Scorched Earth: Expressions of Modernity in Dashiell Hammett's Pulp Fiction

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Scorched Earth: Expressions of Modernity in Dashiell Hammett’s Pulp Fiction

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Abstract

Samuel Dashiell Hammett (“Dash”), American author and activist, is today best known for one of the novels he published 1930, *The Maltese Falcon*. My thesis presents evidence that a close study of a selection of Hammett’s short stories and novels published between 1925 and 1930 (“Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” “The Gutting of Couffignal,” *Red Harvest*, and *The Maltese Falcon*) exposes his personal struggle with modernity in America, through a discussion of three motifs. In his stories and novels, Hammett explores the fluctuating treatment of immigrants, and changing social spaces for newly independent women in post-World War I America. He also questions the consequences of increasing mechanization in cities, through everyman detectives Sam Spade and the Continental Op. As Hammett’s career progresses, he continues to passionately challenge the benefits of conservative cultural values, while urging caution against the unreserved embrace of modernism.

Research for this paper originated with a close study of Hammett’s letters, and several biographies (including Layman and Ward). A range of critics contributed to a discussion of Hammett as a modernist author (e.g. Wheat and Norman). Articles on post-World War I literature were also essential to my research (e.g. Tate and Stevenson). A review of the available material demonstrated the need to analyze Hammett’s complex relationship with modernity, and how the bond evolved over time. While Hammett establishes specific motifs early in his career, it is not until 1930 that he standardizes his
unique portrayal of modernism in American cities, and urges readers to approach modernism in America with cautious optimism.
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Chapter I.

Introduction

Dashiell Hammett’s career as an author began in the early 20th century, when he published short stories and sketches (sometimes under a pseudonym) for popular magazines of the time. His first publication came in 1923 (Ward 81). Novels, particularly pulp novels, were widely read in their heyday, and were absorbed by hundreds of Americans daily. Named after their cheap production method (the term “pulp fiction” refers to the low-quality paper the stories were printed on), critic Daniel Molin notes they were easily accessible and economically affordable for a broad audience, appealing to highbrow and lowbrow readers alike (Molin 238). Given the disposable production methods of pulp fiction in the early 20th Century, it is a testament to the enduring popularity of Hammett’s fiction that his work is still studied by critics and academics alike.

My thesis presents evidence that a close reading of the Continental Op stories and The Maltese Falcon shows evidence of Hammett’s personal struggle with modernity, through a study of the effect modernism had on American cities and citizens. Early signs of his political and social activism, which biographers Layman and Ward suggest is the focus of Hammett’s interest later his life, also are on display in the published stories and novels. Through two stereotypical detectives, the Continental Op and Sam Spade, Hammett is able to draw readers into a conversation about the rapidly changing social conventions and the implicit dangers of increased mechanization in cities. Although he is
not a prominent part of the discussion of fiction between World War I and World War II, recent critics continue to study his work, and recognize the novels and stories as critiques of America. Their studies, however, tend to be narrowly focused on individual works he published, and do not trace his evolving impressions of modernism over the course of his career.

Hammett’s novels, which quickly became stalwarts of pulp fiction beginning in the 1920’s, have city streets full of gangsters and molls, corruption permeating every scene, and violence threatening to overrun city limits. However, despite the general emphasis in pulp fiction on shocking bursts of violence, dramatic showdowns between heroic detectives and devious villains, and other scenes of lurid excess, Hammett’s message lies elsewhere. Hammett quickly moved past the extreme violence, turning his focus to three indicators of modernity, as he struggled to acclimate to expressions of modernity in post-World War I America. The indicators he follows and turns his focus towards include a discussion of the changing social spaces for women, promoting increasing integration of immigrants in American communities, and questioning the impact of increasing mechanization in cities. Hammett’s nuanced approach to discussing these three indicators over the course of his career is an essential lens through which readers understand his tumultuous personal relationship with modernity. In the early Continental Op stories, he establishes the narrative patterns he will follow throughout his career, but shortly later, in *Red Harvest* (1929), his anxiety about modernism reaches new heights. Finally, in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), his most financially lucrative and universally admired publication, Hammett’s theories about modernism become more restrained, and are less alarmist.
In Dashiell Hammett’s writing, he uses the familiar framework of a detective novel, but diverges from his contemporaries by deliberately integrating vernacular language. This might be part of his effort to bolster an already-loyal readership for pulp magazines, but is part of his ongoing discussion of modernism with readers. Although many critics recognize Hammett as one of the founding fathers of pulp fiction, they often critique his successor’s writing in their work (Raymond Chandler). By initially overlooking Hammett in favor of Chandler, scholarly journals and publications do a study of modernism in literature a great disservice. Despite the fact that Hammett’s novels are not as widely studied by critics as Chandler’s are, the stories offer an equally valuable contribution to an analysis of modernism in literature between World War I and World War II. The Op and Spade offer similar insights into a study of modernity, and the author’s struggles to come to terms with the challenges of a rapidly changing social structure.

is the novel which has been most frequently transferred from page to screen. Biographer Nathan Ward also remarks on the novel’s unusual popularity in Hollywood, as he details the three film versions made within a ten-year span following publication (Ward 1). The most famous version was produced in 1941, and featured a notable cast, including Humphry Bogart and Peter Lorre. Additionally, Ward suggests that this is the novel that solidifies Hammett’s status as a celebrity in literary circles (Ward 1).

Hammett’s rapid-fire publication rate was partially driven by necessity. By the time he wrote *The Maltese Falcon*, his family included his wife (an army nurse he was separated from), and two daughters he was helping support. As his rate of publication increased, his social conscience became increasingly developed. While this does not indicate anything about his audience’s social or political preferences, it does imply that Hammett’s underlying discussion of modernity was reaching a broader group of readers. As Hammett’s writing career advanced, his narrative style features an increasingly pointed discussion of modernity in America.

Many critiques are anchored in the fact that detectives Sam Spade and the Continental Op are echoes of Hammett. This is something Hammett himself alludes to in his letters and correspondence, and which contributes to an understanding of his novels as social critiques (Hammett 343). Hammett’s underlying discussion of modernity consistently evolves in time, influenced by his personal life, and becomes more nuanced as his career progresses. He does not lose sight of his activism as his writing evolves, remaining a politically active and sympathetic to the Communist cause for a number of years. Unfortunately, his arrest for being a Communist sympathizer, and his subsequent imprisonment, further damaged his chronically poor health: He died in New York City in
1961. The research for this paper is heavily influenced by Hammett’s biography, and highlights the strong bond between author and his detectives. Through the two investigators, readers are lead through a nuanced and complicated discussion of the effects of modernism in America.

Hammett’s decision as an author, to break predictable narrative patterns and character types, resonates with readers. In his short stories and novels, Hammett first brings his detectives into close working relationships with immigrants, before proceeding to humanize the foreign men and women who increasingly populate American cities. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the character who exemplifies this transformation is con-man and Greek immigrant Joel Cairo. Instead of being isolated or caricatured, Cairo is a fully integrated part of the narrative. Hammett often successfully incorporates characters into the main story by constructing parallel narratives, and drawing similarities between the lives of immigrants and his detectives. Similarly, Hammett overturns traditional literary depictions of women in society. Initially, his short stories feature two distinct expressions of femininity: Women who cling to traditional expectations of gender roles, and those who do not. Hammett challenges these blunt character stereotypes by exploring the newly acceptable social spaces women occupy in post-World War I American cities. To do this, Hammett often creates a clear distance between culturally accepted roles of mother and wife, and the dangerous and independent *femme fatale* (a new type of woman, who thrives in cities with or without men). The two expressions of femininity are initially at odds, but in *The Maltese Falcon*, readers see the successful combination of modern freedoms and social expectations for women, through Effie Perine (Spade’s secretary), and treasure-hunter Brigid O’Shaughnessy.
The final expression of modernity Hammett explores is the Op and Spade’s shared complex relationship with machines, often discussed through the effect increasing mechanization is having in cities. Initially, machines (Hammett focuses on automobiles, telephones and machine guns) are portrayed as taking over urban spaces, or as blunt expressions of wealth. However, as Hammett’s career progresses, his detectives begin to integrate various forms of modern technology into their lives. While his descriptions of cars and telephones in “The Gutting of Couffignal” implies cars, telephones and machine guns are luxury items and status symbols, he challenges these preconceptions about their significance. At the narrative climax, gangsters take over a wealthy island community, and steal all of the cars and guns, shifting the power structure on the island. In this scene, Hammett rewrites the traditional American social hierarchy, while modifying the meaning of these expensive and formidable machines. While readers may not be aware of Hammett’s social agenda, and how he promotes it on an underlying level, they will begin to notice specific patterns as the individual narratives progress. The clearly embedded political and social language embodied by these indicators, and by the specific relationships Hammett focuses on, is clearly a condemnation of American’s easy and unquestioning acceptance of modernity.

This paper is both steered by and directly influenced by Hammett’s personal life. Research for this thesis originated with several biographies, including Richard Layman’s “Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett,” and Nathan Ward’s “The Lost Detective: Becoming Dashiell Hammett.” These sources, in conjunction with his novels, illustrate the ways in which the characterization of both the Continental Op and of Sam Spade was heavily influenced by Hammett’s personal life. A review of Hammett’s correspondence
with family and friends offered additional insight into Dashiell Hammett’s political views, and provided other useful background information from the people who knew him best. Background information on Hammett’s service in the army, and his employment with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, further enriched my understanding of the close bond between Hammett’s life and his detectives’ backstories. Although Hammett’s service in the army and time working for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency were brief, lasting only a short time before he was discharged due to poor health, both experiences had a strong influence on the author, which is evident in his mystery novels. Critic Daniel Linder notes “Hammett certainly had met the real-life prototypes of Joel Cairo, Caspar Gutman and Wilmer Cook” and “described the origin of many of the…characters” to colleagues (Linder 9). Although Ward notes that none of his original files are extant from Hammett’s cases as a detective, it is undeniable that the detective agency inspired his writing (Ward 8). Following my research into Hammett’s background, my inquiry shifted from available primary sources and biographies to the current scholarship on Hammett’s short stories and novels. The critical approaches to studying pulp fiction (and, more specifically, Dashiell Hammett) vary widely. However, starting in the 1970s, an increasing number of critics became interested in pulp fiction, and the critiques began to include a study of how American literature, including Hammett’s novels, was shaped by post-World War I political and social upheaval in America (Philippa Gates, Trudi Tate, and Christopher Metress are examples of this critical approach). However, many of these critics neglect a discussion of how Hammett’s work expresses the challenges of technology through three specific motifs he identifies as crucial to the rapid spread of modernity in America.
The first chapter following the introduction will focus on three of the short stories
Hammett published in 1929 ("Dead Yellow Women," "The Scorched Face," and "The
Gutting of Couffignal"), and his early attempts in identifying and questioning three
specific tropes of modernism. Hammett’s focus on the treatment of immigrants in
American society, changing social spaces women occupy in post-World War I America,
and his evolving discussion of machines and technology is established in these
publications. In addition, guns are often personified, as Hammett reimagines American
city streets as the front lines of a battlefield. Automobiles and telephones are signs of
class distinction and elitism in America, which Hammett protests against. Through his
detectives, Hammett concludes increasing mechanization is a problematic symptom of
modernity.

Hammett builds upon these initial critiques of modernity in Red Harvest, the
subject of the next chapter. Red Harvest is Hammett’s most stereotypical pulp fiction
novel in a number of ways. In Red Harvest, the Op’s disillusionment with American
society reaches a dramatic peak. Violence in Personville (where the Op travels to clean
the town of gangsters and solve a murder) is so widespread, it is spilling out of the town
perimeter. The violence in Personville is enhanced by an equally troubling level of
corruption that is systemically destroying the existing community structure from the
inside out. As the mechanized violence and corruption increase, other forms of
technology become omnipresent. The other aspects of Hammett’s social agenda – the
initial isolation and eventual integration of immigrants, and the dramatic increase in
independence women experience in post-WWI America – are also enhanced as his
ideology becomes increasingly clear. In Red Harvest, there are dozens of character
deaths in as many pages, and all characters are exaggerated and distorted. While this misrepresentation, in conjunction with the increase in violence and crime, may have appealed to an audience which enjoys rapid-fire plots and dramatic scenes, Hammett’s social critique is in danger of being buried by the scale of the narrative drama.

In the third chapter, I will discuss Hammett’s more controlled – but still formidable – approach to writing about modernity later in his career. *The Maltese Falcon*, published in 1930, is the final novel I will discuss in this paper. In the novel, readers are exposed to Hammett’s most complete vision of modern America. As David Herrmann notes, his social narrative is radical in the case: Hammett makes a gay immigrant (Joel Cairo) an integral part of the narrative, and highlights Spade’s ability to easily communicate with Joel Cairo. Immigrants, less anomalous in *The Maltese Falcon*’s narrative and society, remain identifiably “other”. Women, although given a more convincing and realistic portrayal, are fully independent, as seen in the characterization of secretary Effie Perine and *femme fatale* Brigid O’Shaughnessy.

Finally, Hammett’s feelings towards mechanization are more moderate, as Spade uses and depends upon the mechanical advances he used to abhor.

Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op stories continue to intrigue critics and readers alike, but are not recognized as a testing ground where Hammett discusses modernity through his changing literary treatment of immigrants, women, and machines. Later, these emerge as patterns in his work. Hammett’s critique of modernity changes form as his career progresses, reaching a fever pitch in *Red Harvest*. By the time Hammett writes *The Maltese Falcon*, his techniques are much more refined, and he strikes a clear balance between the cases being solved, and his discussion of modernity in America. Through a
study of his short stories and novels, readers are able to follow Hammett’s personal relationship with modernity in California.
Chapter II.


Dashiell Hammett’s semi-autobiographical detective stories featuring the Continental Operative were originally published in disposable pulp magazines and were marketed, as biographer Richard Layman notes, to a “lowbrow audience” who identified with the stoic detective (35). Critical approaches to studying Hammett vary, but emphasize the value of seriously studying Hammett’s writing, and not mistaking the low production values of pulp magazines with the content. Written by an author who was heavily influenced by his service in World War I, Hammett’s Continental Op stories feature a cynical detective with seemingly dispassionate views of postwar city life in America. Hammett’s critique of modernity is identifiable through specific motifs, with some more noticeable to modern readers than to his original audience base. Increasingly independent roles for women, a threatening increase in mechanization, and the social upheaval motivated by an influx of immigrants in cities are concerns which regularly recur in Hammett’s stories. As the motifs develop, they demonstrate Hammett’s fixation with modernity, and the new social models he tries to create for outsiders through the Continental Op’s changing opinions about immigrants and women.

Critics studying Hammett’s work often focus on his structural and stylistic innovations, which have had a far-reaching influence on the genre. Christopher Metress, in his 1994 article “Dashiell Hammett and the Challenge of New Individualism: Rereading *Red Harvest* and *The Maltese Falcon,*” focuses on the author’s distinct writing
style, the “linguistic, structural and thematic innovations” in noir fiction which are credited to Hammett, and are still striking to readers today (89). Hammett’s literary style is integral to his depiction of modernity, especially in the dialogue he highlights between characters of different social classes, or with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Applying David Herrmann’s discussion of the new portrayal of gender roles in Hammett’s stories is essential to a critical conversation of pulp fiction. In his article “Finding Out About Gender in Hammett’s Detective Fiction,” he observes Hammett’s female characters in particular. Herrmann focuses on women’s unusual ability to “take on a highly ambivalent status...at once fetishized...and then, because so objectified, infused with [a] threatening power” (206). He does not, however, draw a connection between their ambivalent social status and modernity, or discuss Hammett’s creation of a new social space for women in post-World-War-I cities. Women’s ambivalent social status is a motif which Hammett consciously questions and reworks through the Continental Op’s cases.

