

## FILM NOIR: THE WRITER

# THE WORLD

by Paul Jensen

Hollywood, always ten or fifteen years late in reflecting trends in fiction or the theatre, didn't catch up with the hard-boiled school of detective fiction until the middle Forties. At that time, Raymond Chandler was its foremost practitioner. His four novels—*The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell My Lovely* (1940), *The High Window* (1942), and *The Lady in the Lake* (1943)—had made him a best-selling author, and literary critics lavished praise on his prose style, at once muscular and baroque, and on his vigorous depiction of urban society's corruption.

Chandler's movie career was limited, but his influence as screenwriter (especially on *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*, 1944) and as adapted novelist figured prominently in establishing the tone of the period: the post-war mood of bitterness and black futility, the hero who has lost psychological stability, the stretching against the boundaries of the Production Code. Although Chandler did not actually cause this trend, he became associated with its formation because the time was right for what he had to offer.

Born in Chicago, Chandler had been raised and educated in England. Soon after World War I, he moved to California, where he became a successful executive for several small oil companies. When the Depression forced him out of that job, he turned to writing, and published his first story in 1933, at the age of forty-four. The Los Angeles-Hollywood environment became the setting for his fiction, and even in his first story, a movie star was one of the main characters. Later, after Chandler's personal involvement with the industry, that world of glittery illusions became even more prominent in his novels, and turned up regularly in his essays and letters.

Although Chandler preferred the independence of writing novels to the teamwork of screenwriting, his outlook was otherwise ideal for a Hollywood filmmaker. In the Forties, mystery novels bore much the same relation to Literature as movies did to the Theatre: that of a condescendingly tolerated appendage. As a genre author working in a despised mass medium, he criticized Serious Writing with a vigor that combined defensiveness with a faith in the possibilities of a popular art. His comments on novels can apply equally well to films.

Chandler viewed his chosen form as one

of the few allowing an honest evocation of contemporary life, and because he would rather communicate with a large audience than a limited coterie, he voluntarily worked within the restrictions of a formula. Writers, he reasoned, had always had conditions imposed upon them from without; he concluded that Shakespeare, if alive, "would have taken the current formulae and forced them into something lesser men thought them incapable of. . . . Instead of saying 'this medium is not good,' he would have used it and made it good."

So Raymond Chandler challenged himself to write for "the semi-literate public and at the same time give them some intellectual and artistic overtones which that public does not seek or demand or, in effect, recognize, but which somehow subconsciously it accepts and likes." He believed that readers would accept style, "providing you do not call it style either in words or by, as it were, standing off and admiring it." It is style, he felt, that puts a writer's personal stamp on familiar material, and thus elevates it—a belief that applies equally well to someone working within the Hollywood system.

It was Chandler's opinion that readers only *thought* they wanted nothing but action; "that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description." What they remembered was not the actual death of a man, but, for example, that "in the moment of his death he was trying to pick a paper clip up off the polished surface of a desk and it kept slipping away from him, so that there was a look of strain on his face and his mouth was half open in a kind of tormented grin, and the last thing in the world he thought about was death." This concern for the expressiveness of concrete detail should clarify why filmmakers found Chandler and his writings attractive.

In one 1948 essay, Chandler described murder tales as "almost the only kind of writing we do better than it was ever done before," and in another, published the same year, he stated that the motion picture is "the only art at which we of this generation have any possible chance to greatly excel." Obviously, he thought of the two in essentially the same terms.

One very basic link between movies and



Fred MacMurray in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*.

# YOU LIVE IN



ALL PHOTOS, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED, MOMAFILM STILLIS

Chandler's fiction is the balance maintained between a relatively realistic setting and a main character who is a fantasy extension of the viewer/reader/author. Chandler, like his predecessor Dashiell Hammett, reacted against the older, gentleman-detective type of mystery. He refused to create an intellectual puzzle that built purposefully to the final revelation of whodunit and howdedooit. He rejected the detective who scientifically accumulates minute facts until the last bit of information; is found and fitted into the overall picture; and he sidestepped the suspects who exist only as pawns to be moved about in a controlled game and whose actions and motives can be deduced by rational means.

Instead, he aimed for an accurate evocation of places and atmosphere, of individuals who are normally illogical and unpredictable, and of their ambiguous motives, emotions, and interactions. The form is justified not by the mental satisfaction of solving a riddle, but by the tensions and insights encountered in the process. In Chandler's words, "The best mystery story is one you would read even if the last chapter were torn out."

Chandler's characters move through a world of pervasive corruption and duplicity—sometimes blatantly brutal, sometimes coated with a slickness of refinement, sometimes lurking unobserved in shadowy nooks and crannies. "A world gone wrong, [in which] civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun," wrote Chandler. "The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night." It was a world that reflected the tension and cynicism of the modern age.

Yet, "although such things happen, they do not happen so fast and in such a tight frame of logic to so closely knit a group of people." The detective provides an artificial framework, with his job allowing the viewer/reader to enter into the characters' lives. An outsider, he meddles in the existences of others, trying to control his urge toward involvement and remain an objective observer. His function defines his existence; to be active and to care is to live, but to lose detachment is to court disaster.

Chandler conceived of his hero, Philip Marlowe, as a solitary, determined individual aiding whatever other individuals he can, offering at least partial respite from the darkness of existence. In Chandler's best-known essay, "The Simple Art of Murder," he describes Marlowe as a kind of knight: "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . . He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. . . . If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in."

In execution, however, Marlowe is not quite so pure or powerful or confident. A disillusioned idealist, he knows that society in general cannot be changed, although a few people might be helped, and that his "quest for hidden truth" very likely will expose more than anyone desires, including his client. Marlowe is somewhat tarnished, because he must deal with corruption on its own terms or be destroyed. Believably vulnerable, he can be fooled and injured, but retains the small virtue of stubbornness. He is a loner and a loser; he has little money, few friends, and less satisfaction. He can trust no one, because only poses are presented to him, even by those innocent of specific crimes. His investigation involves peeling off the layers of artifice by using himself as a catalyst: he intrudes into a precarious situation, the dynamics of which are unknown to him, and stirs it up with insinuations and accusations, pinching a nerve here, slicing with an offensive wisecrack there, hoping that a reaction will occur but that the mixture won't explode in his face.

