a situation that classic detectives such as Sherlock Holmes would never have been involved in.

### **Language Features: Include quotes**

- Non-diegetic music. Non-diegetic music is used right throughout the film to impose upon the responder the feelings of the characters at a particular time. This is particularly important to crime fiction as it can insight feelings of suspense, danger and mystery in the responder.
- Silence. The use of silence is often contrasted with dramatic, suspenseful music to keep the film exciting and unpredictable. It also gives a feel of the 'calm before the storm.'
- Analogy/Metaphor. When Marlowe is in General Sternwood's greenhouse for the opening of the movie, Sternwood makes a comment that reflects the values of society for that time and also alludes to police corruption. Just after Marlowe explains he has fired from the police force for insubordination, Sternwood states that the orchids are "nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. Their perfume has the rotten sweetness of corruption." This example can be applied to many instances in the film which portray human greed and fallibility.
- Film noir. Noir is used extensively throughout the film, generally when danger or mystery is present, two common conventions of crime fiction. Noir occurs in the streets of Laverne Terrace, in Geiger's house, over Marlowe's and Vivian's faces when in danger, in the carpark at Mars' casino and in the back

alley where Marlowe is assaulted. In many instances, Marlowe casts shadows when in danger and this gives a sense that someone is watching or tailing him. This is particularly evident when Harry Jones is following him around.

- Motif of rain. Rain is used throughout the film to represent danger, mystery or the revealing of some new twist to the plot. It is raining when Marlowe is waiting in the bookstore, when Geiger is murdered, when Owen Taylor goes off the pier, after Carmen is dropped home by Marlowe, when Marlowe gets beaten up, when Canino kills Jones and when Agnes & Marlowe are in the car.
- Zoom. Zoom is used primarily when the audience needs to see the expression on Marlowe's face. Rather than just switch straight to a close up, the camera more often than not zooms up.
- Diegetic sounds. The sound of birds chirping in the background can be heard when Marlowe returns to Geiger's house for the second time. This is representational of the quiet after the storm. It also contrasts the often brutal nature of the crimes and gives the film a certain artistry.
- Humour and wit. Humour is used throughout the film to give the audience a break from what is otherwise a complex script to follow. It also reinforces Marlowe as a super sleuth and appeals to the 'star vehicle' angle of movie production. "My, my, my, such a lot of guns around town and so few brains."
- Moving shot. When this film was made it was still the early days of cinema and a moving shot from Marlowe's car looking at Carol Lundgren is used to give a feeling of following and build suspense.
- Mid Shots. Mid shots are continually used when Vivian and Marlowe are in the same shot. This allows the audience to get their fix of the 'star vehicle' angle.
- Juxtaposition. Marlowe walks down a foggy, rainy, dark street past a shop that has "Fresh Vegetables Daily" painted on the window. This is a contrast between the dark underworld of LA and the seemingly innocent front portrayed during the daytime. This is also a great example of the use of mis-en-scene.
- Shadows. The effect of shadows is used when Marlowe is watching Canino and Harry Jones talking. Their shadows appear against a white screen and it gives an impression Canino is a colourless killer.
- Symbolism. Following Jones' death, Canino and Marlowe leave the office within a few minutes of each other yet they exit through different doors. This reinforces Marlowe's commitment to good and the fact he will not walk down the same path as Canino.
- Use of fog. When Marlowe learns of Art Huck's service station, he drives there. Whilst he is driving, a mist begins to swallow the road and this is emblematic of an unclear path Marlowe is heading down. It is full of mystery and danger.

- Framing. There is a shot of Mrs Mona Grant, Vivian and Marlowe in Art Huck's house when Marlowe is tied up. Marlowe is tied up and in trouble and is positioned on the floor whilst Vivian and Mona are higher. When Marlowe starts to take control of the situation, he rises higher and becomes superior again. This once again reinforces the idea of male dominance and the convention of the super sleuth. They are also very often framed closely in tight framing to show connection between Marlowe and Vivian.
- Whenever Marlowe and Vivian are travelling in a car, Vivian slumps in her seat and so Marlowe is always positioned higher. Vivian is behaving in a submissive way and this reinforces the male dominance and super sleuth ideal.
- Repeating Shot. A shot of Geiger's letterbox is shown on numerous occasions to reinforce what was the catalyst for the entire series of events and crimes.
- Repetition. The line by Canino talking to Jones is re-used by Marlowe when he confronts Mars and tricks him into running out the door. "Ain't you ever seen a gun before? You want me to count to three like they do in the movies?"
- Symbolism. When Eddie Mars is shot by his own goons he falls back through the door. Marlowe then leans across and closes the door, effectively closing the case.

### **Personal Response:**

Once again I thoroughly enjoyed the entire film including its plot and subverted storyline. Whilst the plot was at times hard to follow, it was still a very enjoyable film to watch.

I also enjoyed some of the witty quotes splayed right throughout the film and considering the film was made 60 years ago, the very fact that the lines can still amuse modern audiences is testament to its writers.

Other reasons why I and many others in contemporary society still value the text are:

- The witty dialogue. The film's writers have created witty lines that can still draw laughs from modern audiences. Considering that comedy is very much of a time, this is quite an achievement for it still to be humorous to audiences sixty years on.
- The film is also one of the best examples of film noir ever produced. Hawks continually used lighting and shadows to illuminate or darken parts of Marlowe's, Vivian's and Eddie Mars' faces.
- The star vehicle angle. The film contains two of Hollywood's biggest names for the time in Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart and the film is a great "on-screen" representation of their relationship.

- The complex plot and reflection of the values inherent in the society of the time in which it was produced.

All in all, a fantastic golden age production that perfectly fits the crime fiction genre.