More recent critics, specifically Dennis Broe and Will Norman, continue to emphasize the need to seriously study pulp fiction and Hammett’s short stories, but shift their critical focus to reading the novels as critiques of modernism, while taking into account dramatic shifts in post-World War I society. This social upheaval manifests in the Op stories as an increasingly discriminatory social order, which limits the freedom of women, and an often-prejudiced impression of outsiders. While Norman, a scholar who focuses on post-World War I American literature and culture, turns his attention to Raymond Chandler, many of the trends he identifies as iconic in Chandler’s work originate with Dashiell Hammett’s earlier deviations. Hammett’s ominous portrayal of
machines, including automobiles, telephones and automatic guns, reflects an early example of what Norman refers to as Chandler’s “conflicted position in relation to mass culture” and “the unique emergence of modernity in Los Angeles from the 1920s to the 1940s” (747). While this is an accurate assessment of Chandler’s writing, his charged relationship with modernity is an extension of the tension Hammett often explores, beginning with the early Continental Op stories. The relationship between noir authors and the changing physical and social spaces in modern cities is one which interests a number of critics.

Dennis Broe, a critic focused on film noir, submits that Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op stories are devices the author uses to address a sense of apathy in post-World War I America. In his article “Class, Labor, and the Home-Front Detective,” Broe suggests Hammett’s vision is shaped by dramatic political shifts between World War I and World War II and by the author’s “sense of desperation and remorse at the failure of the postwar world to fulfill the expectations of equality prompted by the war” (175). Broe’s assertion attaches new meaning to the Op’s cases and distances his critique from one prominent school of thought, which focuses exclusively on Hammett’s interest in political corruption and labor struggles. Although his pointed discussion of the Op stories as influenced by current politics is an thought-provoking approach to discussing the stories, Broe overlooks the strong connection between Hammett’s unusual literary treatment of immigrants, gender, and machines as a way of questioning traditional social contracts. One example of Hammett’s fixation with changes to social conventions is the femme fatale, one of pulp fiction’s most iconic character types. Defined in part by her ability to realize ambitions by using her sexual allure to triumph over men, the classic
femme fatale becomes increasingly important in Hammett’s fiction. While signs of modernity are evident in the early Continental Op stories of the 1920’s, the signs become more conspicuous, and more easily traceable, as Hammett’s career evolves.

Three of Hammett’s early short stories – “The Scorched Face,” “Dead Yellow Women,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal,” all published in 1925 – are a platform for Hammett to discuss modernity though the Op’s representation of women’s increased autonomy, evolving descriptions of immigrants, and confrontation of the rapid spread of mechanization in cities. In “The Scorched Face,” Hammett explores the changing social spaces and possibilities for modern women, envisioning new identities for them in postwar San Francisco. “Dead Yellow Women” shifts the Continental Operative’s focus from the changing American experience to prejudices leveraged at and the unequal treatment of Chinese immigrants, as the Op investigates a case that takes him into the mysterious alleyways of Chinatown. As the Continental Op’s case drives him deep into a neighborhood which mirrors his own, the disparities between immigrant communities and their American counterparts are clearly exposed. Finally, in “The Gutting of Couffignal,” Hammett questions the ostensibly innocuous potential of modern technology, when an exclusive American commune is robbed by gangsters emboldened by their automobiles and machine guns. A close reading of the short stories reveals Hammett’s uneasiness with assumptions about modernity in early 20th Century American cities.
“The Scorched Face”

Published in May 1925, early in Dashiell Hammett’s writing career, “The Scorched Face” centers upon the disappearance of two wealthy young women. The Continental Op is hired by wealthy industrialist Alfred Banbrock to find his daughters, who leave home to visit a friend, but never return. Mr. Banbrock’s second wife, the sisters’ stepmother, is considered a suspect after her shaky relationship with the sisters is exposed. The Op links Myra and Ruth’s disappearance to a city-wide blackmailing scheme, which many of their wealthy peers have fallen victim to. After partnering with Irish policeman Pat Reddy, the Op finds the body of Ruth and successfully rescues Myra, breaking up the blackmailing ring in the process. The “Scorched Face” referenced in Hammett’s title could refer to the state of Ruth’s body when the Op finds it, but is never clearly discussed. As the Op investigates the case, Dashiell Hammett initiates a discussion of changing social spaces for women in postwar America, beginning with Mrs. Banbrock. Mrs. Banbrock, swiftly proven innocent of the crime, is pushed to the periphery of the narrative, but remains an essential piece of Hammett’s close study of modern femininity. Because of her characterization as a wealthy, modern woman, Myra is also an essential piece of Hammett’s discussion of changing social spaces for women as an expression of modernity.

Hammett challenges readers to reconsider modernism by merging a classic mystery plot with underlying currents of social reform. Critics discussing the portrayal of women in Hammett’s novels have several approaches, including a dialogue about the distinct language of ethnically and socially diverse characters in the novel (e.g. David Herrmann), descriptions of their carefully represented physical appearance (e.g. Carl
Malmgren), and a conversation about underlying social conventions which may have influenced Hammett’s depiction of changing gender roles and relations in post-World War I cities (e.g. John Whitley). This change is reflected in “The Scorched Face” in the Op’s initial embrace of unspoken expectations for women’s social practices in police company, and eventual rejection of them. In his changing discussion around Mrs. Banbrock and Myra, Hammett initiates a pattern of describing characters and their behaviors he will often return to later in his career.

John Whitley, a scholar whose article focuses on the literary context of Dashiell Hammett’s stories, draws a strong connection between the social upheaval in post-World War I America, and the Op’s changing depiction of women (443). A scholar of American Studies, Whitley discusses Hammett’s writing in the context of his peers, and identifies “a number of [literary] features” which “break sharply with previous conventions” of the hardboiled detective story, and which pointedly offer sharp criticisms of American social conventions (443). Many of the conventions Hammett is breaking with are evident in his close study of women, both in the context of wealthy society, and within the broader setting of American cities. Whitley emphasizes how many of Hammett’s literary innovations “provocatively…. remind the reader…. of another and very different world-view” that emerged in post-World War I writing (443). Hammett’s literary treatment of women is a nuanced departure from more traditional detective novels, which largely cast women in two-dimensional roles (as wives, daughters, and/or mothers). Whitley persuasively argues that Hammett’s deliberate rejection of the traditional “romantic vocabulary” used to describe women in noir fiction, and refusal to cast women in socially predictable roles, initiates a discussion of a new social order.
While Whitley identifies this as one point where Hammett’s style departs from literary tradition, he does not capture Hammett’s nuanced approach to rewriting the archetypes.

Whitley’s focus on modern expressions of femininity in the context of the national trauma of World War I is reflected through the Op’s changing understanding of Myra and Ruth (Mr. Banbrock’s daughters). Although Whitley makes a note of Myra and Ruth’s rejection of “social compromise,” and suggests this is primarily emblematic of “a world in flux, where…. order and control seem impossible,” his failure to discuss Hammett’s active rewriting of the social order does the author a disservice (450).

Whitley only briefly discusses Hammett’s persistent efforts to create a new space for modern American women. For Hammett, there is a new societal order which exists in the space between Mrs. Banbrock, and traditionally accepted feminine roles, and sisters Myra and Ruth, who are rebelling against this convention. In addition to creating a new public space for Myra and Ruth, Hammett creates a place that exists within the preexisting hierarchy which women traditionally occupy. Hammett’s efforts in carving out a new shared space specifically for women can be seen through Myra’s rescue, and ultimate social redemption.

David Herrmann’s article, “Finding Out About Gender in Hammett’s Detective Fiction,” accurately characterizes the social challenges women face in “The Scorched Face,” and broaches the question of where women fit in a predominantly masculine world (209). Unlike Whitley, David Herrmann largely studies women in isolation, without historic context. While Herrmann notices Hammett’s decision to challenge conventional depictions of women, he does not suggest this as a symptom of modernity (218). In
Hammett’s novels, social conventions and expectations for women are closely related, which he uses to his advantage in his critique of modernity. In framing his discussion around masculinity, and neglecting to incorporate the discussion in a wider social context, Herrmann fails to acknowledge an important concession Hammett makes about his female characters.

Carl Malmgren interacts with Herrmann’s theory as he studies the underlying structure of detective fiction in his article “The Crime of the Sign: Dashiell Hammett’s Detective Fiction.” Unlike Herrmann, Malmgren argues it is essential to focus on the underlying structure of Hammett’s work, and not on individual characters. An essential aspect of Hammett’s novels is their setting (modern American cities), and for Malmgren, “one of [the] most salient characteristics” of the Op’s portrayal of San Francisco is “the chasm between appearance and reality” (372). He further posits that the strength of Hammett’s Continental Op mysteries “derives…from the subversion” of expected tropes (Malmgren 372-3). Subversion of expectation is a recurring theme in the Op’s relationships with women, and one Hammett exploits in “The Scorched Face” to further his literary agenda. The Op’s superficial assumptions about Myra and Ruth are one example of the chasm between modern expectations for modern women, which remain unchanged, and the reality of their experience. However, taking Malmgren’s further assertion that “all values [are] undermined” into account while studying “The Scorched Face” is problematic (375). Although Hammett challenges traditional values, one of the enduring qualities of Hammett’s Op novels is the return of social order at the conclusion of each case.
While some critics recognize the shifting representation of Myra and Ruth as symbolic of a larger cultural change in America, they do not address Hamnett’s recurring critical focus on changing social spaces for, and roles of, women. Hamnett’s characterization of women clearly reflects this divided social space in the opening passages of “The Scorched Face,” when women are either typecast as faithful wife/mother/daughter, or as morally corrupt outlier. Myra and Ruth complicate this previously clear equation. Their relationship with the Op further illustrates this difficulty: Myra and Ruth are initially portrayed as distanced, almost inhuman creatures, who “at once attract and repulse, both threaten and allure” (Herrmann 210). Although Hamnett often creates strong and self-sufficient female characters, he makes a point not to connect their independence with a moral decline. This is another departure from literary tradition, and a distinction he continues to cultivate as he develops the iconic *femme fatale*.

Socially, women at the opening of “The Scorched Face” fit into three categories: Mothers, daughters, and/or wives. Hamnett initially embraces this more familiar pattern of writing about women in mystery novels, and promotes a conservative social agenda through the Op. Mrs. Banbrock, Myra and Ruth’s stepmother, is described as “a tall dark girl of not more than twenty-two years, inclined to plumpness” (Hamnett, *Scorched Face* 78). Although this early formulaic description of Mrs. Banbrock establishes her social status, it is limited. Hamnett highlights her place as the wife of Mr. Banbrock, and mother to his daughters. The brief description hinders character development, leaving her to fade into her surroundings. If Mrs. Banbrock is defined by
her role as a ‘wife,’ Myra and Ruth are typecast as daughters: The first description of the sisters is eerily similar to their stepmother, Mrs. Banbrock.

The Continental Op’s first description of Myra and Ruth is mundane and conventional: Myra and Ruth are simply described as wealthy young women, with the Op focusing on Myra and Ruth’s appearance in his initial briefing. Studying a recent photograph of the sisters, the Op asks for a description of the women, specifically of what they wore when they left home. Myra, “fond of horses and all outdoor sports,” was wearing “a blue and green wool dress, small blue hat, short black seal coat,” while her younger sister was dressed in “brown fur” and a “gray silk dress” (Hammett, Scorched Face 76-7). The emphasis on their clothing and wealth, and use of external traits as a substitute for character development, reinforces the pattern of superficial assessments of women. These descriptions, while interesting, seem offhand. Initially described as members of an elite social set, Hammett enhances his characterization of Myra and Ruth as the Op’s case evolves, establishing them as self-sufficient women who are shaped by the cultural forces of modernity. Later in “The Scorched Face,” when the Op fills out the varied social landscape of postwar San Francisco, Myra and Ruth begin to take on a deeper meaning in the descriptive structure of the narrative.

Hammett’s efforts to revise traditions become clearer in a broader social context, as the Op continues to question Myra and Ruth’s peers, and search for suspects. During his investigation into the disappearance of Myra and Ruth, the Op interviews a number of young men and women who come to represent the excesses of modern American culture. Initially, Myra and Ruth are only two of many women who disappear in the story, and are seemingly interchangeable with any of the other wealthy young women in
their social circle. However, when the Op interviews Myra and Ruth’s wealthy peers, he is introduced to effeminate men and haughty women who belong to “the dancing, teaing [sic] world,” and who look “honest and candid no matter what is going on” (Hammett, *Scorched Face* 78). This wry and seemingly offhand note by the Op illustrates the stark difference between historic ideals of femininity and modern excesses in Hammett’s Op stories.

Deceptive and shallow, the nameless young men and women epitomize the ‘fast’ crowd that whole-heartedly embraces modernity. If Mrs. Banbrock’s character a nod to traditional ideas of femininity, these men and women are her modish counterparts. These thoroughly corrupt characters embody the treacherous effects of changing gender roles Hammett tries to separate Myra and Ruth from. Hammett’s creation of a new form of femininity, which simultaneously values independence and respects social expectations breaks with readers expectations.

Hammett quickly confronts preconceptions about the changing gender roles of women in modern America through the Op’s changing relationship with both Myra and Ruth. Over the course of the case, the Op moves past his initial impression of Myra and Ruth, echoing Hammett’s protest against the tradition of women’s split personality as submissive and socially acceptable, or modern and rebellious. Myra, in particular, is a female character in direct conversation with traditional social ideas of how women in the 1920’s should appear and act. The first sign of this departure from tradition is when the Op studies a photograph of Myra, and draws readers’ attention to Myra’s “almost masculine manner and carriage” (Hammett, *Scorched Face* 77). Her physical appearance and personal style quickly become symbolic of modern femininity for the Op. Unlike her
stepmother, Myra is not physically ladylike. After the Op meets Myra, he continues to elaborate on the traits which separate her from her stepmother.

Later in “The Scorched Face,” the Op meets Myra, and he further emphasizes her unusual appearance, isolating Myra’s personality as distinct from that of other women in the novel. The first difference he notices is her face, “a pale blank square,” which reflects “none of the masculinity that had been in her photographs and description” (Hammett, Scorched Face 107). His thoughts about her physical appearance are deceptive. Not simply an observation of her features, they are also meant as a comment on Myra as an outsider who operates outside of traditional social structures, much like the Op does. Myra insists she didn’t kill Ruth, and while the sisters had “talked about suicide” she had “persuaded her [Ruth]…not to” (Hammett, Scorched Face 107-108). This gives readers rare insight into Myra’s character, something he does not usually allow for. When Myra and Ruth are blackmailed, they run away instead of going to the authorities. Their non-traditional approach, to “hide from…everything,” and to burn the nude photographs, further illustrates their status as outsiders (Hammett, Scorched Face 107-108). Aware that they operate outside of the social order on a number of levels, they wonder if police would help them, or would simply return them home, and expose them to social exile. While the Op does not present Ruth and Myra as “treacherous female villain[s],” he clearly categorizes them as avant-garde (Broe 170). The Op clearly defines Myra as a woman who, while avoiding traditional social and expectations and roles, is not an immoral woman, but a victim.

The moment the Op recognizes Myra’s dilemma is the beginning of Hammett’s deliberate rewriting of her place as a woman in the narrative. In a moment of
compassion, the Op expresses his sympathy for Myra, a victim who was made “crazy” by “drugs….in [her] blood” (Hammett, *Scorched Face* 109). Recognizing her as a victim, the Op comes up with a plan to return Myra to her family, while keeping the case out of court, “out of the newspapers – and [Myra] out of trouble” (Hammett, *Scorched Face* 112). An integral part of the conclusion of the case is the Op’s efforts to return Myra and Ruth (more specifically, Ruth’s remains) to the Banbrock family. Despite her identity as a victim, Myra remains far removed from the “ideal woman” Dennis Broe references. That social role is embodied more completely by the traditional and submissive Mrs. Banbrock than by any other woman in the narrative (175).