Eventually, the crime is solved and its perpetrator exposed. All mysteries, it seems, must reach this simple but satisfying point. But here, the final emphasis is not on the identity of the killer or on his method, but on what is revealed about human nature, about the things people choose to do, are driven to, or tolerate. Often Chandler leaves an impression of wide-ranging guilt, tangled responsibility, and the inexplicable potential of humanity. What Marlowe uncovers is never all and rarely quite enough; it remains a small resolution, a tentative revelation, an incomplete insight.

So, the fantasy exists: in the overemphasis on melodrama, in the resolution of

the mystery, in the romanticized hero who is educated, concerned, and appealingly solitary. However, Marlowe's reality can be partially defended on the basis that Chandler himself shared many of his creation's traits. Described as "a sensitive, almost tender man" with "a touch of the elder statesman" about him, Chandler also possessed a "restlessly observant contemplation of general human frailty," which produced "the sardonic comments which make Marlowe's talk so engaging. . . . His writing and conversation are scarcely distinguishable." Chandler's letters reinforce the fact that he shared his character's unsparingly direct and tersely phrased opinions. "P. Marlowe and I," he once wrote, "do not despise the upper classes because they take baths and have money; we despise them because they are phoney."

Like Marlowe, Chandler believed that "whatever you set out to do, you have to do it as well as you know how." As a writer, he had to maintain his honesty and sense of quality while catering to the desires of editors, publishers, and readers.

a separate occasion, Hollywood society is "not any duller or more dissipated than moneyed society anywhere: God knows it couldn't be."

"The wise screenwriter," as described by Chandler, would share Marlowe's uneasy combination of realism and idealism. "He should have a touch of cynicism, but only a touch. . . . He should be scrupulously honest about his work, but he should not expect scrupulous honesty in return. . . . And when he has had enough he should say goodbye with a smile, because for all he knows he may want to go back."

Like Marlowe, Chandler asserted his independence, and at one point was suspended by a studio unable to understand his perfectionism. "It seems quite impossible," he wrote in a letter, "to convince anyone that a man would turn his back on a whopping salary—whopping by the standards of normal living—for any reason but a tactical manoeuvre through which he hopes to acquire a still more whopping salary. What I want is something quite different: a freedom from

pulsion to "crack wise" when silence might have been wiser, as in publishing his caustic comments on the industry ("Writers in Hollywood," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1945) while at the height of his success as a screenwriter. "If I still have a job after my article is published, I'll be surprised," he predicted to a *Newsweek* interviewer; and in a letter he reported that the piece "had done me a lot of harm with the producers at Paramount."

If Marlowe rarely found the results of his investigations satisfactory, Chandler too resented having every picture he worked on altered by subsequent writers or improvising directors. When he did achieve an ideal position—in 1947 Universal-International did not employ him, but simply agreed "to buy the motion-picture rights to something I write in my own way"—the script remained unproduced.

Chandler had been brought to Hollywood in 1943 to work on the script of James M. Cain's controversial novel *Double Indemnity*, and the resulting film rapidly became accepted as the start of a trend



FIVE MARLOWES. Dick Powell in *MURDER MY SWEET*; Humphrey Bogart in *THE BIG SLEEP*; Robert Montgomery in *THE LADY IN THE LAKE*; George Montgomery in *THE BRASHER DOUBLOON*; Elliott Gould in *THE LONG GOODBYE*.

But once he began working for film studios, Chandler's position even more interestingly echoed that of Marlowe. He had hired himself out to representatives of the corrupt society he criticized. As a writer, he sought truths for employers who only thought they were interested in his discoveries, who in fact wanted less than the employee insisted on giving.

Hollywood was an exaggerated microcosm of the rich man's world, as Chandler saw it. "The superficial friendliness of Hollywood is pleasant—until you find out that nearly every sleeve conceals a knife," he wrote in 1945. The next year, he described Hollywood as a degraded, falsely idealistic community. "The pretentiousness, the bogus enthusiasm, the constant drinking and drabbing, the incessant squabbling over money, the all-pervasive agent, the strutting of the big shots (and their usually utter incompetence to achieve anything they start out to do), the constant fear of losing all this fairy gold and being the nothing they have never ceased to be, the snide tricks, the whole damn mess is out of this world." But, Chandler added on

datelines and unnatural pressures, and a right to find and work with those few people in Hollywood whose purpose is to make the best pictures possible within the limitations of a popular art."

Chandler refused to be intimidated by people with power. "In any negotiations you must be prepared to lay your head on the block. A writer [or even a private eye] never has anything to fight with but whatever guts the Lord gave him. He is always up against business organizations that have enough power to destroy him in an hour. So all he can do is to try to make them understand that destroying him would be a mistake, because he may have something to give them. I found it quite wonderful to deal with the moguls. They seemed so ruthless, they conceded nothing, they knew they could throw me out, that in a sense I was nobody, that I said things to them that a writer in Hollywood simply does not say to the big bosses. But somehow or other they were too clever to resent it. And in the end I almost think they liked me for it."

Chandler also shared Marlowe's com-

labelled "red meat" by contemporary reviewers. Of course, there were precursors: *CITIZEN KANE* for the flashback/inquiry structure and *THE MALTESE FALCON* for subject matter and toughness. But *THE MALTESE FALCON* had not inspired a trend toward A-budget private detective films.

In fact, although RKO bought Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* in 1941 and Fox purchased *The High Window* the following year, neither sale netted the author much income (about \$2,000 each) and the studios merely incorporated each book's plot into an already-established low budget series. The former became *THE FALCON TAKES OVER* (with George Sanders as the debonnaire antithesis of Marlowe) and the latter a Lloyd Nolan vehicle, *TIME TO KILL*. In 1943, however, Chandler hit the best seller lists, and although Billy Wilder had wanted Cain to adapt his own novel, he settled for Chandler as second choice. The book had been around since 1936, but the Production Code officials had warned the studios off, as the material was considered too sordid.