By placing Mrs. Banbrock, Myra, and Ruth at the heart of “The Scorched Face,” and in conversation with more socially liberal women, Hammett opens a discussion about new possibilities for women (in their private lives and newfound employment possibilities). Hammett uses American women’s increasing independence to his advantage in “The Scorched Face.” Myra and Ruth, the two modern women who “came and went [from home] pretty much as they pleased” are perfect examples of Hammett’s conversation about increasing freedoms for women in post-World War I cities (Hammett, *Scorched Face* 74). The Op’s striking but enigmatic descriptions of women are a crucial departure from traditional literary tropes, which allow for wives or morally compromised women. Myra and Ruth’s disappearance could be read as a moralistic warning to other women, but Hammett pointedly avoids conversations about morality in all of his narratives. This distinction, in addition to Hammett’s changing description of women (giving them a more masculine appearance), is the beginning of his attempt to rewrite conservative social traditions through depictions of women in “The Scorched Face.”
Although the Op identifies the aforementioned modern women and men as social outcasts, he emphasizes that Myra and Ruth’s presumed threat to core American values is only superficial. While Hammett establishes this theory in “The Scorched Face,” he will continue to explore the meaning of modernity for women in his later short stories (“Dead Yellow Women,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal”).

The characterization of Myra and Ruth, especially in context of the other women of “The Scorched Face” is best understood as a critique of gender roles which applies to a larger demographic: Unmarried women in post-World War I America. By highlighting Myra and Ruth’s independence and masculinity as a contrast to Mrs. Banbrock’s feminine dependence upon her husband, Hammett begins to rewrite the role of women in society as a way of exploring the ramifications of modernity. The increasingly progressive characterization of Myra draws readers’ attention to the qualities which distinguish her as modern women, while heightening the contrast between the sisters and their peers. The Continental Op’s stories become part of a complex critique of the challenges of modernity for women, while promoting the author’s liberal social views.

Deceptively introduced as supporting characters in a larger mystery, women are central to Hammett’s discussion of social tensions, and are a means through which Hammett examines cultural changes in early 20th century San Francisco. Recognizing the rift in postwar American’s worldview that Whitley describes, other critics also urge for a nuanced reading of “The Scorched Face”. Despite this, a number of critics overlook discussions of gender roles in the story. This is a disservice to the sisters’ role in the narrative, as a core component of Hammett’s exploration of modernity in America. By investigating the Continental Op’s changing representation of the sisters, from runaway
heiresses, to victims of a blackmailing scheme, readers are offered insight into the challenge of changing expectations for women in postwar America.

Myra’s challenging character trajectory, of the fallen modern woman who is returned home, begins in “The Scorched Face” but continues to appear in Hammett’s later books. Unlike some authors, however, Hammett challenges preconceptions of modernity by creating a new social space for these women, where they are part of acceptable society, but are able to express their individuality, through work, relationships, and increased independence in cities. Myra becomes a lingering reminder of the changing roles of femininity, and the challenges women face in modern American cities.

Dashiell Hammett’s decision to deconstruct a traditional understanding of the limited roles women play in society, and his efforts to use the novels as part of a larger literary attempt to establish a social space for women, is one of the prominent signifiers of modernity in “The Scorched Face.” The traits the Op isolates in Myra and Ruth transform them from uncomplicated stereotypes to symbols of progress. Although the narrative initially reinforces the social stigma of new postwar identities for women, it quickly expands to explore changing ideas of femininity. The Op continuously revises his impression of Myra and Ruth, creating a new social space for young women in postwar cities, and interrogates reader’s assumptions about women’s roles in American cities on a large scale. Although the mystery is solved, Hammett’s challenge of modernism through a discussion of the changing role of women is not. Hammett’s interest in modern interpretations and images of women is a dynamic feature to look for as his career progresses, with independent (sometimes masculine) women evolving to become the now-recognizable *femme fatale*. 
The patterns Hammett experiments with early in his career as a way to discuss the challenges of modernity become more pronounced in his later stories (“Dead Yellow Women” and “The Gutting of Couffignal) and novels (Red Harvest and The Maltese Falcon). In identifying and isolating them early in his career, it becomes possible to track his changing impression of modernism in America. In “The Scorched Face,” his description of Myra and Ruth, two commanding and modern women, can be read as threatening traditional gender tropes. However, Hammett proves the perceived threat of modern-day social spaces for women is an imagined one. He dismantles his readers’ preconceptions of changing gender roles through the focused study of Myra and Ruth.

“Dead Yellow Women”

Published a brief six months after “The Scorched Face” (in November 1925), the mystery at the center of “Dead Yellow Women” is set in Sea Cliff, a wealthy and exclusive enclave of San Francisco. The Op’s client is Lillian Chen, a young woman whose father has died, leaving her independently wealthy, and the sole inheritor of his estate. When she returns early from her travels, she finds strange men in her house. Immediately restrained by the men, Lillian is held captive in the basement. She escapes, only to find her maid and cook dead, and several other servants missing. The sheriff’s deputies are unable to make any progress in solving the murder and disappearance, so Lillian hires the Continental Op. The Op’s investigation leads him to Chinatown, where he tracks down clues, and searches for the criminals. While the Op ultimately finds the murderer, and solves the case, Hammett is again studying the Op’s relationship with modernity. By shifting the Op’s focus from the changing social spaces of “The Scorched
Face” to an immigrant community embedded in San Francisco in “Dead Yellow Women,” Hammett is able to interrogate Americans’ challenging relationship with modernity through an analysis of the place of immigrants in cities. Hammett continues to explore the intimate relationship between modernity and innovation by taking the Continental Op into isolated immigrant communities in “Dead Yellow Women”.

As mentioned earlier, academics sometimes overlook Hammett altogether in a discussion of noir novels. Those critics who do study Hammett’s work tend to overlook “Dead Yellow Women,” preferring to discuss Hammett’s Op stories as a set, or to focus on the novels Hammett wrote later in his career. Hammett’s carefully constructed plot in “Dead Yellow Women” continues to appeal to a wide audience, although he turns his critical gaze to the subservient status of immigrants, and actively resists including established representations of outsiders. In “Dead Yellow Woman,” the Op initially avoids Chinese residents, or objectifies their features, and questions their customs and language from a distance.

Christopher Metress, in his article on “Dashiell Hammett and the Challenge of New Individualism” discusses the importance of language in Hammett’s novels, but challenges its effect in the narrative. In the article, Metress focuses on Hammett’s language in the context of noir fiction at large, and Hammett’s distinct “linguistic, structural and thematic innovations” (89). Metress’ observations about language in Hammett’s writing are an interesting foundation to a close study of “Dead Yellow Women.” While Metress argues that Hammett’s unusual use of slang and spoken language incorporates a unique social message into Hammett’s mysteries, he does not discuss the evolution in how Hammett uses language to discuss isolation of outsiders in
America. In “Dead Yellow Women,” the speech patterns of the residents of Chinatown are exaggerated – almost cartoonish – and create an striking counterbalance to the Op’s blunt and direct language. In “Dead Yellow Women,” Hammett’s use of speech patterns becomes more refined, the differences becoming more pointed as Hammett publishes more detective stories. Few scholars have continued the conversation. When they do, it is often to only briefly cover Hammett’s innovations, before moving the focus of the critical conversation.

Will Norman’s critique of Raymond Chandler, who follows in Hammett’s literary footsteps, focuses on the author’s stylistic choices. While considering the motivations behind and the development of Raymond Chandler’s modernist style, Norman discusses Raymond Chandler’s form and influence on noir fiction in depth. According to Norman, Chandler’s legacy “rests upon his reputation as a prose stylist working within the U.S. vernacular idiom” (748). Before Chandler, Hammett’s interest in language is evident in “Dead Yellow Women,” and his use of language adds is integral to his narratives. Often, the different speech patterns he includes work in tandem with physical character traits for a more pointed social message about how heavily prejudicial Americans are when it comes to isolating immigrants. Hammett’s careful focus on speech patterns and inclusion of slang reinforces an unspoken social hierarchy which consistently separates immigrants and outsiders from members of the dominant culture. Although Norman asserts Chandler is stylistically indebted to Hammett, he does not develop the point. Chandler’s interest in language and expression, when combined with Norman’s assertion about the literary link between the two writers, should lead to a similar critique of Hammett, but is not discussed by contemporary critics.
The Op’s reluctance to treat immigrants as equals, read in tandem with Hammett’s newly-established social liberalism, could form the foundation of Carl Malmgren’s assertion that fear, specifically “suspicion…. of individual people,” drives the social narrative underlying “Dead Yellow Women” (375). While Hammett’s initial descriptions of immigrants are abstract – he describes the Chinese men and women as part of an indistinct mass, who “pass up and down the alley, scuffling along” they gradually become distinct personalities (206). In some ways, this is manifested through immigrants’ gradual integration into the narrative. Though initially suspicious of outsiders, the Continental Op is not able to solve the case without help from the Chinese community. Here, Malmgren’s argument that fear of individuals grows to include suspicion of “the social order itself,” fails to accurately distinguish the Op’s strong and focused critique of social isolationism (375). A representative figure standing in for assimilated immigrants in the United States, Lillian is invaluable to both Hammett and the Op; she facilitates introductions between the Op and the Chinese residents, creating connections for him to build upon as his case progresses. Hammett draws readers towards his ideological focus through the eyes of the Continental Op, as he chases down leads in Chinatown.

The murder mystery at the core of “Dead Yellow Women” frames Hammett’s evolving discussion of modernism through the immigrant experience in post-World War I San Francisco. Hammett is aware of Americans’ preoccupation with immigrant communities, and uses it to his advantage. The Continental Op identifies Lillian as an outsider from the opening lines of the story, isolated in Sea Cliff because of her Chinese heritage.
Her physical features and stereotypically Oriental style marking her as an outlier, Lillian Chen becomes an icon Dashiell Hammett uses to reflect the experience of Chinese immigrants in “Dead Yellow Women”. Recurring and detailed descriptions of her physical appearance reinforce her status as an immigrant. “The black shine of her bobbed hair...the pale yellow of her unpowdered [sic] skin, and... the fold of her upper lids at the outer eye-corners” ensure she will never completely fit into mainstream American society (Hammett, *Women* 189). “Broad-shouldered,” she wears “mannish gray clothes,” in a descriptive pattern some readers will recognize from “The Scorched Face” (Hammett, *Women* 189). However, unlike his descriptions of Myra and Ruth in “The Scorched Face,” the Op predominantly identifies Lillian by her ethnically distinct features. He describes her in turns as “Chinese-American” and “Oriental” (Hammett, 189).

The Op’s initial description of Lillian furthers his discussion about modernity and prejudice. He capitalizes on her uniquely East Asian physical features, including narrow eyes, different skin tone, and dark hair, suggesting they are representative of other character traits and assumed morals. She is also isolated in Chinatown, where she stands out as assimilated, and visibly Western. Lillian enables the Op’s access and exposure to Chinatown, enabling him to evaluate the two worlds she inhabits. As the Op moves between the elite American neighborhood of Sea Cliff and immigrant-populated Chinatown, he creates parallels between the neighborhoods. The constantly evolving case strengthens the relationship between the Op and the local Chinese community makes the immigrant community indispensable to the plot of “Dead Yellow Women.”
Although Lillian is isolated by the physical features which define her as an outsider, she has grown up in the United States, and has made efforts to assimilate. Her deliberate effort to change her identity – from Chinese to American – is part of a larger transition the Ob observes in Lillian, and, to a smaller degree, the other Chinese characters. Lillian’s clear, un-accented speech becomes the most striking difference which separates her speech from the thickly accented English the immigrants speak in Chinatown. This is a personal trait which socially aligns her more closely with Americans. While her deliberate changes to speech and appearance have helped her begin to blend in with her neighbors, and create a superficial association with Americans, they do little to help her assimilate in San Francisco. Even as the Op lingers on Lillian’s aloof personality, Hammett pushes readers past superficial reactions, which mark her as an outsider, to add depth to her character. One of the most unusual aspects about Lillian is her name, which has been translated from Chinese (‘Ai Ho’) to English (‘Water Lily’), and further Westernized (to ‘Lillian’) (Hammett, Women 190). Hammett’s portrait of Lillian continues to develop, becoming increasingly sympathetic to her experience as a Chinese immigrant as he questions the benefits modernity in America.

As the narrative develops, the Op’s metaphorical gaze widens, and his discussion of immigrants in modern America gains breadth. In Chinatown, the Op recognizes Chinese immigrants as outsiders, focusing on their unusually styled clothing, easily identifiable physical appearance, and thick accents. The physical features he identifies as unusual earlier in the story through Lillian are now applied to a Chinese man he meets. The man’s “dark, close-fitting cap…a purple robe, tight around his neck” and “blue satin trousers,” are exotic to the Op (Hammett, Women 209). The Chinese man speaks in
parables, “an exaggeration…. of the well-known Chinese politeness,” full of “crazy complements” which make the Op uneasy (Hammett, Women 209). Hammett’s also includes a conversation (phonetically written) to illustrate another means of isolating immigrants. By including a conversation between the Op and a Chinese man, Hammett shifts the focus from the case the Op is assigned, to the author’s evolving social agenda.

Although the Op’s San Francisco is a diverse city, small differences in physical appearance and speech are used to separate people into rigid social classes. For the Op, Chinatown is a mix of exotic and familiar, “a strip two blocks wide by six long” packed tightly with “gaudy shops and flashy chop-suey [sic] houses catering to the tourist trade” before giving way to “alleys and dark corners” exuding “the proper Chinese smell of spices and vinegar and dried things” (Hammett, Women 209-211). The Continental Op’s observations about the immigrant neighborhood illustrate superficial cultural differences between Americans and newly-arrived Chinese men and women. The Op’s skeptical impression of immigrants initially appears to align with Malmgren’s theory of suspicion of outsiders. In an interesting parallel, the Op himself is clearly an outsider in Chinatown, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Just as Lillian undeniably stands out in Sea Cliff, so the Op is a clear interloper in Chinatown. The Op is easily recognizable as an American citizen: His features, clothes, and speech are all relatable to his native American peers. While his social status as a Westerner makes him authoritative in Sea Cliff, it limits his authority and reach in Chinatown, where he is clearly an alien. The residents are wary of Americans in their neighborhood, and refuse to work with the Op. This becomes clear when the Continental Op trails Chang Li Ching, a Chinese informant, to a maze-like apartment building in
Chinatown. While Malmgren might characterize the Op’s reception in Chinatown as representing Americans’ fear of the shifting social order, this argument needs to be reframed. By using a well-known and recognizable trope – having the Op change positions with the immigrants, and experience the challenges they would have in American cities – Hammett furthers his liberal agenda about necessity for a more equal treatment of immigrants, as a way of discussing modernity.

As the Continental Op searches Chinatown for his informant, and tries to make a break in the case, language and accents become one clear way to identify outsiders. Spoken language also reinforces the established social hierarchy. After clothing and physical appearance, language completes immigrants’ status as ‘other’. A second example of the space between the Op and immigrants becomes clear when the Op meets with Chang Li Ching, a man who is reluctantly assisting the detective. Chang Li Ching speaks in a heavily accented mix of English and slang, insisting he does not know where the Op’s missing source is (“no savvy”), but directs the Op to a “closs stleet [sic]” to investigate (Hammett, Women 107-108). The man’s attempt to use American slang (“savvy” instead of “know”) could be interpreted as a parody, but ultimately reiterates the man’s status as an immigrant and outsider. The conversation also subtly acknowledges the challenges immigrants face as they try to assimilate. The brief interaction between an immigrant and a detective intensifies and reinforces the social space between the American-born Continental Op and the Chinese community. Even as the Op separates people into different groups, Hammett manipulates the plot and character interactions to challenge preconceptions of immigrants, opening a discussion of the more challenging aspects of modernity.
The Continental Op’s position as an instrument to further Hammett’s underlying agenda is exploited again, this time through his evolving impression of Chinese immigrants (a reflection of his gradual but complex embrace of modernity). As mentioned earlier, at one point in the case, the Op finds himself isolated in Chinatown, shunned by the residents. Alone in a foreign community, he is powerless when his source double crosses and tries to assassinate him. An unnamed Chinese man, whom the Op was warily eyeing just moments earlier, comes to the detective’s rescue. “In each of his hands was an automatic as big as a coal scuttle…. the big guns in the little man’s hands flamed…. pouring metal into the door behind me [the Op] - the door from which I had been shot at” (Hammett, Women 207-208). In these brief lines, Hammett rejects the Op’s early understanding of immigrants as members of a socially inferior group. The unnamed Chinese man, once pushed to the sideline of the narrative, is now heroic. Here, the Op defies his readers’ expectations.