*Double Indemnity* deals with insurance

agent Walter Huff (Neff, in the film) who plots with beautiful Phyllis Nirdlinger (Dietrichson, in the film) to kill her husband. By making it look as if he died falling from a moving train, they hope to collect double the insurance money. After the murder is committed, Keyes, the company's claims investigator, keeps his friend Huff posted on the progress of the case. Eventually, Huff falls for Lola, Phyllis's step-daughter, and realizes that Phyllis is a pathological personality with previous murders to her credit, and that she had been "using" him all along. Huff is shot by Phyllis and, when he realizes that Lola is under suspicion, he admits everything to Keyes. The company, to avoid excessive publicity, accepts a written confession from Huff and arranges for the guilty couple to leave the country on a steamer. The two, realizing they had no future, commit suicide.

Although Chandler and Wilder changed the novel's ending to reveal a more explicit sense of poetic justice, their script was still a breakthrough accomplishment, with both romantic leads cold-blooded murderers, and with adultery strongly implied as well. In 1944, a newspaper article noted that *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* was already being described "by some producers as 'an emancipation for Hollywood writing,'" and that, as a result, similar material would be produced.

It is hard to know to what degree Wilder collaborated with Chandler, or even whether other writers were involved. (*Best Film Plays—1945* includes a credit, "Adaptation by Angus MacPhail," on its contents page but not on the credits section of the script itself.) Chandler described his ten weeks working with Wilder as "an agonizing experience" that "has probably shortened my life, but I learned from it about as much about screen writing as I am capable of learning, which is not very much . . . Too many people have too much to say about a writer's work." Wilder, much more recently, described Chandler as "a kook, a crazy man, but he had a wonderful flair."

Perhaps a more objective view can be found in a letter by James M. Cain (quoted by David Madden in *Film Heritage*). Wilder, hoping to convince Chandler to use Cain's original dialogue, had hired some actors to recite the book. The attempt failed. "'I could have told you,' said Chandler, 'that Cain's dialogue, in his fiction, is written to the eye . . . Now that we've got that out of the way, let's dialogue it in the same spirit as he has in the book, and not the identically same words.'" Wilder then brought Cain himself in, expecting him to contradict Chandler. He didn't. "Chandler, an older man a bit irked by Wilder's omniscience, had this odd little smile on his face as the talk went on."

The final result is a model of subtly efficient adaptation, essentially the same as

the novel in the nature and order of scenes, but with dialogue and a flippant tone that are mostly new. The famous sexual fencing between Walter (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck)—epitomized by the exchange starting with her statement, "There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff"—is entirely new dialogue. Also new is a scene involving the confession of a man who had burned his truck for the insurance; instead of just having Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) and Walter talk about the incident, as in the book, the film shows their confrontation with the man. In general, the scenes between Walter and Keyes are expanded, building up their relationship and giving more footage to Keyes, one of the few honest characters in the film (albeit an obsessively distrustful one).

In adapting *Double Indemnity*, Chandler encountered a problem that others would face regarding his own novels: the book was a first-person monologue by its protagonist, and thus a subjective recounting of events and confiding of thoughts. The problem of transposing such material to the screen hadn't been faced by John Huston with *The Maltese Falcon*, as Hammett's book had been written in the third person, with little commentary. Chandler and Wilder's solution was to begin the picture at the end, with Neff reciting the past events into a dictaphone for Keyes to find. Thus, from the start, we know the entire plot: "I killed Dietrichson—me, Walter Neff—insurance salesman—thirty-five years old, unmarried, no visible scars—'til a while ago, that is. . . I killed him for money—and for a woman. I didn't get the money, and I didn't get the woman. . . It all began last May. . . ." Here, Chandler is putting to the test his theory that a mystery story should be interesting even when the resolution is not an issue.

At times, the script turns Cain's first person description into dialogue (this is done with Neff's statement that Keyes wouldn't acknowledge the day of the week without checking and double checking his information). This technique could have been awkward, with a character unlikely to voice certain thoughts, but here the choices are carefully made and don't strain credulity. At other times, the script utilizes subjective monologue to excess, so that we hear Neff's voice summarizing action that should be shown as incident, and describing things that are in fact being shown. But for the most part the narration in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* effectively gets past the exposition and allows the scenes to concentrate on more dramatic two-person encounters.

*DOUBLE INDEMNITY* isn't a detective story, but when MacMurray sits behind his desk, hat on and tie loosened, it takes only a slight transposition to see him as Marlowe. The same holds true for the characterization: tough and irreverent, but vulnerable. The difference is that Neff, poised like Marlowe on the edge of corrup-

tion, readily falls. While the official investigation is conducted by Keyes, Neff eventually becomes suspicious of Phyllis and investigates on his own, discovering a depth of evil in her that he never suspected. This allows him to give the 'I'll-tell-you-how-I-think-you-planned-it' speech in their final scene.

At that point, she shoots him and he, embracing her, kills her. This linking of sexuality and death crystalizes an attitude found throughout the Forties and Fifties, epitomized by titles like *MURDER MY SWEET* and *KISS ME DEADLY*. Neff then returns to his office and starts dictating; Keyes arrives, and it is implied that Neff dies before the police arrive. Since this finale differs from that in the book, the "falling out of thieves" and final detective overtones were very likely contributed by Chandler. More coincidental, perhaps, is the presence of a family relationship that turns up, in varied forms, in Chandler's books: an elderly man is married to a young woman, who does not get along with a stepdaughter who is young enough to be her sister; or else the man is widowed with two daughters of distinctly different ages and temperaments. (In contrast, Chandler himself was married to a woman seventeen years his senior.)

While *INDEMNITY* was shooting, Chandler contributed to two other Paramount films. On *AND NOW TOMORROW* he was only one of several writers (not all of them credited) who had a hand in the script. Based on Rachel Field's novel, it concerned a young doctor (Alan Ladd) who cures the deafness of a society girl (Loretta Young). There is little of Chandler in the picture, although his presence can be felt in Ladd's dislike of the rich, and specifically in one line of dialogue. (Ladd, entering a diner, orders, "Coffee—hot, strong, and made this year!" The line is lifted, almost word for word, from Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*.) Chandler also worked on *THE UNSEEN*, a weak follow-up to Paramount's successful ghost story, *THE UNINVITED*. Its producer, John Houseman, has dismissed it as "just a polish job" for Chandler, and it reflects none of his personality or style.

In December, 1944, *The Atlantic Monthly* published Chandler's essay on mystery fiction, "The Simple Art of Murder." By then the filmic trend was well underway: *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW* was in release, Cain's *Mildred Pierce* was in production, and his *The Postman Always Rings Twice* had been announced. Appropriately, RKO decided to take advantage of owning *Farewell My Lovely* and began filming a new, more faithful production in April, 1944, with Edward Dmytryk, veteran of twenty-seven "B" pictures. RKO suspected, and a public opinion poll confirmed, that the title and the presence of Dick Powell might lead audiences to expect a musical; so at the last minute the title was changed to the more direct *MURDER MY SWEET*.

*MURDER MY SWEET* and *THE BIG SLEEP*,



NOIR: THE WRITER CONTINUED  
along with the later *THE LADY IN THE LAKE*, illustrate further the problems of adaptation which Chandler had faced with *Double Indemnity*. Once again, the novels were written in the first person, but unlike Cain's almost objective approach, Chandler gloried in his character's subjectivity, making full use of verbal style to depict and interpret people, places, and events. Much of his individuality lies in this style, which was much more difficult to transfer into another medium than Cain's had been.

The first fact to be faced is that Chandler's style, while cool and direct, is also ripely imagistic. Rather than realistic recording, we have a heightened expressiveness, usually through hyperbolic similes that reflect Marlowe's sardonic outlook. Often this occurs in description and Marlowe's thoughts, which are not directly filmable as dialogue. For example, a woman's hat has "a crown the size of a whiskey glass and a brim you could have wrapped the week's laundry in." Or, "The coffee shop smell was strong enough to build a garage on." Or, Moose Malloy was "a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck. . . . He looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food." Plots may be transposed from novel to film, but style cannot be translated; it must be created anew for the new medium.

Part of *MURDER MY SWEET*'s solution to this problem is the same one Chandler used for *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*: the film begins with Marlowe (Powell) in a police station, recounting past events. Thus, with the story placed in a flashback, Marlowe's narration can make substantial use of the vivid but otherwise unspoken opinions provided him by Chandler. But after the scriptwriter had done his part, it became necessary for the director and photographer and set designer to make the images consistent with those comments. This filmic world must look like a Chandler world. The influence of *CITIZEN KANE* (also an RKO film) is put to good use in *MURDER*, with a similar semi-expressionist distortion in its lighting and settings. Most of the scenes take place at night in claustrophobic rooms, dark hallways, or cluttered alleys. The photography is starkly, deeply shadowed, with sharp-edged sidelighting that outlines certain areas and hides others. It makes a beach-front feel like a back alley.

Just before shooting started, Dmytryk said that he liked the project because "I can have some fun with effects and lights and shadows." He was true to his word, and to Chandler. In one scene, Marlowe sits in his darkened office, looking out the window, as a flashing neon sign alternately illuminates part of the room. Suddenly, Moose Malloy appears as a reflection in the window, standing behind Marlowe, and we are as startled and disoriented as the detective. At other times, the images "illustrate"

the narration, the voice representing "our" thoughts responding to what both "we" and Marlowe see, which solders our identification with the character. When he is knocked out unexpectedly, the voice speaks of diving into a black pool, and we see blackness flow into the frame from all sides, engulfing him.

When Marlowe awakens after a vividly paranoid, drug-induced nightmare, he is lying down, seen in a medium shot from above. Trying to orient himself, he extends his arm upward, toward the camera, and examines his fingers. To us, as to him, they look as unreal as they must feel. Dmytryk's image gives us the point of view; Powell-Marlowe's voice isolates the proper simile: "My throat felt sore, but the fingers feeling it didn't feel anything. They were just a bunch of bananas that looked like fingers." The smoke that Marlowe then describes as filling the room also obscures our view of him. After regaining his bearings, Marlowe confronts the doctor in charge, and as the dizziness returns, the smoke fades in and we share—this time through visuals only—what Marlowe feels.

John Paxton's script follows the novel quite faithfully. Certain specific elements (a few supporting characters, and references to Negroes and marijuana), are omitted, and the plot and relationships are tightened. But these changes do little damage to Chandler's original conception. Toward the end, the script adjusts the plot in order to bring out certain similarities to *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (the young, beautiful, self-serving wife who takes advantage of her older husband; the younger girl who has grown to hate her; the sexual fencing between the wife and Marlowe, and her attempt to seduce him into helping her kill someone). All this is consistent with the novel, but heightened, and one might say the same about the film itself: an adaptation that is faithful without being slavish, and which respects Chandler's verbal style while complementing it with a caustic visual grace.

In contrast to *MURDER MY SWEET*, *THE BIG SLEEP* made almost no attempt to achieve an equivalent of Chandler's verbal style (other than in the dialogue). There is no flashback structure or narration, and no attempt at unusual visuals. Evidently Howard Hawks aimed for a look of strict realism, rather than Chandler's (and Dmytryk's) rococo.

As a tough, sardonic, straightforward tale, *THE BIG SLEEP* holds up well. The atmosphere is taut, the banter sharp, and the violence explosive. Some scenes, such as the one in which Marlowe (Bogart) observes a hired killer force a nice little guy to drink poison, are among the best in any private eye picture. Still, the feeling persists that Hawks could have done more; the milieu isn't quite as tangible as it should be.