Although the Op concludes the story with a dismissive comment about Chinatown (“if I never have to visit Chinatown again, it’ll be soon enough”), Hammett has created clear social parallels between Chinatown and Sea Cliff (Hammett, Women 246). Many of the formulaic approaches Dashiell Hammett takes in describing immigrants, which the Op embodies in each case, undergo dramatic changes. The Op’s initial distain for outsiders and people he views as other is only matched by his disgust with the criminals he chases. Each community has a strict hierarchy which the Op is a part of. Hammett clearly revises the literary treatment of immigrants in “Dead Yellow Women,” in part by creating inverse relationship between expectations and reality. Chinatown is as corrupt as Sea Cliff, as the Op realizes when Lillian tells him she has been helping smugglers
bring contraband into the elite seaside community. Some of the most notorious criminals the Op encounters are Americans, who feel they are untouchable. However, as the Op’s cases progress, he often is forced to revisit his earlier impression.

Hammett continues to develop the way immigrants are presented, as he creates a second approach for questioning modernity in “Dead Yellow Women.” Through the Op’s increasingly sympathetic depiction of superficially exotic Chinese immigrants and his increasingly sympathetic portrait of Lillian, Hammett challenges readers to question their tolerance of so-called outsiders in America. As one of only a few characters who confronts his biases and disrupts convention, Hammett reimagines the conversation in terms of modernity. Hammett’s corrective character study of immigrants directly contradicts traditional social expectations in post-World War I America. Hammett undergoes a similar process with Chinese immigrants, revising his ideas about immigrants, and offering new depictions of immigrant communities in cities. When he overturns cultural preconceptions, by shifting the power structure, he promotes his personal, revised social agenda. While it would be too simplistic to suggest all immigrants are heroes, Hammett leverages this narrative of isolation and outsiders to push back against prejudicial assumptions about the idea of outsiders. Themes of redemption and acceptance are essential to the narrative structure of “Dead Yellow Women,” with the Op desperately working to solve the case, and to clear Lillian Shen from suspicion.
“The Gutting of Couffignal”

In Hammett’s final publication of 1925, “The Gutting of Couffignal,” he creates a controlled social experiment through which he explores the ramifications of modern technology on a wealthy and isolated community. The Continental Op is hired to guard wedding gifts at a society wedding on Couffignal, a fictitious island off the coast of California. After the wedding celebrations slow down, and the guests have retired for the evening, a series of explosions shake the island. In a sensationalist twist, the gangsters hold wealthy residents at bay with their machine guns and automobiles as they methodically raid Couffignal. They take anything of value, and successfully upend the historically clear power balance and controlled social setting of Couffignal. As the gangsters rob the island, there are a series of explosions, the first of many technologically induced disasters, when modern advances either fail to protect, or actively harm the Op. Through an intriguing study of technology as another symbol of the onset of modernity, Hammett questions the assumed benefits of, and democratizing power of mechanization.

When he arrives on Couffignal, the Continental Op describes the island as an idyllic echo of an American city, with “the usual bank, hotel, moving-picture theater, and stores” (Hammett, Couffignal 3). The “intersecting streets” gradually become “winding hedged roads as they climb toward the cliff” where “the owners and rulers of the island” live (Hammett, Couffignal 3). Most of the residents are “well-fed old gentleman who...have bought into the colony so they may spend what is left of their lives nursing their livers” (Hammett, Couffignal 3-4). These wealthy men “admit to the island...as many storekeepers, working people, and similar riffraff as are needed to keep them [the
patrons] comfortably served” (Hammett, *Couffignal* 4). Accessible by only one bridge, the island is essentially a wealthy colony that reproduces a select portion of San Francisco society on an intimate scale.

One critical approach to studying “The Gutting of Couffignal” draws upon Hammett’s personal history as a veteran, and discusses his personal life in tandem with the Op’s experience of mechanization. Trudi Tate, a scholar who writes on modernism and World War I, addresses returning veterans’ mindset and anxieties about technology, which many of them wrote about, when she describes World War I as “the world’s first industrial war….war on an industrial scale using industrial technology” (163). Hammett, like many World War I veterans who became writers, has a complex relationship with machines. As a result of his personal experience in the devastating ‘first industrial war,” Hammett has a preoccupation with the dangers of widespread mechanization in modern America. Hammett personifies machines as a way of introducing his antagonistic relationship with modernity. His focuses on machines and the place of technology in cities is dogged: Hammett shares his cautiously optimistic, but overwhelmingly suspicious view of cars, guns, and telephones with the Continental Op. Through the Op’s eyes, modernity and technology have an intimate and, at times, inverse relationship. Mechanical progress is not always human progress, as the Op quickly realizes. The element which is most symbolic of modernity, and which is most closely connected to Hammett’s wartime service, is the rapid mechanization encountered by the Op (particularly on the island retreat of Couffignal).

Another approach to “The Gutting of Couffignal” is to study the story with a broader historic context in mind. Edward Wheat has more wide-ranging discussion of
Hammett’s influences, as he dissects both the political and social context which influenced Hammett’s (and, by extension, the Continental Op’s) cautious view of industrialization in a discussion about American political culture. Hammett draws upon firsthand experience in World War I for his writing, and warily explores the ramifications of modernity through “The Gutting of Couffignal.” As a result, the Continental Op’s experience on Couffignal closely echoes the author’s trauma. As Tate notes earlier, there is an underlying understanding that World War I is the “culmination of a century or more of modern industrialization…. turned to the specific purpose of destruction” (170). Wheat’s critique of the Op’s cases builds upon this statement, connecting the mystery novels’ popularity with “the general disillusionment of the period, the perceived failure of democracy, and the end of American isolation and innocence” (15). The failure of democracy can be seen in the exclusive setting – the language Hammett uses to describe both residents and the island itself clearly exposes the island as an isolated kingdom. Any semblance of isolation or innocence is quickly destroyed, as the robbers upend the cultivated lifestyle of the elite residents.

The Op’s cynical point of view speaks to Hammett’s exhausted and disenchanted post-World War I readers. This literary tone, combined with the robbers’ extensive use of machines, concisely exposes Hammett’s initially pessimistic opinion of modern technology. While his audience may come into the mystery with a favorable impression of technology, Hammett’s increasingly striking images and violent plot lines help bolster Hammett’s critique of modernity. Despite this, while Hammett’s narration begins with this sense of pessimism, his novels are ultimately cautiously optimistic about modernism in America.
The final aspect of American culture through which Hammett discusses modernity is the rise of mechanization, which features prominently in “The Gutting of Couffignal.” He is particularly interested in the disparity between the perception and reality of modern technology in cities. Although machines are initially represented as signs of wealth for an exclusive set of Americans, Hammett thoroughly overturns this principle. In the Op’s eyes, machines are disruptive and dangerous. More often than not, the Op is betrayed by the machines he depends upon, whether it is a gun, a car or a telephone. Through the Op, Hammett challenges the assumption that mechanization is universally beneficial, but stops short of romanticizing the past. Hammett continues to utilize his novels as a platform to protest conservative social values, and the more extreme expressions of modernism.

Hammett explores the dynamic relationship between wealth and control over technology in the story. Essential to the economic and social success of the community on Couffignal is the strict social hierarchy. One of the things which separates the wealthy residents from the tradesman is their access to, and control over modern technology (including automobiles, telephones, and guns). However, the immobile social hierarchy and resulting controlled social climate are violently disrupted early in the narrative, when gangsters storm the island, and hold wealthy residents at bay with the stolen machine guns and automobiles. In holding the residents of Couffignal captive, the gangsters are disrupting the traditional power structure of the community. With the residents immobilized, the Op is not only detective, but also lawman and hero. Underlying the crime itself is the dramatic shift in power structures Hammett himself is observing taking place in American cities after World War I.
The machines that were status symbols for residents of Couffignal are the very tools robbers use to commit their crimes. By placing automated weapons in the hands of criminals who race around the island in stolen cars, Hammett extends the intimate relationship between modernity and technology, and between technology and crime. Machines and weapons are no longer decorative objects, or signs of wealth, but are actively used to overturn the existing social hierarchy. Even as the Op tries to defeat the criminals, he is observing a social collapse enabled by the trappings of modernity. In studying Hammett’s careful deployment of, and the subsequent failure or manipulation of machines through the course of “The Gutting of Couffignal,” readers are exposed to yet another facet of the author’s concerns about modernity.

In the robbery of Couffignal, the robbers show calculated efficiency as they steal guns and commandeer cars. Fortified by modern technology, their weapons seamlessly merging with automobiles, the criminals become more threatening. Because the citizens of Couffignal are armed with more primitive weapons, they are powerless against the machine guns, which “won’t let ‘em [the residents] get near enough to see what they're shooting at” (Hammett, Couffignal 11). The gangsters ride through the narrow streets of Couffignal like conquering heroes, with “a machine gun on a car in the middle of the street” (Hammett, Couffignal 11). They have effectively created a home-grown tank, and elevated a simple robbery to a war on both the social order and privileged lifestyle of Couffignal. Relying upon his wits and physical strength, the unarmed Continental Op is fighting an unwinnable battle against his more heavily armed enemy. Hammett returns to a pattern he establishes in “Dead Yellow Women,” of merging man and machine, and
embracing grotesque imagery in his critique of uncontrolled technology as a calling card of modernity.

The most treacherous form of modern technology, which creates a parallel for readers between the literature and their personal lives, are the machine guns the robbers carry. Militaristic connotations are prominent when Hammett describes the noise on the island when the Continental Op approaches the beach, where guns are inescapable. The first signs of danger are the bullets, which “ripped through walls with the sound of hail tapping on leaves” (Hammett, Couffignal 11). The Op is seemingly mesmerized by the guns, both as a destructive force, and as technological marvels. As he slowly moves nearer to the beach, “the machine gun barked on. Smaller guns snapped. Three concussions, close together - bombs, hand grenades, my ears and my memory told me” (Hammett, Couffignal 13). With this description, Hammett renews the connection between the Continental Op and soldiers, and between the motorized attack on Couffignal and the mechanized attacks of World War I. This undisputable connection, between technology and modernity, along with the very clearly illustrated dangers of the machine guns, is a strong rebuttal of his readers’ presumed embrace of modernity.

Hammett deliberately preserves the physical and social isolation of the island through the narrative. One of the earliest signs of danger for the Op, after he hears gunfire, is his isolation from the mainland. The gangsters cut telephone lines and blow up a bridge, before looting the shops, and stealing from residents. In cutting the telephone lines, the gangsters almost guarantee their triumph in Couffignal. Their effective disruption of the telephone system on the island again exposes the fallibility of technology, and the residents’ challenging dependence on modern technology. With
telephone access on the island gone, the Continental Op is unable to call for backup as he defends the island. This is the first instance of many where machines betray the authorities who depend upon them.

Trapped on the island by machine-gun-carrying gangsters with phone lines dead, the Op realizes there is no way to get help from the outside. Isolated by their dependence upon technology, the islanders’ dependence upon modern conveniences may be their downfall (Hammett, Couffignal 16). Although convenient and easily accessible, machines are easily corrupted. While one man is able to escape Couffignal in a rowboat, those remaining are at a grave disadvantage. It is only when the Op himself becomes armed that there is an end to the siege in sight. Having exposed and explored the weaknesses of machines, Hammett seems eager to return the focus to his heroic Op, and conclude the mystery.

Although he is severely injured, and has only a pistol against the much-more-heavily armed robbers, the Op is victorious – in the battle of man versus machine, man is the champion. Despite their newfound mechanical advantage, the automobiles and automatic weapons cannot help the gangsters escape. The gang of thieves are no match for the cynical and experienced Continental Op. The Continental Op, recast as a conquering hero, critiques their dependence upon tricks and machines, saying “you people botched the job from beginning to end…. Amateur stuff!” (Hammett, Couffignal 32). The gangsters’ coordinated and mechanized attack reflects uncertainties about modernity in postwar America, and Hammett’s questions about the value of modernity.

As an activist, Hammett argues for a more nuanced reading of modernism in America after World War I. Hammett consistently returns to three indicators through
which he explores the changing social landscape of urban America. Women’s increasing independence, the isolation and inferior treatment of immigrants, and the challenges of a mechanically driven society. Hammett’s interrogation of modernity creates new socio-economic possibilities for women, while confronting preconceptions about independent women as threatening, and offers a new social narrative for them in modern American cities. Later in his life, Hammett became a firm believer in the Communist cause, and an active liberal campaigner and teacher (Ward 343). The seeds of this interest can be seen in his early short stories, becoming clearer in his later.

Hammett's short stories are more than a series of sensationalist mysteries, filled with gore, violence, and cheap thrills. Instead of addressing modernity directly, he focuses his energies upon the changing reception of women, immigrants, and the increasingly rapid spread of technology. Women, whose social status is beginning to change following World War I, are shown as increasingly independent, but the characters are not morally ‘punished’ for this. Immigrants, initially viewed as outsiders who should be kept at a distance but share the Op’s moral and ethical compass. Often coming to his aid as he solves cases, the immigrant community serves as the second example of character redemption in his novels. Finally, machines, technology, and the increasing mechanization of modern society are scrutinized. While many of his contemporaries view these advances as uniquely beneficial, the Continental Op is quick to highlight the failure of machines, and how these inanimate objects can be used for good or evil. While he neither condemns nor condones technology, he argues for a more cautious approach to modern conveniences. Perhaps in light of the recently-ended World War I, caution is a realistic reaction.
Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, featuring the now-well-known everyman Continental Op, was initially serialized in four parts, from 1928-1929. Shortly after its serialized publication in *Black Mask*, it was published as a novel. By late 1928, the themes Hammett brought up and questions he aired about the challenges of modernity in his earlier short stories were more fully formed. He continues to discuss the challenges of modernism through three indicators. Hammett confronts the isolation of immigrants, offers new social spaces and practices for women, and challenges the supposed benefits of increasing mechanization in cities. In *Red Harvest*, his narration is foreboding, and readers begin to understand that he sees the damaging effects of widespread corruption and lawlessness as prompting the collapse of American culture as inevitable if the rapid spread of modernity proceeds unchecked. With this new novel comes an overwhelming sense of dread about the future of America, and a blunt portrayal of corruption at all levels of society. *Red Harvest* reflects Hammett’s at his most pessimistic about modern America. This worldview is not expressed anywhere as concisely as it is in the name of the town: Personville (pronounced by all of the residents of the town as “Poisonville”).

The Continental Op returns as narrator and detective in *Red Harvest* a few years older, but otherwise unchanged. The Op travels to Personville to meet newspaper publisher Donald Willsson, who has hired him to investigate corruption in Personville.
Donald is murdered before the Op is able to meet with him in person (this first death occurs just a few pages into the novel). After Donald’s untimely death, the Op’s investigation changes course. Instead of meeting with Donald, the Op meets with his father, Elihu Willsson. Unbeknownst to the Op, Elihu is at the core of the corruption in Personville. While Elihu used to have control over the town, he found his authority under threat by several gangs, which he originally brought to town to help break a labor strike. Elihu hires the Op to clean up the city.

During the Op’s investigation into Donald’s murder, and his attempts to rid the city of criminals, he begins spending time with Dinah Brand. Dinah is a prostitute who has connections to the Willsson family and the gangs, and becomes a valuable source of information for the Op. Realizing he needs reinforcements for his investigation, the Op calls the Continental Detective Agency, asking for backup. Detectives Donald Foley and Mickey Linehan quickly arrive to support the Op’s investigation. One morning, after a late night of drinking and discussing the case with Dinah, the Op wakes up to find her dead, an ice pick in her back. The Op was the last man to see her alive, and is named a lead suspect in the case. Despite being suspected by the police, the Op continues his work in Personville, eventually turning the rival gangs against each other. The narrative soon dissolves into a chaotic gang war. Corrupt police, arson, grenades and several gun fights effectively diminish the gangs’ numbers. The Op also blackmails Elihu into calling the National Guard to declare martial law in Personville. Ultimately, Elihu gets his town back, and the Op returns to San Francisco, his name cleared.

Thomas Heise’s 2005 article, “‘Going Blood Simple Like the Natives’: Contagious Urban Spaces and Modern Power in Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest,” is an
introductory discussion to crime novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Heise encompasses theories on the changing nature of urban crime and the new response to crime by law enforcement in his critique of *Red Harvest* when he asserts that “the American hardboiled narrative emerges in the midst of a profound shift in the study and prosecution of urban crime” (486). He then shifts his critical focus to urban spaces and the challenges law enforcement officials face in 1920’s America, arguing that in the context of *Red Harvest*, Hammett “used organized crime as a pretext for study of ‘delinquent’ urban spaces…. [and *Red Harvest*] is an ideal site for interrogating the means by which the genre…. managed the tensions of its historical moment” (487). However, he overlooks the influence of modernity on crime, and how Hammett’s interest in the intersection between technology and crime drives the narrative. While he alludes to tensions in modern society, he does not identify specific tensions, or ways Hammett reflects them in his novels. The challenges and strain modernity has on people is an important theme to follow in the novel, and one Hammett is fascinated by.

John Walker’s argument in “City Jungles and Expressionist Reifications” is an example of the critical approach Heise upholds, as he explores the importance of American cities as a setting in *Red Harvest*. Walker suggests that the physical location of detective novels – specifically, Personville in *Red Harvest* – “presents the modern city as a zone of tribal warfare” (125). Furthermore, he notices “legally justified structures of authority cannot be distinguished from illegal hierarchies of gang rule” in Hammett’s modern cities (Walker 125). His critique suggests cities are conducive to crime, as they have high numbers of people living closely to each other. As mentioned earlier, an overwhelming sense of dread permeates the novel. This is largely due to the systemic
corruption the Op sees around him. Walker’s analytical discussion of *Red Harvest* highlights Hammett’s interest the dominant social geography of cities, and heavily depends on an analysis of Hammett’s careful use of distinct urban social spaces in the novel. Despite this implication about the close relationship between social and physical geographic maps of cities, Walker does not discuss the novel’s physical setting (Personville) as the foundation of Hammett’s more wide-reaching interpretation of the challenges of modernity. This omission limits the range of his critique. However, his insights about urban spaces open up a conversation about the importance of cities as a crucial component of a discussion of modernity, as a means of studying broader socio-political changes in the United States.

Crime writer and critic Julian Symons discusses both Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, his book about the evolution of the pulps. Symons begins by tracking the literary transition from detective stories to crime novels. Although Hammett and Chandler share a number of similarities, Symons clearly distinguishes between them, even as he comments on their shared influences (both produce work that is heavily influenced by current American events). According to Symons, Hammett and Chandler both wrote during times of dramatic change, during which “established crime writers [tried] to adapt to new conditions” (138). One of the literary tropes he identifies as originating with this societal upheaval is the establishment of the Private Investigator as a character. While the P.I. is related to previous examples of detectives, Symons makes particular note of the tough demeanor which dominates the character type. Symons notes that “the behavior of the private detective may be tough, [it] is based on ethical standards” (138). His argument is
a notable complement to earlier critics who focus on the seemingly overwhelming crime and lawlessness which comes to a climax in *Red Harvest*, and begins to fill out the critical conversation around Hammett’s writing. Symons does not, however, take into account the other signs of modernity which disturb Hammett. For Hammett, these include a series of shifting social signifiers, including increasingly independent roles for women in society, integration of immigrants, and an ongoing discussion the effects rapid mechanization is having on cities.

Andrew Pepper’s article, “Hegemony Protected By the Armour of Coercion,” moves the critical conversation from the physical setting to the exchange of power underlying the plot of *Red Harvest*. His argument focuses on scenes of fighting in the novel, and the concept that these clashes “depict the shift from the rawer…forms of capitalist production characteristic of the robber baron….to the consolidation of monopoly capitalism in the US and the development of newer…. methods of productions” (Pepper 337). Pepper’s argument emphasizes the effects of corruption and absolute power in the novel, but disregards Hammett’s more subtle approach to discussing the challenges of modernism.

In “Going Blood-Simple in Poisonville,” Christopher Breu, a scholar from Illinois State, identifies and contextualizes the ‘hard-boiled masculinity’ that becomes more fully expressed in *Red Harvest* (when compared with the Continental Op stories). Although the changing expression of masculinity in pulp fiction is a common point of focus for critics, it is often discussed in the context of capitalism and power. Breu argues instead that the Op’s masculinity in *Red Harvest* novel is “violent, rationalized and largely purged of interiority and affect” (52). Emotionless masculinity and rationalized violence
work together in the novel, and become a trademark of Hammett’s detectives. Breu quickly segues from a critique of modern masculinity to a discussion of the level of corruption in Personville. He again identifies the “amoral detachment and instrumental rationality” of the violence in the city (Breu 53). While he mentions the social and economic conditions in Personville in passing, suggesting they allow for the Op’s existence in the narrative, he does not discuss the corrosive power of modernity any further, before returning to a conversation on changing forms of masculinity. Despite his thorough conversation of hard-boiled masculinity and corruption in pulp fiction, he does not associate the specific representations and social consequences with modernity in Red Harvest. As an author, Hammett has been focused on the social effects of modernity from early in his career, and they are essential to a critique of Red Harvest.

In an extension of Breu’s critique of hard-boiled masculinity and corruption, John Whitley, an academic from the University of Sussex, discusses Hammett’s interest in social structures at large in his article “Stirring Things Up: Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op.” In Whitley’s article, the Op’s act of cleaning the city of criminals is a way to frame a discussion of modernity. His argument draws attention to the narrative parallels between the criminal world of Personville, and early-20th Century society. For Whitley, Hammett’s crime novels are more than just entertainment: The detective sees “crime as a shadow world paralleling and commenting on the real world” (447). In the opening passages of the novel, Hammett describes Personville as “a society so poisoned…that one death is neither here nor there. The poison lies deep in the system, and only a succession of furious bloodlettings will go any way towards purification” (Whitley 444). Although Whitley’s article begins to shift the critical discussion of Red
Harvest from the corruption and violence which captivated critics like Symons and Pepper to a study of a corrupt society, he does not discuss Hammett’s isolated critique of modernity.

George Thompson’s commentary on Hammett’s detective fiction, “Dashiell Hammett’s Hard-Boiled Modernism,” is similarly focused on Hammett’s literary form, with an emphasis on how the school of hard-boiled fiction was inspired by the author’s personal experience. In Thompson’s essay, “Hammett’s modernism, and the modernism of the hard-boiled school, is based not on a repudiation of mass culture, but instead on an embracing of its possibilities” (118). Hammett does begin to portray facets of mass culture favorably in Red Harvest, but a large part of his narrative is dedicated to skepticism of technology, and the ominous signs of modernity in America. Although Thompson’s arguments are persuasive, his conclusion that Hammett’s world view (which Hammett shares with the Op) is an optimistic embrace of modernism and mass culture is too simplistic. The tension between the overt violence and corruption in the opening scenes of the narrative, and the return to law and order the Op spearheads drive the narrative forward. Ultimately, Hammett’s cautious optimism for America prevails, although it seems counterintuitive after the ubiquitous violence and corruption in Personville. While Thompson’s assertion of overwhelming optimism in the narrative is flawed, he clearly identifies the strong connection between the trauma of World War I, and the dramatic changes in content and literary style in literature following the war.

While the aforementioned critics have interesting approaches to discussing Red Harvest, many are narrowly focused on specific aspects of the novels, or are preoccupied by a close study of the devastating scale of violence and corruption in the novel. This is
understandable, as biographer Nathan Ward notes in his recent publication: Hammett often features scenes of crime and violence in his earlier novels, but dramatically increases the intensity of these elements in *Red Harvest*, at his editor’s urging (120). However, while the Op remains the same character readers know from earlier stories, his impression of the challenges of modernity as seen in America has changed. This change in tone (the Op’s narration is initially pessimistic, verging on defeated) calls for a broader approach to critiquing *Red Harvest*. After reading “Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal,” it is clear Hammett’s view of American culture has taken an extreme turn for the worse in this novel. Though the outsized violence, characters, and corruption all combine for a novel full of dramatic flourishes and a high body count, it is essential to look past the provocative elements Hammett includes, and return to the indicators Hammett focuses on in his continuing conversation about expressions of modernity in postwar American cities.

As mentioned earlier, Hammett consistently tracks three signs of modernity in his novels, focusing on new social spaces for women, increasingly liberal views of immigrants, and a close study of increasing mechanization in cities. He continues to feature female characters in socially conservative roles to anchor his discussion, but also more fully develops the independent and dangerous *femme fatale*, developing the character further from the pattern he established in the earlier Op stories. Hammett’s narrative focus on immigrants, brought to the narrative foreground in “Dead Yellow Women,” has also changed. In this novel, readers see the Op depending upon help from immigrants more than he has before, and beginning to recognize the men and women for their strengths rather than their nationality. The increasingly mechanized society the Op
belongs to in Red Harvest continues to interest Hamnett as well. While the Op used to see them as signs of wealth or exclusivity, telephones, cars, and machine guns are now widely available. Continuing to study these motifs in the context of Hamnett’s earlier stories allows readers insight into his concerns about modern America, as his approach to discussing modernity continues to change shape. While his early stories establish his interest in studying modernity, Red Harvest is where his critique becomes increasingly pointed, and his anxiety reaches new heights.

The first symbol of modernity I will focus on, both in isolation from and in comparison with earlier Continental Op stories (“Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal”), is the treatment of women. Two women are integral to the narrative: Housewife Mrs. Willsson, and prostitute Dinah Brand. Although Dinah is a more memorable character, and more intimately tied to the case, both Dinah and Mrs. Willsson are important representations of changing social positions for women in American cities. Mrs. Willsson, Donald Willsson’s wife, is the first character I will discuss.

Mrs. Willsson occupies a traditional female role in the novel, and is only slightly more modern than comparable women (e.g. Mrs. Banbrock) in Hamnett’s earlier stories. When the Op travels to Personville, Mrs. Willsson is the first person he speaks with. She is only present for a few scenes in the novel, and is mainly represented as a two-dimensional character type: A young, married woman. Only briefly described, she is “a slender blonde woman of something less than thirty in green crepe” (Hamnett, Harvest 4). During her brief conversation with the Op, she acts as wife and hostess, leading the Op to the library, and apologizing for her husband’s delay (Hamnett, Harvest 4). Their
discussion is interrupted when she steps out to take a telephone call. These mundane early scenes quickly give way to a classic pulp fiction narrative.

The novel takes a turn when Mrs. Willsson returns from taking a call, “her face white, her eyes almost black” (Hammett, *Harvest* 6). She offers no explanation for her long absence, only saying, “‘I’m awfully sorry…. but you’ve had all this waiting for nothing. My husband won’t be home tonight’” (Hammett, *Harvest* 6). The Op, not realizing the call was to tell her Donald was murdered, leaves the house. Even in her moment of crisis, Mrs. Willsson remains composed, putting her guests’ interests above her own grief. This character represents the ideal American woman and wife. With her husband’s murder, Hammett accelerates the plot, transforming Mrs. Willsson from married housewife to a widow and suspect. However, even as a suspect in her husband’s murder, she represents a more identifiable form of modern femininity than the morally questionable Dinah Brand. Compared to the *femme fatale* character Hammett develops in “Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal,” Mrs. Willsson has more recognizable social practices. As in his other stories, Hammett often establishes a baseline character type early in a narrative, before challenging readers’ expectations about women’s usual social roles.

The challenge to Mrs. Willsson’s conservative femininity comes in Dinah Brand, the other prominent female character in *Red Harvest*. Dinah, a woman who has become independently wealthy, by monetizing her sexuality, is clearly operating outside the range of socially acceptable roles for women. Her reputation as a moll precedes her in Personville. The police chief describes her as a dangerous woman, “‘a soiled dove…. a de luxe [sic] hustler, a big-league gold-digger,’” whom the police department has been
“‘keeping an eye on’” (Hammett, *Harvest* 22). When he meets Dinah in person, the Op is surprised by her disheveled appearance. She stands “an inch or two taller than [the Op],” and has an undeniable magnetism to the men who cross her path (Hammett, *Harvest* 32). Unlike Mrs. Willsson, her figure is not classically beautiful. She is described as “broad-shouldered, full-breasted, [and] round-hipped,” with “big muscular legs” and a face that is “already showing signs of wear” (Hammett, *Harvest* 32). Her “coarse hair…needed trimming and was parted crookedly” (Hammett, *Harvest* 32). Her visibly flawed appearance, torn nylons, and ripped clothing indicate a dramatic change in Hammett’s depiction of women, even in modern America, and are the first of many pointed deviations Hammett will include in this novel.

Dinah’s mix of vulnerable and dominant traits are Hammett’s way of experimenting with character traits to illustrate the challenges of modern social opportunities for women. Dinah’s power is reflected in her sexual relationships with the men in Personville, and her ability to manipulate them for her advantage. The Op notes that while Dinah takes “her pick of Poisonville’s men,” she is also manipulative, often selling information about planned labor strikes (Hammett, *Harvest* 25). When Spade asks her for help with his case, she is clear about the cost: “‘Money….the more the better’” (Hammett, *Harvest* 25). Despite her mercenary nature and deeply ingrained business sense, she continues to struggle for financial and social independence throughout the narrative. Dinah, through rumored to have the men in the city in the palm of her hand, is also entirely dependent upon them for her independence and survival. This is an important challenge the majority of women face: Hammett illustrates the
increasing tension women are confronting, between traditional expectations, and modern prospects.

By illustrating Dinah’s sexual and social freedom, but still making her dependent upon the men of Personville for her existence, Hammett illustrates the challenges women face in post-World War I America. Despite her modern embrace of her sexuality, Dinah’s status as an independent woman and *femme fatale* is in flux. Dinah’s narrative is in some ways similar to Mrs. Willsson’s, as she strives to balance traditional expectations for women with the possibilities in modern American cities. Hammett takes advantage of the idea of parallel narratives, often selectively changing the character development of women in his stories to reflect the increasing pressures changing social expectations on select populations.

Much like Ruth, the younger of the two sisters in “The Scorched Face,” the very independence Dinah gains from changing social spaces for women in modern America will be the cause of her downfall. Her character arc, although ultimately tragic, is defined by her independence. Dinah’s complex characterization is a noticeable step forward in Hammett’s development of the modern woman, reiterating the very fine line between the recent past and the future Hammett draws as an author, and strengthening the balance between tradition and modernity he establishes in earlier stories. While women in *Red Harvest* are given some freedoms, they are still punished for criminal behavior. Dinah Brand is a rough precursor to the *femme fatale*, a clear early iteration of the character type Hammett will refine later in his career.

Hammett explores changing impressions of immigrants in American cities in *Red Harvest* in parallel to his detailed portrayal of the changing roles for women in
Personville. In a departure from his earlier stories, which describe immigrants as social and cultural outsiders, Hammett’s portrayal of immigrants in *Red Harvest* has evolved to integrate them into mainstream society. Instead of physically isolating immigrants into separate neighborhoods, or create caricatures of other cultures, Hammett positions the Op in a close relationship with several immigrants over the course of the narrative. No longer socially isolated, the Op both works with and comes into contact with a wide range of people over the course of his case. This second shift in the Op’s experience with modernism reflects a rare moment of optimism Hammett includes in the narrative. He imagines a more equally integrated society, emphasizes the benefits of more culturally diverse cities.

Dick Foley, a fellow detective from the Continental detective agency, is Canadian, and one of the characters the Op identifies as an outsider. The Op initially highlights Foley’s Canadian nationality, before emphasizing the man’s odd features and clothing. Whenever the Op discusses Foley, he refers to him as “the Canadian,” or “the little Canadian op” (Hammett, *Harvest* 92). He elaborates only slightly on Foley’s character as the narrative progresses, describing him as “a boy-sized Canadian with a sharp irritable face” who “wore high heels to increase his height, perfumed his handkerchiefs and saved all the worlds he could” (Hammett, *Harvest* 92). Even though Foley is integrated into the case, the Op’s initial treatment of Foley suggests he will always be an outsider (Hammett, *Harvest* 129). Despite these early dismissive comments from the Op, the Op later implies he has great respect for Foley.