The opening scene, with Marlowe talk-

ing to General Sternwood in the old man's greenhouse, works because of the actors' handling of fine dialogue. But Chandler's prose had created the feeling of being underwater, with Marlowe drowning in humidity and the General incubating, and both engulfed by orchids with "nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men." In the film, even though Bogart is obviously sweating through his shirt, the room neither looks nor feels as hot and claustrophobic as it should. Many other scenes miss part of Chandler's mood, as well.

Although Bogart remains the definitive Forties tough-guy, Dick Powell is really the more accurate Marlowe. A lot of Bogart's Marlowe is really Hammett's Sam Spade, and most of it consists of the Bogart Mystique. (Defending Elliott Gould's Marlowe in *THE LONG GOODBYE*, Robert Altman remarked: "When most people say 'That's not Philip Marlowe,' what they really mean is 'That's not Humphrey Bogart.'") Powell came to the genre fresh, and could more easily adapt himself to the Marlowe persona—some would say because there was less to adapt.

Bogart's Marlowe is crueler than Powell's: at one point, holding a hated henchman at gunpoint, Bogart temptingly drops the gun, allows the man to bend forward to pick it up, then viciously kicks him in the groin. Indeed, in his tendency to be all-powerful, to take vengeance into his own hands, Bogart is closer to Spillane's Hammer than to Chandler's Marlowe. Although we get vagrant glimpses of Bogart-Marlowe's subterranean humanity, the cynicism and the bitterness are so strong that they tend to dominate. In point of fact, Bogart is *too* tough.

Chandler's Marlowe was no pushover, and he could play the tough-guy role to impress a client or intimidate a suspect. But he always indicated to the reader that it *was* a role, by undercutting each grand gesture with an ironic aside. ("I snicked a match on my thumbnail and for once it lit.") Much more believably than Bogart, Dick Powell conveys this vulnerability—this sense that Marlowe's always taking chances that could easily backfire. He's not so much tough as stubborn. (And, of all the actors who have played Philip Marlowe, Powell is the only one you could even imagine playing chess.) Sometimes Powell reveals a light, almost boyish side—also true of Marlowe—as when he indulges in a brief turn of hopscotch on the checkered floor of a mansion's echoing hallway, or when he strikes a match against the posterior of a decorative statue. He's not a Superman like Bogart; indeed, he's less likely to make a successfully stealthy exit from an apartment house than to trip over the tin cans scattered outside.

Chandler accurately praised Bogart as an actor who "can be tough without a gun," and who had "a sense of humor that

*continued on page 24*

FROM FICTION TO FANTASY  
WITH HOWARD HAWKS

Referring to Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep*, Howard Hawks has declared, "I never could figure the story out"—and most critics writing on the film have made similar assertions. It's all very entertaining, they say, but it doesn't make sense. The common notion is that the screenwriters (William Faulkner and Leigh Brackett, and later Jules Furthman) departed freely from Chandler's text, and that Hawks and his actors achieved their best effects through improvisation. "Neither the author, the writer, nor myself knew who had killed whom . . . I can't follow it," says Hawks. Actually, most of these claims have no basis in fact.

At least two versions of the script are available for study: one has been published in *Film Scripts One* (edited by George P. Garrett, O.B. Hardison, Jr., and Jane R. Gelfman) and the other is available in the Theatre Research Library at Lincoln Center. Internal evidence suggests that the *Film Scripts One* version predates the Lincoln Center version. An interested individual could follow the course of the material from the original novel, to the *F.S.O.* script, to the Lincoln Center script (which itself contains clearly marked and dated revisions), to the final film itself. The resulting comparison would provide subtle but revealing insights into the adaptors' task.

In general, each version of the script, as well as the film itself, follows the novel almost scene for scene and line for line. The *F.S.O.* script hews closely to the original, but occasionally leaves out lengthy speeches, such as General Sternwood's description of himself as the "dull survival of a rather gaudy life," which the Lincoln Center version includes (as does the film). There are slight variations in dialogue phrasing from version to version, mostly to condense, occasionally to improve via word choice. Sometimes, the change is simply in the order of phrases, to angle the line for a listener rather than a reader. For example, "What was Owen doing with your car last night?" becomes "What was Owen doing last night with your car?"

In one scene between Vivian Sternwood (Bacall) and Marlowe, the novel has Vivian make a reference to Marcel Proust. Marlowe asks, "Who's he?" and Vivian condescendingly replies, "You wouldn't know him." Marlowe says, "Tut, tut. Come into my boudoir." The *F.S.O.* script leaves out all of this except the boudoir line. The Lincoln Center version returns the reference to Proust, and lets Marlowe reply, "Voulez-vous entrer dans mon boudoir?" It then adds a parenthetical alternate line, "Come into my boudoir." The final film keeps the Proust reference, and wisely allows Bogart to reply in English.

Early in the story, Marlowe comments to a butler about Carmen Sternwood's sexual precociousness.

*Book*: "You ought to wean her. She looks old enough."

*F.S.O.*: "You ought to wean her. She looks old enough."

*LC*: "You ought to housebreak her. She's old enough."

*Film*: "You ought to wean her. She's old enough."

During the conversation in the greenhouse, General Sternwood offers Marlowe a drink, saying, "How do you like your brandy, sir?" The reply is:

*Book*: "Any way at all."

*F.S.O.*: "Just with brandy."

*LC*: "In a glass."

*Film*: "In a glass."

In both instances, the variations are slight, but the final choice is in fact an improvement over Chandler's version. Another improvement over Chandler's phrasing



occurred in the following exchange with the General:

*Book*: Marlowe: "Ah."

General: "That means what?"

Marlowe: "Nothing."

*F.S.O.*: Marlowe: "Ah."

General: "What does that mean?"

Marlowe: "It means, Ah."

*LC*: Marlowe: "Hmm."

General: "What does that mean?"

Marlowe: "It means, Hmm."

*Film*: (Same as LC version.)

Clearly, while the scriptwriters did an excellent polish job, the dialogue remains essentially Chandler's.

Each script puts progressively more emphasis on Vivian (to be played by the Star). This began in the *F.S.O.* version, and reaches extreme proportions in the re-shot, re-written scenes added to the Lincoln Center copy (and to the film). Because Vivian is placed in scenes where she did not appear in the novel, her motivations are rendered more ambiguous. This does contribute added confusion to the final unraveling of the plot, but that is not to say that it cannot be unraveled. The novel is complicated, but it can be understood. The film, derived closely from the book, can also be understood—with the usual amount of effort required by such stories.

Granted, the ending is altered. According to Hawks, the censors didn't care for

Chandler's finale, in which Carmen Sternwood, the younger sister, is identified as pathological and sent off to be tended and perhaps cured, with Marlowe keeping silent about it to the police. The censors suggested a different and more violent conclusion, says Hawks. "It was everything I wanted, and I made it and was very happy about it." In this ending, gambler Eddie Mars is guilty, and has been psychologically blackmailing Vivian with the thought that Carmen is the murderer. This complicates matters a bit, but it doesn't really confuse them. It does, however, allow for all the guilty parties to be killed off and, in Production Code terms, proper morality is superficially asserted.

The famous story, told time and again by everyone involved, about the confusion surrounding one of the deaths, does not

really affect comprehension of the main plot. The character in question is the Sternwoods's chauffeur, who drives off a dock to his death. The question is whether he committed suicide or was murdered. This occurs early in the story, and relates only slightly to the main plot. And that loose end also exists in the novel, whereas the anecdote about everybody contacting everybody else to find out the answer generally is used to imply that the entire film is inexplicable. In fact, it merely indicates how closely the book was followed.

Another famous anecdote is the one Hawks repeatedly tells about the bookstore scene. "I said, 'This is an awfully ordinary scene. Can't you think of something to do?' And he [Bogart] just pushed up his hat brim, put on glasses and got a little effeminate. The moment he did that, I said, 'O.K. come on, we're off. I'll write some new dialogue when we're inside.'" The image of this moment of inspiration is appealing, and Hawks has probably convinced himself of its truth. Yet the novel reveals the following description of the same scene: "I had my horn-rimmed sunglasses on. I put my voice high and let a bird twitter in it . . . 'You do sell books?' I said in my polite falsetto." The entire scene, right to the dialogue, is in the novel; the only improvisation could have been Bogart's turning up his hat brim.

—Paul Jensen

NOIR: THE WRITER CONTINUED

contains that grating undertone of contempt." But in Bogart, the frustrated idealist seems to be buried beneath this contempt—except in certain scenes with Bacall, which are themselves atypical of the character. Of the three most prominent incarnations of Chandler's detective in the Forties, we might say that Robert Montgomery in *THE LADY IN THE LAKE* had no style at all; Dick Powell had Marlowe's style; and Bogart had, not Marlowe's, but his own.

With *MURDER MY SWEET* and *THE BIG SLEEP* in production, Chandler's stock had risen precipitately—and a contract conflict inevitably arose, in November, 1944, between Chandler and Paramount. Eventually a new contract was drawn up, and in January, 1945, Chandler returned to work. "In less than two weeks I wrote an original story of ninety pages. All dictated and never looked at until finished. It was an experiment and, for one subject from early childhood to plot-constipation, it was rather a revelation. Some of the stuff is good, some very much not." Work on the script followed, and in March Chandler felt that the picture, *THE BLUE DAHLIA*, was "about ready to begin shooting."

The account given by John Houseman, again Chandler's producer, differs considerably from the above. Evidently Chandler had started the story as a novel and couldn't finish it, so he decided to turn it into a script. He also had difficulty finishing that, but shooting couldn't be postponed because Alan Ladd, the star, was due to report to the Army. Chandler, an alcoholic, decided that he could only complete the script drunk, and so, under

Houseman's "supervision," he finished it. During that time, said Houseman, "Chandler did not draw one sober breath, nor did one speck of solid food pass his lips. He was polite and cheerful when I appeared, and his doctor came twice a day to give him intravenous injections."

The artistic result of this crash program did not really satisfy Chandler. "I threatened to walk off the picture, not yet finished, unless they stopped the director [George Marshall] putting in fresh dialogue out of his own head. . . . The direction was so bad that the cutting, which was very expert, was not able to conceal it." But the weaknesses were also partially the script's.

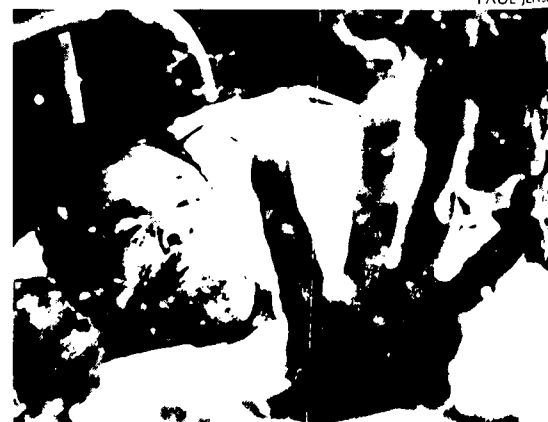
In *THE BLUE DAHLIA*, the detective figure is a returned airman (Ladd) who finds his wife living it up among the decadent rich. When she is murdered, the police seek Ladd, so he attempts to solve the case. The film has little tension or visual style, although some of the dialogue is bright (especially that between Ladd and Veronica Lake) and the peripheral characters are well played. William Bendix receives many of the sharpest lines, and gives the film's best performance, as the hero's shell-shocked buddy. Ladd, in turn, was aptly summed up by Chandler himself as "a small boy's idea of a tough guy." Chandler once mentioned that the best short scene he ever wrote "was one in which a girl said 'Uh huh' three times with three different intonations." Unidentified by Chandler, that scene is in *THE BLUE DAHLIA*, performed in a bar by William Bendix and Doris Dowling.