Although the description of Foley’s appearance isolates him from the other lawmen, the Op’s dismissive comments about Foley are soon forgotten. As the men
continue to work together, the Op begins to find more common ground with Foley. Foley often reports to the Op “in his word-saving manner” in an echo of the Op’s often-abrupt interactions with employers and suspects alike (Hammett, *Harvest* 138). As the narrative continues, readers realize how much the Op depends upon Foley. When chasing down a lead in Personville, the Op “curse[s himself] for having pulled Dick Foley away…. too soon. That was a tough break” (Hammett, *Harvest* 111). Spade is always brief when talking about his fellow operatives from the Continental Detective Agency, but in a rare moment of praise insists “they were both good operatives” (Hammett, *Harvest* 92). While Foley’s clothing is unorthodox, isolating him as an outsider, and he is a foreign national, the Op clearly trusts and depends upon him.

This narrative device, of isolating immigrants’ status as outsiders, before making pointed reference to their similarities to Americans, and their usefulness to the Op – is one that Hammett established in “Dead Yellow Women,” and continues to refine. A short time after he joins the case, suspecting the Op of Dinah’s murder, Foley departs. He is not seen again in this case, and the Op continues his investigation of the mystery alone.

The final aspect through which Hammett considers the challenges modernity is a discussion of the rapid spread of technology and mechanization in modern American cities. While telephones, cars, and guns were relatively rare in the earlier Continental Op stories, they are very common in *Red Harvest* (almost becoming ubiquitous). By increasing the appearance of modern conveniences and technology in *Red Harvest*, Hammett shifts the existing conversation around technology in his detective novels. Rather than having modern technology suggest wealth and access (as in “The Gutting of
Couffignal”), he challenges readers’ impressions of the beneficial relationship between man and machine. In the case of the Op and the residents of Personville, machines are often an isolating force. These three forms of technology have an unusual effect on human interaction. Telephones interrupt important conversations, automobiles are the cause of countless accidents and deaths, and automatic weapons easily multiply the number of deaths.

The first piece of equipment to come to Hammett’s attention in the narrative is the telephone. Pivotal conversations often take place over the phone lines, exposing readers and, in many cases, the Op himself, to only one side of the conversation. The Op first experiences this in the opening passages of Red Harvest, when he meets with Mrs. Willsson. Mrs. Willsson receives a phone call mid-conversation, but the perfect hostess, she waits until she is summoned by a maid, then “excuse[s] herself and follow[s] the maid out” (Hammett, Harvest 5). The phone call increases narrative tension. In this case, Mrs. Willsson has just received news that her husband has been killed. She rushes to her car quickly and drives off, presumably to identify Donald’s body. Hammett frequently uses he disruptive ring to interrupt conversations in the narrative.

This pattern, of disruptive technology, repeats later in the novel when a phone call interrupts a conversation between the Op and a fellow detective. As the Op is briefing Dick Foley on the case in Personville, the telephone rings, “interrupt(ing) [the] tale in the last quarter” (Hammett, Harvest 117). Dinah is calling to set up a time to meet later in the evening, and to collect the money the Op owes her. Their exchange is brief, and the Op returns to his conversation with Foley. A short time later, as the Op sits down to discuss the case with Chief Noonan, the pattern repeats itself again, when one of the
police station’s phones rings. Noonan “put the receiver to his ear…. listened for a moment….and had to make two attempts to get the receiver back on its prong before he succeeded. His face had gone a little doughy…” (Hammett, Harvest 143). Noonan has received news of yet another murder: Lew Yard, a gangster and confidential source, has been killed. As the narrative continues, it becomes clearer how much technology has spread, and the effect this is having on human relationships.

Despite what these early scenes indicate, Hammett is not entirely suspicious about or resentful of telephones. The Op, though largely distrustful of modern conveniences, begins to rely upon them as the storyline continues. At one point, as the Op gets too close to solving the case, a gunman tries to kill him in his hotel room. In a moment of desperation, the Op crawls across the floor to a conveniently close telephone, asking “the girl to send the house copper up” (Hammett, Harvest 66). He is moved to a room where the “bullets [can’t] be as easily funneled” (Hammett, Harvest 67). This brief call saves his life, and marks the beginning of a change in the perception of technology. This is not the first rescue facilitated by telephones. Later in the novel, realizing he needs support from the Continental Agency, the Op calls the Old Man (the Op’s name for his boss), to request backup as soon as possible. These scenes are the one concession Hammett – and the Op – will make to the convenience of telephones. While they complicate the initially clear rejection of technology, they open a conversation about the value of modernism in moderation.

An integral part of the chaos in Red Harvest is the scale of the violence in Personville. As mentioned earlier, when Elihu Willsson calls gangsters in to regain control over Personville, he doesn’t anticipate the effect their ambition (combined with
their access to machines and modern technology), will have on the citizens. Seeing an opportunity, the heavily armed gangsters take over the town, and Personville begins to live up to its nickname, “Poisonville”. When he arrives in town, the Op notices there is a dramatic increase in automated weapons increasing the violence in Personville, in part motivated by Elihu Willsson, who was trying to break a strike in town. “Old Elihu hired gunmen, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even arts of the regular army…. organized labor in Personville was a used fire-cracker” (Hammett, Harvest 9). Automatic guns, often presented by Hammett in the Op stories as a sign of modern warfare, increase the narrative tension throughout the novel.

Following WWI, the first industrial war, many of Hammett’s readers would have had strong memories of and personal experience with extreme violence. As a sign of modernity, very few things would have spoken so viscerally to his readers as machine guns. When the Op is introduced into Personville, gun violence has been steadily increasing for months. The level of violence is reinforced in the opening chapter. The Op describes Donald Willsson’s body in his typically clinical way, noting “at ten-forty the previous night he [Donald Willsson] had been shot four times in the stomach, chest and back, dying immediately…. six shots had been fired at Willsson from a .32 caliber pistol. …. the shooting had been done from a narrow alley across the street. That was all anybody knew” (Hammett, Harvest 12). Gun violence has become the prevailing force in Personville, as the weapons make murder, revenge, and criminal acts anonymous and easy. The residents of Personville live in fear as a crime spree unfolds around them, enabled by the accessibility of mechanized weapons, and the extreme damage these machines can so easily unleash.
As the narrative proceeds, Hammett’s description of machine guns becomes more explicit and disturbing. When the mechanized violence reaches a climax, the Op describes the battle between the police and the gangs, personifying the guns and laying bare the impact of the violence. “The machine-gun settled down to business, grinding out metal like the busy little death factory it was” (Hammett, *Harvest* 122). After the shooting dies down, the Op goes into the roadhouse the gangsters have been hiding in. His description of the destruction left behind is chilling. “The first floor [is]….ankle-deep with booze that was still gurgling from bullet holes” and the detectives find “four dead bodies and no live ones…two of them were practically shot to pieces” (Hammett, *Harvest* 123). The most striking aspect of the scene for the Op is not the dead gangsters (he seems almost numb to the murders), but the utter destruction in front of him. The excess – guns, buildings, and the town itself being shot to pieces – leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, and is a forceful condemnation of this aspect of modernity.

Even after this scene, the Op continues to emphasize how dangerous the gangsters are, made stronger by their access to and control over guns. The abundance of weapons increasingly become a threatening sign of modernity, as machine guns seem to proliferate within the city limits. Despite the pervasive threat of violence, the Op remains a stalwart voice of reason. Constantly armed, but rarely firing his own gun, the Op is a study in restraint, a counterbalance to the extreme behavior surrounding him. More often than not, he mitigates the threat, as when he disarms Elihu, and “take[s] the black gun from the bed” (Hammett, *Harvest* 34). Despite his wary view of weapons, the Op always goes to bed armed (Hammett, *Harvest* 43). The Op’s reluctant acceptance of modern conveniences in *Red Harvest* is consistent with what readers see in earlier stories.
However, while Hammett never condones the violence in Personville, he offers an example of how the weapons can be integrated judiciously into modern American society through the Continental Op.

The third aspect of mechanization that stands out Red Harvest, and which is also ambiguously handled, is the rise of the automobile. Initially, cars and taxis are innocuous, even helpful. They are much more accessible to average citizens than in earlier Op stories, and play an integral role in the narrative, often facilitating the violence engulfing Personville. Hammett has the Op springing in and out of cabs as he is on the trail of the case; the best driver is one who can handle a car well, and “knew what speed was” (Hammett, Harvest 156). But the Op’s initial approach to discussing cars gradually changes. The Op’s personal interactions with cars, and stories from other characters creates a more complex image of the machines, even as they seem to multiply in the city.

Hammett first illustrates the dangers of cars through a conversation with an informant. MacSwain, one of the men the Op is working with, several times references his wife’s violent death in a car accident. He tells the Op his “wife got killed – an accident. Uh-huh, an accident. She drove the Ford square in front of No. 6 where it comes down the long grade from Tanner and stopped it there” (Hammett, Harvest 114). After the accident, MacSwain “come [sic] into a piece of change … [and] quit” (Hammett, Harvest 95). As convenient as cars are, they are also machines which can be dangerous in the wrong hands.

During the final encounter between the Op and the gangsters controlling Personville, the Op finds himself trapped in a car, chased by gangsters. The Op gets in a “curtained touring car…squeezed in between men in the back seat” (Hammett, Harvest
195). Within minutes, “another car came out of the first cross street to run ahead of us. A third followed…. [The] speed hung around forty, fast enough to get us somewhere, not fast enough to get us a lot of attention” (Hammett, Harvest 195). Within moments, one of the men in his car is “shot…. down,” and “at the next corner, we ran through a volley of pistol bullets” (Hammett, Harvest 196). In the chaotic shootout that ensues, cars and guns take a central role, driving the narrative, heightening the violence, and emboldening the gangsters. The Op notices the car which has been following them is now “stationary up the street, trading shots with the neighborhood” while the third car, which has been leading the group, has now “turned into a side street. Pistol shots…. told us that our advance car was covering the back door” (Hammett, Harvest 196). In these scenes, the Op illustrates another change in urban crime: It becomes increasingly violent with advent of guns, and more efficient as gangsters acquire cars.

Hammett chooses this car chase to reinforce the concept he has been discussing for the bulk of Red Harvest: Nowhere is safe in modern America, not even the prototypical American neighborhood. His core concerns about modernity come to a peak as Personville comes under literal fire from automatic machines, aided by technology and cars. As integral as modern technology is to the Op’s case, Hammett challenges readers to question their growing dependence on these modern conveniences. While the early 20th century brings incredible opportunities and conveniences, Hammett cannot help but see the dangers of a blind acceptance of these manifestations of modernity.

In Red Harvest, Hammett drastically increases the level of violence, perhaps in an attempt to please the pulp fiction audience. While the increase in violence is at times gratuitous, it illustrates the drastic repercussions of a rapidly modernizing and
increasingly mechanized world. The spread of crime is often aided by increasingly accessible cars, and is perpetuated by corrupt officials. Telephones, once purely an accessory of the wealthy, are now useful to the Op. Women, increasingly evident in nontraditional roles, still face some of the same concerns. Still, they are not punished by society for their independence, but for instances of breaking the law. Similarly, immigrants, at times totally socially rejected, begin to gain a more integrated role in the narrative. While Hammett prevents them from joining the main narrative, the Op clearly depends upon Dick Foley, a Canadian coworker. The narrative, at times overpowered by a dramatic increase in violence and corruption, is slowly brought under more control, as the Op (and Hammett) begins to come to terms with these signs of modernity.
Chapter IV.

*The Maltese Falcon*

*The Maltese Falcon* contains the same motifs evident in Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op stories. Detective Sam Spade, as a more modern echo of Hammett, comes to terms with the challenges of modernism by recognizing the value of increased social freedoms for women, the integration of immigrants into mainstream American society, and the trend of expanding mechanization in cities. In near-constant publication since its original date of issue (1929), the book stands out for its enduring popularity among all of Hammett’s published work. Biographer Nathan Ward comments on the novel’s far reach: It was mined as source material for three films in the 15 years immediately following production (1).

The plot of *The Maltese Falcon* is centered upon the theft and ownership of the eponymous statue - a small bird encrusted with garnets, amethysts, emeralds and sapphires. The novel opens as the Spade & Archer Detective Agency is contacted by the beautiful Miss Wonderly, who claims to need help searching for her missing younger sister. Spade, a new iteration of the everyman Continental Op, picks up the investigation when Miles Archer is murdered shortly after beginning his investigation. “Miss Wonderly” is soon revealed as a pseudonym for Brigid O’Shaughnessy, one of many people chasing the trail of the valuable falcon. Corrupt businessman Casper Gutman, his bodyguard Wilmer Cook, and Joel Cairo, a mysterious Greek man, are also hunting for the treasure. While the quest for the falcon is ultimately a failure, the case is a tool
Hammett uses as he continues to challenge the signifiers of modernity in postwar San Francisco, the increasingly fluctuating social spaces for women, the shifting reception of immigrants, and the growing influence of machines in everyday life. Over the course of the novel, Spade gradually comes to terms with the altered social landscape in America, and begins to gain an appreciation of modern life.

One of the challenges of studying *The Maltese Falcon* is the critics’ response to the novel. Despite its popularity of the novel, they are more often interested in critiquing the memorable films it inspired, or discussing Hammett’s successor (Raymond Chandler), than recognizing the value of the source text. Still, it has been taken seriously as a novel, and does not face the same challenges that the Op stories have.

George Thompson, a Hammett critic and scholar, has a specific method of dissecting the interwoven plot lines in Hammett’s novel, but does not incorporate a discussion of modernity (93). Instead, he bases his discussion of *The Maltese Falcon* on the theory that Hammett “for the first time [in his career] articulates a fully realized…vision” of morality (Thompson 93). Thompson considers the novel’s structure, and he divides the author’s novel into three narrative strands. The first narrative strand is the mystery of Miles Archer’s murder, and the second is defined by Spade and Brigid’s relationship. The third strand is the overarching quest for the falcon. Thompson’s assertion about Hammett’s novel highlights the author’s complex approach to a discussion of underlying social tensions in San Francisco. However, in focusing on the plot of the novel, Thompson overlooks Hammett’s persistent underlying discussion of modernity. A close reading of the novel reveals Hammett’s vision of contemporary San Francisco is undeniably linked to an analysis of modernism in America.
Robert Shulman, an academic whose work in the 1980’s focuses on elements of class, violence and gender in modern American literature, falsely interprets the novel as an ultimately fatalistic portrait of modern American society. Shulman opens his critique with the assertion that Hammett gives “his social vision its fullest expression” in *The Maltese Falcon* (416). While “characters are exotic,” Shulman reminds readers that “their motives are all too familiar” (461). At the heart of this argument is his conclusion that “because of…human isolation, betrayals and obsessive pursuit of false goals, the novel renders a hell-on-earth” (Shulman 461). Shulman does not allow for a redemptive future in Hammett’s American cities, despite Hammett’s clear efforts to highlight the benefits of modernity though the changing experience of outsiders and women. Hammett’s decision to integrate foreigners and *femme fatales* as he upends social norms is informed by his experience with modernity. Although Hammett grapples in the novel with the physical violence and social upheaval instigated by modernity in post-World War I cities, he is clearly optimistic about the future of America.

Philippa Gates’ 2008 article shifts the academic discussion from individual characters’ motives that Shulman focus on, and Thompson’s discussions of narrative structure, to variations of masculinity in the three film versions of *The Maltese Falcon*. She credibly argues that changes in the “theme and representation regarding the masculinity of the hero” are intimately related to “social, economic, and industrial factors of the time” (Gates 8). Gates further suggests that a shift in the representation of masculinity is necessary to “highlight issues of national identity …with an increased emphasis on…foreignness [of perceived outsiders]” (8). Her evaluation of changing ideas of masculinity and gender in the context of social changes is a persuasive
assessment of the post-World War I social values and changes which interest Hammett. However, Gates overlooks the possibility that foreignness and mechanization are symptoms of modernism, although modernism is integral to Hammett’s novel.