In February, 1945, MGM purchased the rights to Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*,

and this time the price was \$35,000. That summer, Chandler went to MGM to work on adapting his novel, but disliked the activity: "Just turning over dry bones." Another writer, Steve Fisher, was then brought in to return the bones, and Robert Montgomery became the film's director. For years, Montgomery had been nagging the studio for a chance to make a film in which the camera would consistently be the eyes of the main character, and *THE LADY IN THE LAKE* became that project. The adoption of this format no doubt required a major revamping of the script's structure. When the film was released, at the start of 1947, it bore a solo writing credit to Steve Fisher.

Montgomery's approach to the problem of the first-person narrative was to film the entire story subjectively, with a voice-over narration. Theoretically, this might seem a logical solution, yet because we see "ourselves" only when Marlowe looks in a mirror, it is harder to identify with him than with, say, a visible Dick Powell in *MURDER MY SWEET*. Also, the long, continuous takes forced the script to be constructed in a limited number of lengthy scenes, bypassing the wide-range of the novel. Staging was likewise inhibited, as everyone had to relate to the lens, and the many camera movements limited the use of imaginative lighting. Although an interesting experiment, and probably a backbreaker to execute, Montgomery's approach was mistakenly literal and became a limitation rather than a challenge.

As for the Chandler side of it, although hunks of his plot and dialogue remain, excessive compromise was required to fit the novel to the enforced structure. The



Top left: Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray plant the evidence in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*. Top right: MacMurray is executed as Edward G. Robinson looks on, in an epilogue cut from *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* after preview screenings. Bottom left: Stanwyck monitors Robinson's summation of the case against her. Bottom center: Bogart monitors a murder in *THE BIG SLEEP*. Bottom right: Dick Powell's nightmare ("a bunch of bananas that looked like fingers") in *MURDER MY SWEET*.

PAUL JENSEN



Top left: Bogart examines Martha Vickers in *THE BIG SLEEP*. Top center: Sterling Hayden, Elliott Gould, Nina Van Pallandt, Henry Gibson in *THE LONG GOODBYE*. Top right: Alan Ladd ("a small boy's idea of a tough guy") and Veronica Lake in *THE BLUE DAHLIA*. Bottom left: Marlowe as adolescent—Robert Montgomery and Audrey Totter in *THE LADY IN THE LAKE*. Bottom right: Farley Granger and Robert Walker "crisscross" murder plans in *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*.



final impression received is that the story exists as an excuse for the style, instead of the style being a means of conveying the story, with Montgomery more interested in his double-jointed dolly than in his characters. And Montgomery performs the role of Marlowe—mostly vocally—as arrogant, superior, rude, and, it sometimes seems, quite stupid. His delivery of the sharp dialogue comes out more as a whine than a crack. If Bogart is an all-man fantasy figure and Powell an irreverent Boy Scout, then Montgomery seems a petulant, intolerable adolescent.

In January 1946 (two months after the article, "Writers in Hollywood," appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*), Chandler was suspended by Paramount, "for refusing to perform" under what he considered an outdated contract. "I requested a cancellation, but was denied that." But the rifts were again healed and in May 1946, the studio announced that he would adapt *The Innocent Mrs. Duff*, a mystery novel by Elizabeth Sanxay Holding which he admired. However, nothing came of this reunion and *THE BLUE DAHLIA* remained Chandler's final work for Paramount.

About a year later, in Spring 1947, Chandler began on an original script for Universal-International, and averaged \$4,000 a week for it. But again, nothing was filmed. In 1949, he published *The Little*

*Sister*, a Marlowe novel he had been working on since 1944 and which had a movie star and an agent among its characters. (Chandler would, a few years later, write an article elaborating further on his displeasure with all agents.)

Chandler's final scriptwriting stint was for Alfred Hitchcock's *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, and once again it is difficult to assess the extent of his contribution. The collaboration with Hitchcock did not satisfy Chandler. "The thing that amuses me about Hitchcock is the way he directs a film in his head before he knows what the story is. You find yourself trying to rationalize the shots he wants to make rather than the story. Every time you get set he jabs you off balance by wanting to do a love scene on top of the Jefferson Memorial or something like that. . . . His idea of characters is rather primitive. Nice Young Man, Society Girl, Frightened Woman, Sneaky Old Beldame, Spy, Comic Relief, and so on."

Hitchcock was also dissatisfied. "The work he did was no good and I ended up with Czenzi Ormonde, a woman writer who was one of Ben Hecht's assistants. When I completed the treatment, the head of Warners tried to find someone to do the dialogue, and very few writers would touch it. None of them thought it was any good." When Chandler saw the final

script, he described it as "a good deal changed and castrated. It is, in fact, so bad that I am debating whether to refuse screen credit." The credit remained, however. Chandler's notes about the many necessary character and plot details are indeed intimidating, and would inevitably conflict with Hitchcock's penchant for sidestepping demands for logic and heading straight for the scenes of tension.

The first third of Patricia Highsmith's thriller is adapted faithfully, and the film retains even the setting, actions, and dialogue of the strangling of Farley Granger's wife. The changes are minor ones; "Bruno" becomes a first name rather than a surname for the Robert Walker character; and his famous alter ego is changed from an architect to a tennis pro. But after the first murder, the film deviates more and more from the book. (Miss Highsmith had her character actually kill Bruno's father, then suffer from guilt, be investigated by a private detective, and eventually be captured.) It also tightens the time structure, and builds to the new, more suspenseful climax of a hurried tennis match. It's impossible to say just what part Chandler played in these changes. The general plot line (the hero is an outsider who becomes involved with rich, decadent people and is sought by the police for the murder of his wife) echoes that of



THE BLUE DAHLIA—but so do numerous other melodramas of the period.