Additionally, while Gates’ article focuses on the films inspired by the novel, a close reading of the novel enforces the intimate relationship between films and the novel, emphasizing the sweeping social changes Hammett is grappling with in his novels. While my argument shares some overlap with Gates’ interest in the treatment of outsiders, it tracks changing treatment of women and immigrants in post-World War I American society, and the challenges of an increasingly mechanized city, through the case of the Maltese Falcon.

Daniel Linder, a more recent scholar whose work focuses on foreign language versions of Hammett and Chandler, turns his attention to language specifically used for and by outsiders (Linder solely focuses on gay characters) in *The Maltese Falcon*. In his 2014 article, Linder isolates the linguistic patterns Hammett uses when writing about homosexual characters, and how Hammett codifies their interactions. Linder isolates Spade as a rare protagonist and hero, a man who is “very adept at recognizing bi-/homosexual characters...and engaging with them, using language they…understand” (337). One example of this are the conversations Spade and Cairo have – at times, they seem to be in a separate conversation from anyone else in the room. Linder notes “an example of Hammett’s…clear intention…is when detective Sam Spade asks…Cairo who owns the Maltese falcon” (339). When Cairo misinterprets the question, assuming Spade’s feminine pronoun is referring to effeminate Wilmur, Spade’s response is guarded – he immediately notices and processes the oversight, but does not draw attention to it.
Linder also discusses how subtle linguistic patterns allow Hammett to write about characters who would otherwise not be included in the narrative. Throughout this article, he emphasizes how unusual it is for a novel published in the 1920’s to feature characters who are homosexual, but who are neither criminals nor victims of violent crimes. Despite textual evidence to indicate Hammett’s intentions, Linder does not tie the presence of gay characters in Hammett’s novels, and the general public’s resentment of sexually ambiguous characters, as related to modernity. However, Hammett often uses social outliers to continue to question conservative social traditions, while also opening a nuanced discussion about the benefits of modernity.

Joseph Porter’s article, “The End of the Trail: The American West of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler,” critiques Hammett’s and Chandler’s novels in the literary tradition of American Westerns. While Hammett’s novels do not take place in the “wild west,” the version of San Francisco portrayed in *The Maltese Falcon* is a city largely shaped by modernity. Porter does not acknowledge this in his critique, although many aspects of Hammett’s. In this early critical review of noir novels, Porter creates an important frame of reference for a discussion of crime fighting and social order in the heart of American cities. Porter analyzes Hammett and Chandler’s detective novels, in part by deconstructing their setting, the modern American city. He concludes his critique with a discussion of the collapse of the American West, which he argues is caused by “pessimistic exhaustion” (415). Hammett’s initially pessimistic view of modernity seems to support this theory, as mentioned earlier, in a discussion of Shulman’s analysis. However, although the residents of the city are often deceitful, Spade begins to singlehandedly turn the tide against corruption and clearly envisions a more optimistic
future for San Francisco through the course of the narrative. In the closing pages of the novel, Spade clearly refutes pessimistic claims with his hardboiled code of honor: “When a man’s partner is killed, he’s supposed to do something about it…He was your partner, and you’re supposed to do something about it” (Hammett, *Falcon* 213-214). *The Maltese Falcon* ultimately contradicts Porter’s assertion of social collapse, often through scenes of redemption for women, acceptance of outsiders, and a more complete integration of technology into everyday life. Hammett’s optimism for modern America, though sometimes muted, is mainly expressed through his fictional counterpart Sam Spade.

The case during *The Maltese Falcon*’s plot – a detective trying to solve the case of his partner’s murder, and becoming entangled in the dangerous search for a priceless falcon statue – threatens to drown out Hammett’s deeper motivation, and overwhelm his conversation about modernism in cities. Although the novel is named after the priceless statue, the statue does not appear until well into the second half of the narrative. When it appears, the priceless falcon draws together a broad range of characters by their shared desire for the treasure. Spade’s comparative disinterest in the falcon becomes a way for Hammett to shift readers’ attention from the purported treasure to the people who search for it. Even as Spade holds the statue in his hands, his eyes “glow,” but his face remains “hard and dull” when he realizes he has “the damned thing” (Hammett, *Falcon* 158-159). This moment represents an important shift in Hammett’s narrative, and reinforces the gap between the treasure-hunters and Spade.

*The Maltese Falcon* is the novel where Hammett’s social ideology and theories about modernity are most fully integrated. Hammett’s more carefully controlled plot and decision not to linger on scenes of gratuitous violence draw readers’ attention to the
undercurrent of discomfort with modernity in America. Building upon themes he established earlier in his career, in the Continental Op stories, Hammett continues to turn a critical eye to modernism. He begins this with an increasingly liberal literary treatment of immigrants, often humanizing characters who would previously be limited to brief scenes highlighting their eccentricity. Hammett’s interrogation of modernity continues as Spade’s investigation into Archer’s murder and the missing falcon also exposes the challenges women face in San Francisco. As a population, women in the 1920’s and 1930’s are still often identified and restrained by traditional societal expectations (which do not allow for working, unmarried women with lovers), even as Hammett acknowledges the new social positions in post-World War I San Francisco. Finally, Hammett offers a more nuanced discussion of mechanization in San Francisco through Spade’s personal experience with technology in the city, which is rapidly evolving. The Maltese Falcon is an example of the evolution of Hammett’s study of social trends and prejudices, while addressing the very real anxieties of the author and his readers. While suspicion of outsiders is overshadowed by the gratuitous violence and sensational storylines of Red Harvest, the immigrant story is integral to Hammett’s social vision, and he continues to expand upon it in this later novel.

A discussion of the individual treasure-hunters and their place in post-World War I America opens a conversation of modernism. Hammett advocates a more liberal society through the close study of changing relationships between men and women, the place of immigrants, and the increasing power of technology and machines in American cities. To highlight the enormity of these social changes, Hammett pointedly includes characters like Effie who adhere to more conservative social traditions, even as others
operate on the edge of conventional society (examples in this novel include Cairo and Brigid). Hammett’s use of the statue as a literary device is masterful. The falcon, superficially a treasure to move the mystery forward, is quickly revealed as a means of exploring modernity in tense post-World War I America. While the novel shares a similar narrative structure with Red Harvest and the earlier Op stories (including “Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal”), many of the ideas Hammett has been exploring earlier in his career only reach their ultimate form in The Maltese Falcon.

Hammett depicts the changing treatment of immigrants in cities from early on in his career, but pointedly confronts depictions of immigrants over the course of The Maltese Falcon. Detailed character studies in this novel enrich Hammett’s evolving discussion about the challenges and benefits of modern advances. In particular, Hammett’s dynamic portrayal of Joel Cairo offers a more humanized portrait of an immigrant, from the moment he walks into Spade’s office. From the outset, Cairo is one of the most unusual characters in The Maltese Falcon, and is a man who does not fit into the traditional American social hierarchy. Spade’s initial description of Cairo emphasizes his appearance, which underscores the man’s status as an outsider. A mix of flamboyant characteristics and East Asian features, Cairo is a “small-boned dark man of medium height” with “black and smooth and very glossy hair” (Hammett, Falcon 16). He is referred to as both “the Greek” and “the Leviathan,” instead of by name, which only isolates him further from all-American Spade (Hammett, Falcon 42). Despite his unusual characterization, Cairo is essential to the case.
These unusual descriptions of Cairo are noteworthy for both the detail Hammett continues to include, and the physical traits he emphasizes. After identifying Cairo as a physically distinctive figure, Spade describes the man’s odd clothing. Unusually fashionable, Cairo wears a “deep green…cravat” and a “black coat, cut tight to narrow shoulders, flared a little over slightly plump hips. Cairo’s trousers [fit] his round legs more snugly than [is] current fashion…the uppers of his patent-leather shoes [are] hidden by fawn spats,” and he walks with “short, mincing, bobbing steps” (Hammett, *Falcon* 42). His silk handkerchief and calling cards are heavily perfumed. Hammett’s focus on Cairo’s slightly too-tight clothes, and heavily perfumed card and handkerchief are a nod to readers, implying Cairo is not only an immigrant, but also a gay man. He is an outsider on multiple levels in this narrative.

Although Cairo is clearly an immigrant, he is also making an effort to fit in with his surroundings, much like Lillian Chen in “Dead Yellow Women.” One sign of this is evident in his conversation with Spade. While holding Spade at gunpoint, he is excessively formal: “‘You will please keep your hands on top of the desk….I intend to search your offices’” (Hammett, *Falcon* 51). In comparison to Spade, who constantly speaks in slang and contractions, Cairo’s language is formal and articulate, almost careful. As readers familiar with Hammett’s earlier work will remember, the author is interested in the increasing integration of immigrants in cities, and how this changes in postwar America (exhibited in his characterization of Lillian in “Dead Yellow Women”). Clothing and speech patterns are two of the main signifiers Hammett uses to illustrate similarities between Americans and outsiders. This is a departure from Hammett’s earlier work. When the Op chases down leads in earlier stories, there are either American
or foreign characters, and the two styles rarely overlap. Spade’s description of Cairo’s clothing and behavior is a remarkable example of this active incorporation. By emphasizing specific details of Cairo’s appearance and underlining his speech patterns as unusual but distinctly American, Hammett deviates from descriptions of immigrants in the Op stories. Hammett often focuses on interactions between Cairo and Spade as the case evolves, clearly placing the two men in cultural conversation with each other.

While Spade’s description of Cairo emphasizes his strangeness, it also reignites a discussion of the treatment of immigrants in American cities. Hammett has previously leaned heavily on depictions of immigrants as outliers who wear exotic uniforms, and speak through almost-unintelligible accents. Spade’s early characterization of Cairo as a dandy gradually shifts away from this image, giving way to a sympathetic portrait of a man who is forced to live and work on the edge of society. In contrast, Effie, Spade’s secretary, has a different reaction. She immediately recognizes Cairo as an immigrant and social outcast, and emphasizes this when talking to Spade. Her observation about Cairo, when she describes the man as “queer,” emphasizes his status as an outsider while slyly commenting on his sexual orientation (Hammett, Falcon 42). Spade acknowledges this, but does not give it further attention.

Despite Spade’s initial assessment of Cairo as a strange outsider in San Francisco, the detective works with him. While Spade never exactly considers Cairo a peer, the detective includes him in the case, and protects him from the police. While Spade is sometimes offended by Cairo’s lack of morals, this complaint is leveled at a number characters – immigrants and Americans alike. Spade’s reception of Cairo seems to be a tacit sign of acceptance, and an indication to readers of how Spade feels towards
immigrants at large. Spade’s interactions with Cairo are a way for Hammett to change the conversation about modernism in America.

The approach Hammett takes, of using Spade’s observations of and discussions with Cairo to prompt a transformation of his characterization from immigrant and outsider to a more assimilated social position will reappear. Hammett uses this same controlled approach in his discussion of the new and changing social spaces women occupy in post-World War I San Francisco. In 1925, when Hammett published “Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and “The Cutting of Couffignal,” he was beginning to create new social positions for women in his novels that paralleled those of contemporary American cities. It takes until The Maltese Falcon for him to present readers with fully realized women who express the challenges and benefits of modern femininity.

Chronologically, the first female character whom readers are introduced to in The Maltese Falcon is all-American, loyal Effie Perine. A “lanky sunburned girl,” she is often described as “playful,” with a “shiny boyish face” (Hammett, Falcon 1). Her unaffected appearance implies a level of innocence not seen in any other characters in the novel. Throughout the narrative, Effie is presented as a relatable character, and a relatively conservative example of modern femininity. The model employee, she is loyal to Spade, and dedicated to her job. Effie’s position as a secretary in the agency reflects a newfound level of independence for women. In spite of this level of social freedom, she shows some restraint, which aligns her with traditional social roles for women. Outside of work, she seems conservative, even living with and caring for her elderly mother. Effie, initially read as an example of a woman successfully balancing the increasing
freedom possible in postwar cities while maintaining respectability, is an essential facet of Hammett’s study of modernity.

However, Hammett’s initial characterization of Effie as an uncomplicated expression of modernity for women is not without challenges. Effie is clearly involved in a tryst with Spade, even as he juggles simultaneous relationships with Brigid, and with Mrs. Archer, his now-deceased partner’s wife. While Effie’s relationship with Spade is not explicit, he is familiar enough with her to reach “out a hand on her head, and smooth her hair away from its parting” (Hammett, Falcon 24). Although the relationship complicates the image of Effie as an unmarried and ‘pure’ single woman, Hammett constantly mitigates any moral threat by putting Effie in social conversation with femme fatale Brigid. Effie’s close relationship with her mother grounds her firmly in mainstream American society, but her more acceptably feminine social position and job are in direct contrast to Brigid’s career. Although unmarried and sexually liberated, Effie is unthreatening to Spade, as her femininity and sexuality are balanced by childlike traits and implied strong bond with her family.

Hammett creates Brigid O’Shaughnessy as a threatening counterpart to Effie’s more acceptable expressions of modern feminism. Although she is introduced to readers as a helpless woman, Spade is not misled Brigid’s supposed innocence and deceptively wholesome expressions of feminine charm. Spade realize she is a treacherous woman from their first meeting. His eyes linger on her “tall and pliantly slender” figure in their first meeting, as her “probing” eyes, red hair and lips, and ominously glistening teeth create an enticing and threatening image (Hammett, Falcon 4). As she implores him for help in searching for her sister, Spade wryly comments, “you won’t need much of
anybody’s help…You’re very good. It’s chiefly in your eyes…and that throb you get into your voice” (Hammett, *Falcon* 35). Brigid, a black-market businesswoman and seductress, draws Spade further into the dangerous search for the bejeweled falcon. Hammett’s characterization of Brigid is a tool through which he interrogates readers’ concerns about uncontrolled female sexuality, and the potentially threatening power of an independent woman.

A world traveler and treasure hunter, Brigid is an unsettlingly immoral woman, who quickly emerges as a threatening challenge to socially acceptable modern positions for women. Emboldened by the prospects available for independent women, she uses her identity as a woman to lie, cheat, and steal. A single woman with few morals or restraints, she embodies the stereotype of a dangerous and ‘loose’ modern woman. She actively weaponizes her sexuality from the opening passages of *The Maltese Falcon*, leveraging her ability to seduce men for her own benefit, and cutting a destructive path through the city, often taking men down with her. However, she is both limited and empowered by new opportunities. She seems to realize she is out of her depth when talking to Spade in a rare moment of honesty. “‘I am a liar…I have always been a liar’” (Spade’s response is typically abrupt, as he urges her “‘Don’t brag about it’”) (Hammett, *Falcon* 88). The culmination of Hammett’s earlier visions of threatening modern femininity in the Op stories, she is a clear example of the dangerous and alluring *femme fatale*. Although her behavior is not socially condoned, when Brigid is arrested at the end of the novel, it is not for her implied promiscuity, but for murdering Miles Archer. Her wholehearted embrace of newfound independence indirectly causes of her downfall.
Hammett’s success in discussing the challenges of modernity through the lens of women’s increasing social and sexual independence derives in part from his decision to divide the original prototype of 20th century femininity into two distinct characters. Through Spade’s relationships with Effie and Brigid, Hammett explores the differences between two forms of postwar feminism. Hammett’s decision to separate Effie’s independence from her sexual freedom stands out in the context of Brigid’s deliberate manipulation of sex and relationships. A ‘girl next door,’ Effie reasserts the power of tradition, while carving out a more independent identity through her affair with Spade. As a character, she balances the expectations of more conservative San Francisco society and her newfound social freedom (expressed here in her job and relationship with Spade), and thrives.

In Brigid, Spade has firsthand experience with the dangers a thoroughly modern woman who consciously rejects acceptable expressions of femininity in America. After repeatedly lying to Spade about her identity, she draws him more deeply into the case, exposing him to increasingly more dangerous situations. Even when he ends up with the falcon, he is in a perilous position, as both his personal and professional integrity come under attack, and Spade becomes a suspect in his partner’s murder. Despite this, Brigid is accepted – even embraced – by one man at the end of the novel. As Spade wryly comments, “You’re an angel, I’ll wait for you” (Hammett, *Falcon* 211).

As a female counterpart and complement to Effie’s all-American ingénue, Brigid is in constant conversation with Effie, though they are rarely in the same physical space in the novel. Where Effie is an independent and successful woman, Brigid is dangerous and deceitful. Through this split vision of modern femininity, Hammett refines the
traditional concept of American woman his predecessors favor, and perfects the characters he establishes earlier in his career through the Continental Op’s cases. Ultimately, Hammett offers no easy conclusions about modernity through his study of femininity. However, his portrayal of Effie and Brigid enriches his existing study of the challenges modern women face.

Hammett’s critique of modernity in America does not, however, stop with character studies. Equally important to the social changes he integrates, is his increasingly integrated use of technology in the novel. In *The Maltese Falcon*, an indication of modernity in cities is rapid industrialization, and increasingly accessible modern conveniences. By setting his mysteries in cities, Hammett consciously chooses a location where Spade will constantly be in close contact with machines, and experience firsthand the increasing mechanization of modern America. Hammett uses San Francisco as a space to test his theories about modernity, much as he does with the imagined island community of Couffignal in “The Gutting of Couffignal” (1925). Technology is now much more visible in the hands of American men and women in various forms, something not seen in Hammett’s earlier work.

*The Maltese Falcon* consistently echoes the tension of modernity, through a close study of guns, cars, and telephones, as part of a persistent interrogation of the assumed benefits of an increasingly mechanized urban lifestyle. Despite his initial and superficial pessimism about this increase in mechanization, signs of modernity which were once inconvenient or offensive to Hammett’s Continental Op become slowly integrated into Spade’s detective work. Hammett’s critique of technology, which begins with automobiles and machine guns, extends to telephones, which consistently interrupt
conversations or bring ominous messages. While Spade is seemingly resentful of telephones and taxies, they are integral to his case, and are clearly integrated in his lifestyle. Hammett’s critical exploration of guns, which begins in the Op stories, grows to encompass a discussion of the effect small technological advances and modernism are having in America. It culminates with a dramatic show of force in *The Maltese Falcon*. The rapid spread of technology, combined with increasing access to machines, acts to balance the power imbalance in San Francisco while challenging popular assumptions about the value of increased mechanization.

As another highly visible symbol of modernism in San Francisco, cars have undergone a transformation. Once a signifier of elite social status, as seen in “The Gutting of Couffignal,” cars are also easier for the general public to obtain in this novel. Taxis are increasingly used for the anonymity they provide, both to passengers and to Spade. Spade is acutely aware of this when Brigid goes missing, talking with Effie about the precautions he took. “‘Nobody followed her….I made sure of it before I put her in the cab, I rode a dozen blocks with her to be more sure, and I checked her another half-dozen blocks after I got out’” (Hammett, *Falcon* 116). This complicates Spade’s investigation: The same machines which allow him anonymity and easy passage from one part of the city to another are also used by criminals. Brigid recognizes the anonymity as well, and takes advantage of Spade’s offer to get her home safely, by having the cabbie make several stops on the way to her apartment. Her ability to blend in with her surroundings and to anonymously carry out her business gives her an advantage over Gutman and Cairo. Spade similarly relies on a network of cabbies over the course of the novel, most notably when Brigid disappears. Spade’s omnipresent network is
integrated into his everyday life, further complicating Spade’s relationship with modernity.

Spade has a similarly conflicted relationship with telephones, the second example of the broad reach of technology in *The Maltese Falcon*. As physical objects, Hammett presents phones as physical signifiers of wealth and access earlier in his career (seen in “The Gutting of Couffignal”), but they are now ubiquitous. Spade’s reliance upon a network of sources in his work makes constant proximity to a telephone a necessity, but he does not welcome the metallic ring that seems to be consistently disrupting scenes. In the opening pages of the novel, Spade goes to “the telephone-box beside his bathroom door,” and “scowl[s] at the black telephone-box” when it rings, “breathing irregularly while a dull flush [grows] in his cheeks” at the interference (Hammett, *Falcon* 16). This pessimistic literary treatment of technology is a continuation of what readers see in Hammett’s earlier Op stories, where he emphasizes the failure of telephones.

Telephones are only one aspect of the challenge Sade faces. Although, Spade’s resistance has been worn down, he remains suspicious. In *The Maltese Falcon*, characters only reluctantly accept telephones and telephone calls. This reticence is shared by many characters in the novel, although the most haunting example of this is when Effie talks to Brigid on the phone. Her fears are not unreasonable, since telephones are often used to deliver ominous messages. Within moments of answering the call, “her eyes became large…her mouth suddenly stretched wide and fearful….she sobbed and spun to face Spade” (Hammett, *Falcon* 159). This climactic moment in the narrative is an escalation of previously-established doubt about the value of telephones and modernity. Through his earlier stories, Hammett’s detectives rebel against machines in
The Maltese Falcon, Hammett turns his attention to man’s inability to control technology, and the unpredictable ramifications of increasingly connected society. Although Hammett continues to struggle with these signifiers, The Maltese Falcon is the most complete imagining of his social agenda, written for a wide audience, while still retaining the cautious optimism Hammett and Spade share.

Hammett’s study of the complex effects of modernity in American cities through mechanization becomes increasingly nuanced as his career progresses. Although guns are increasingly accessible – Spade and Cairo are perpetually armed – Hammett focuses on pistols to further explore the challenge of increased mechanization in America. Hammett interrogates modern technology through men and their relationships with their weapons. Although Wilmer Cook, wealthy businessman Casper Gutman’s sometime-bodyguard and gun-for-hire, seems dangerous, he is more often at odds with his gun than in control. Silent for the bulk of the narrative, his lack of control over his pistol speaks loudly. A sign of power and modernity, “black pistols [are] gigantic in his small hands” (Hammett, Falcon 171). When he tries to threaten Spade, the detective handily disarms him (Hammett, Falcon 121). Ultimately, Wilmer’s gun provides him with nothing more than a false sense of security. Through Wilmer’s interactions with the detective, Hammett makes a pointed warning about the dangers of modern technology, implying the increasing accessibility of weapons is only superficially an equalizing force. Hammett’s pessimistic representation of guns in San Francisco threatens to overtake the narrative, and casts a long shadow on his discussion of modernity at large.

A final aspect of Hammett’s argument is about modernity comes with the clear integration and grounding social presence of the police force in The Maltese Falcon.
This literary treatment of police in society represents part of a larger shift in Hammett’s ideology as his career progresses. While his early stories featuring the Op included a few bumbling policemen (Pat Reddy, an Irish policeman who works alongside the Op), and *Red Harvest* becomes a platform for Hammett to discuss corrupt authority, *The Maltese Falcon* presents a different social perception of police and the law. Instead of corrupt and omnipotent, they are often present over the course of Spade’s investigation. Hammett’s changing presentation of the police is part of the larger shift in his novel as he gradually comes to a more measured understanding of modernity, one which is less threatening, and more optimistic.

Hammett’s portrayal of immigrants, previously seen as living on the fringe of society, has been rewritten in this novel. While the Op made a deliberate effort to accept outsiders, and to understand women’s place in post-WWI society, Spade has a more neutral approach. Unlike the Op, who makes concerted efforts to reconfigure his treatment of outsiders, Spade is often dispassionate from the outset, preferring to judge people on their actions. Although San Francisco remains far less than an ideal world in Spade’s eyes, it is a redemptive city with new social possibilities for people previously rejected by mainstream society. Whereas previous iterations of Hammett’s detective mysteries see the Continental Op pushing back against increasing mechanization, Sam Spade has incorporated it into his lifestyle. This level of social integration is not the only shift in Hammett’s exploration of modernity.

Hammett’s theories on and treatment of three aspects of modernism coalesce in a single narrative in *The Maltese Falcon*. As one of his most widely-read novels, it is not only a tightly written mystery, but also a call for readers to observe and challenge the
potentially dangerous outcome of modernity in American cities. As the United States moves further from the social upheaval and physical trauma of World War I, Hammett continues to illustrate the effect of modernity in America. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett shows Sam Spade easily interacting with the technological advances his earlier detective (the Continental Op) strongly resisted (and resented). Hammett also creates more fully realized female characters, placing modern women (Effie and Brigid) in conversation with each other through their interactions with Spade. While both are independent women, they are not socially exiled for their social status, but are thriving in the city. Likewise, immigrants and social outliers (like Joel Cairo and Wilmer) are spared social exile: The social platforms available to them are greatly expanded from Hammett’s earlier work.
Chapter V.
Conclusion

Dashiell Hammett is well known for his crime novels in the 1920’s, 1930’s, and 1940’s. While he is recognized as a popular pulp fiction novelist, however, he is not acknowledged as an author whose work critiques modernism in modern American cities. A close investigation of his novels reveals the author’s ultimate goal was not simply to entertain the masses absorbing pulp fiction in the first half of the 20th Century, but to simultaneously promote his more liberal social ideology, and expressed his concerns about modernity. Tracking Hammett’s changing literary treatment of immigrants, his increasingly sympathetic portrait of changing social spaces for women in post-World War I cities, and the often-disturbing images of increased mechanization in cities, provides readers and scholars with a way to monitor his changing relationship with modernity.

While Hammett’s earlier stories, including “The Scorched Face,” “Dead Yellow Women,” and “The Gutting of Couffignal” are effectively ground zero for these theories, they expand, becoming anxiety-ridden dialogues when Red Harvest is published. In The Maltese Falcon, the final novel discussed in this paper, his vision of modernity in America is unenthusiastic, but is more moderate. Although he is still anxious about the future of American cities in the face of modernism, he nevertheless continues his discussion of modernism through a demanding discussion of the three indicators
(changing social spaces for women, increasing integration of immigrants in American society, and mechanization in cities), urging cautious optimism through detective and everyman Sam Spade.

While critics (e.g. David Herrmann) have studied masculinity in his work, and post-World War I politics (e.g. Randall Stevenson and Trudi Tate), and have at times discussed the implications of violence in his novels, few have taken into account these novels as expressions of Hammett’s personal experience with modernism in America. These stories and novels are undeniably autobiographical: Both the Continental Op and Detective Sam Spade are echoes of author Dashiell Hammett’s personal experience. Spade and the Op both have cases heavily influenced by Hammett’s, as confirmed by Hammett himself (Hammett 343). It follows that the detectives’ characterization in particular is influenced by Hammett’s view of himself, and of his time with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. One of the most memorable cases Hammett was assigned as a detective with The Pinkerton National Detective Agency was to break up a labor strike (Ward 8). Readers will recognize this as a plot device at the heart of his 1929 novel Red Harvest. These plot similarities are the first of many parallels between Hammett’s personal life and ideology, and those of his detectives. The seeds of Hammett’s liberal political views can be seen clearly from his earliest work. As his writing career died down, impacted by his arrest for being a Communist sympathizer, he continued to be a politically active, Communist sympathizer (Zumoff 78).

As previously mentioned, this paper discusses specific signifiers of his political activism. The paper tracks Hammett’s discussion of modernity through three signifiers over the course of three short stories (“Dead Yellow Women,” “The Scorched Face,” and
“The Gutting of Couffignal”), and two novels (Red Harvest and The Maltese Falcon). In each case, I turn my focus to the evolving treatment of immigrants in Hammett’s literature (as Hammett moves from the dark alleyways of Chinatown and isolates the immigrant population in “Dead Yellow Women”), and to the instances of their full integration in cases (seen in the characterization of Joel Cairo in The Maltese Falcon). Hammett’s interest in the changing treatment of immigrants is complemented by his changing depiction of the social practices acceptable for women in post-World War I cities.

While the Op’s first few cases see him exploring the ramifications of women who leave home, and creating a safe space for them to return to within acceptable society, his later novels portray women striking a balance between their increasingly independent lifestyles outside of the home, and traditional societal expectations for behavior. While Ruth and Myra in “The Scorched Face,” leave home under a haze of distrust, Myra (the surviving sister) is accepted back into her family at the conclusion of the novel. Hammett makes a deliberate choice as the narrative comes to a close, not socially condemning Ruth for rejecting conservative social morays, and for committing suicide. This is another significant break in his characterization of women, and in his discussion of the changing social spaces for women in post-World War I America. While Hammett gradually diminishes her place in the narrative, she is not actively excised. By the time Hammett writes about Brigid O’Shaughnessy, the now-iconic femme fatale, and Effie Perine, Sam Spade’s amorous secretary, he has created two new and fully-formed expressions of modern femininity. Both women embrace their sexuality, and live and
work independently, but are not socially or morally condemned for their unconventionality.

The final aspect of modernity which I studied was Hammett’s liberal use and observations of the effect of increasing mechanization in cities. While his early stories present the increasing presence of technology in cities (cars, telephones, and machine guns) as a rarity, and a sign of wealth or social status, this changes rapidly. In *Red Harvest*, the destructive power of technology is alarmingly evident: Cars race in and out of city streets, ferrying heavily armed gangsters from one crime scene to another. Between their increased access to cars, and the glut of machine guns filling the city limits, gangsters are almost invincible. Despite the horrifying number of murders occurring all around him, the Op remains optimistic about the potential of mechanization. He is rescued from a gunman when he is able to make a brief telephone call to the police.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, machines and technology are more fully integrated into the narrative, although Spade remains uneasy about the encroaching influence of technology in everyday urban life. His message around modernity shifts as his characters adapt to life several decades later in postwar San Francisco.

As illustrated above, the specific signifiers Hammett tracks are in fact a way for him to broach a broader discussion of modernity in American cities. By establishing three specific signifiers, and tracking his detectives’ relationship with each over the course of a novel, Hammett is able to express his own relationship with modernity as a part of the narrative, and open a discussion with his readers. The Continental Op stories and novel are useful in this context, as the detective acts as a control: A man whose reactions can be tracked, and whose relationship with modernity can be more easily
measured. The Op’s anonymity provides him flexibility: He is stand-in for the average American male. Furthermore, the Op’s decisions about what aspects of modernity he will integrate into his own life serve as a point of comparison for readers.

Although Hammett constructs Spade as a distinct detective, he a man cut from the same mold as the Op. This allows Hammett to continue the conversation about modernity in America several years later in his career, and express his changed views. In a departure from the Continental Op’s suspicion of and disparaging comments about immigrants, new spaces for women in modern cities, and technological advances, Spade is resigned to the changes. Joel Cairo, a clear outsider who would have been excluded to the narrative perimeter in an earlier version of the mystery, is fully integrated into the mystery. Effie Perine and Brigid O’Shaughnessy, while depicted as departures from traditional modest depictions of women, are not socially corrupt. This is another shift which separates Hammett’s writing from his predecessors. Portraying women who are active members of society while rejecting traditional roles is an approach he consistently refines throughout his career. Eventually, Spade reaches a new level of acceptance of technology in modern America. While he never wholeheartedly accepts mechanization into his life, he begins to take advantage of technology in whatever capacity he can. Through Spade, Hammett begins to express his cautious optimism for modernism in America.

Hammett’s changing impressions of modernism in America, while initially pessimistic and alarmist, gradually take shape, becoming more optimistic over the course of his career. His early stories establish his literary style, while popularizing his name in the pulp fiction genre. In the Op stories, he highlights three signifiers of modernity he
will revisit over the course of his career. Immigrants, initially sidelined and isolated in American cities, are gradually reimagined through Hammett’s mysteries, becoming integral to the social and literal narrative. Similarly, the social spaces women occupy are investigated, beginning with the traditional two-dimensional representation of women as wives/mothers, before advancing to express the more varied social possibilities for women in post-World War I American cities. Brigid O’Shaughnessy, an iconic *femme fatale*, is the ultimate example of this, and is a means of discussing changing social spaces women occupy in cities. The final signifier, the spread of technology and mechanization, offers more insight into his changing relationship with modernity. As these signifiers develop in tandem, they offer valuable insight into the dramatic social upheaval taking place in American cities. A close study of the novels is invaluable, as the social commentary underlying Hammett’s novels provides interesting insight into his changing relationship with modernity.