Chandler published only two more novels, *The Long Goodbye* (1953) and *Playback* (1958), the latter a revision of his unproduced U-I script, but Philip Marlowe has remained, in one guise or another, a cinema fixture. George Montgomery portrayed him in *THE BRASHER DOUBLOON*, released by Fox in 1947, to complete the Forties's quartet of Marlowes. Based on Chandler's *The High Window*, it was a cheaper effort than the others, and offered no different, or especially well-executed, solutions to the problems posed by the novels.

The Fifties were dominated by the more vicious Mike Hammer of *KISS ME DEADLY*, and only in 1969 did Marlowe reappear, in an adaptation of *The Little Sister* entitled simply *MARLOWE*. By then a new problem had arisen: could the character be transposed from the studio night-world of the fearful Forties into the on-location, shining-color, and flashing-freeway Los Angeles of the Sixties? *MARLOWE*, directed slickly but impersonally by Paul Bogart, tried to treat the material seriously, while updating the novel in superficial ways: a run-down hotel has become "The Infinite Pad," and an influential movie star is now the lead in a TV series. Marlowe's office adjoins a School of Cosmetology, where messages are left for him, and he has a ballet teacher girlfriend. A supposedly comic three-way phone conversation, depicted in split screen, falls flat, as does the self-conscious addition of Bruce Lee as a henchman who breaks up Marlowe's office and later attacks the detective.

At least, *MARLOWE* touches all the familiar bases, including the character's flippancy and verbal byplay, his conflict with a police Lieutenant, his encounters with well-played incidental characters, and even his Office Bottle. Individual moments work quite well. When Marlowe is asked how he spotted a piece of evidence missed by the police, he taunts, "I'm a trained detective!" And he can't resist quipping to an unpleasant thug, "Does your mother know what you do for a living?"

Where *MARLOWE* falls short is simply that nothing is carried off with quite enough effort and imagination. The wit is all in Chandler's dialogue, rarely in the direction; the pacing fails to build and maintain tension; the *mise-en-scène* isn't down-to-earth enough. Although James Garner handles a wise-crack well, he doesn't bring enough character to Marlowe. His face is too pretty, too soft; it doesn't look lived-in. His body isn't slouched or his psyche vulnerable enough. Even in precarious situations, he never really conveys distress. When in one scene he sits in his office listing all the things that had gone wrong that day and feeling sorry for himself, the words do not ring true

because we haven't seen him feel those events; we certainly haven't felt them ourselves.

Must we conclude, then, that Marlowe is an anachronism, as out-of-date as his "black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them"? Robert Altman's anti-Marlowe version of *The Long Goodbye* takes that approach. Here, again, the novel is updated to the present, but this time Marlowe has changed. Still equipped with an old car and battered ideals, he obviously can't function in the absurdist (rather than menacing) milieu Altman creates around him.

As portrayed by Elliott Gould, Marlowe is almost totally passive; he wanders in a daze, as though not quite awakened from a fitful sleep. (Altman says that, on the set, the character was called "Rip Van Marlowe.") He drifts through events to which he contributes almost nothing; not even remotely resembling a catalyst, he mutters to himself, no matter what has just occurred, "It's OK with me." In his final encounter with Terry Lennox, a friend who has taken advantage of him, Marlowe is told, "You're a born loser." The line would have fitted the original character, but here it isn't quite apt: there's a vast difference between being a loser and being defeated. Altman's Marlowe has given up.

But Altman's emphasis on comedy, off-beat casting, and outré events makes it seem that Marlowe has given in to nothing. For example, his comments about a henchman's clothes may be true (almost) to Marlowe's character, but in this film the henchman thanks Marlowe for his suggestions instead of belting him for his insolence. While, in the novel, the main criminal was a menacing Mexican hood "who inspired respect when he entered a room," here Mark Rydell plays him for Jewish comedy and irrational bursts of violence.

*THE LONG GOODBYE* lacks the feeling of real menace and futility needed to have reduced Marlowe to this state. And into what does he evolve at the end? Realizing that the only solution to endless disillusionment and betrayal is death, he cold-bloodedly shoots Terry Lennox, then skips happily down the road. Altman has rejected the traditional Marlowe virtues, but he has replaced them with an even more simplistic "mythic" stereotype, turning him into an instant Dirty Harry.

Despite its appealing moments, most of which have little to do with Chandler, *THE LONG GOODBYE*'s demythification of a relatively realistic character concept ends up offering an even less satisfying alternative. Altman compounds the offense by replacing Chandler-Marlowe's vivid similes with dull-witted lines—like one comment that the cops have got the case "all zippered up like a big bag of shit."

Yet a reasonable combination of Marlowe with the present is not an impossibility, since Darren McGavin's TV series *The Outsider* (about a private eye named David

Ross) managed it, as did the Paul Newman-Jack Smight film *HARPER* (a version of Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer novel, *The Moving Target*), with the latter's final freeze frame neatly capturing a very modern moral dilemma. No, there remains more to Marlowe than Altman seems to realize.

*The Long Goodbye*, written during the long illness of Chandler's wife, is not as tight a novel as its predecessors, and in it Marlowe indulges in excessive bitterness and self-pity; it is a work of greater than usual disillusionment for both Chandler and Marlowe. As the author said, regarding the book, "one grows up, one becomes complicated and unsure, one becomes interested in moral dilemmas, rather than who cracked who on the head . . . I cared about the people, about this strange corrupt world we live in, and how any man who tried to be honest looks in the end either sentimental or plain foolish." The novel, if filmed faithfully, could still have made what appears to be Altman's point, because in it Marlowe is very tired and close to defeat, and the atmosphere is one of decayed emotions and corroded relationships. But filming it that way would have meant caring about the people and their world, a feeling Altman was unable to muster.

Altman may, as he claims, have succeeded in killing off Philip Marlowe, if only by using up Chandler's last major novel. But even if Chandler's hero is gone, his bleak vision will continue a strong and persuasive one. A faithfully filmed version of *The Long Goodbye* would surely have captured a world that was described best by Chandler in 1945, but which is still our contemporary—a world "in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of moneymaking, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a holdup in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge. It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in." ❖