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From Decadence to Degeneration: *The Big Sleep*, its forceful plot, and a femme fatale ‘still in the dangerous twenties’

Dr. Larry Shillock

“*She has a beautiful little body, hasn’t she?
 You ought to see mine*”¹

Vivian Sternwood

‘*All hereditary illnesses are sisters*’²

Bénédict Augustin Morel

Tasked with naming an exemplary decadent artist, scholars often turn to Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). In his epigrams, essays, plays, and The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), Wilde calls for an ‘art for art’s sake’ that underscores a broader assault on nineteenth-century lifeways. As his 1895 trial on gross indecency demonstrates, however, British society refused to accept aesthetics as a domain accountable to beauty alone or to condone the new masculine identities that his work championed. A modern novel, Dorian Gray anticipates both refusals, insofar as it shows the protagonist’s pursuit of sensation to be intensely compelling while warning that his decadent experience, however wittily expressed or secured by wealth, carries with it the potential for physical degeneration. Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep (1939) has long been treated as a terse, hardboiled novel by readers, and rightly so. Its mean streets—built up from the example of Dashiell Hammett—would therefore seem to be far removed from decadents like Wilde and the airy experiments of The Yellow Book.³ But Chandler (1888-1959), a Chicago-born American who came of age in turn-of-the-century London, is no stranger to the decadent movement;⁴ and his dark realism recalls Wilde’s project by depicting a set of characters whose lives of static privilege compel a descent into a criminal underworld. For Dorian Gray as well as for the Sternwood family, then, decadent experience leads to dissolution, and dissolution—however much it might resonate with social critique—compels personal and narrative degeneration. In the reading of The Big Sleep that follows, I return decadence and the science of degeneration to interpretive prominence so that the force⁵ driving Chandler’s strange double plot and its femme fatale’s criminal designs may be conceived anew.

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¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), p. 73.

² Erwin H. Ackerknecht, *A Short History of Psychiatry*, trans. by Sula Wolff, (London: Hafner Publishing, 1968), p. 56.

³ *The Yellow Book* was a London literary periodical, published quarterly, from 1894 to 1897. Despite its brief existence, artists, writers, aesthetes, decadents, and forward-thinking cosmopolitans of many stripes read it avidly.

⁴ In September 1900, Chandler entered Dulwich College, where he studied Classics and Languages. Aided by his Irish mother and her family, he embraced British life, becoming a British subject in 1907. During the century’s first decade, he demonstrated an uncanny ability to find his way to centers of art and decadence, including Paris, in 1905; Munich; London, in 1907; and Bloomsbury, in 1908. Writing to James Sandoe on 10 August 1947, Chandler recalls hearing George Bernard Shaw ‘give a lecture in London on Art for Art’s sake’. Frank MacShane, *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 96. Additional letters to Hamish Hamilton (22 April 1949) and Dale Warren (9 July 1949) address his knowledge of Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde. Unsurprisingly, these letters are marred by considerable homophobia. See MacShane, p. 171 and p. 185, respectively.

⁵ Responding to Jacques Derrida, Peter Brooks holds out the possibility that the force informing narrative progression may be understood. By so doing, he brings the energy associated with plotting to the forefront, a project I will extend to the causes that inform a femme fatale’s actions. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. xiv.

The Space of a Decadent Family

Wealth is both subject and subtext throughout *The Big Sleep*. Its tripartite exposition opens inside the Sternwood residence in West Hollywood. Dressed for a meeting with what he terms ‘four million dollars’⁶—real, metonymic wealth during the depression—Philip Marlowe, 33, surveys the ostentatious household. Chandler is a master of spatial description, even this early in his career, and his first-person narrator-detective takes readers down a two-story hall and, his gaze approximating a painting’s vanishing point, through glass doors, across a manicured yard, and past a garage.⁷ Marlowe’s overview slows but does not stop there: ‘Beyond the garage were some decorative trees trimmed as carefully as poodle dogs. Beyond them a large greenhouse with a domed roof. Then more trees and beyond everything the solid, uneven, comfortable line of the foothills.’⁸ Such a mannered space occupies his internal monologue for good reason, since the constrained estate will serve as counterpoint to its less-constrained inhabitants.

The first of these is Carmen Sternwood, 21, the youngest of two daughters. Small and delicate, she wears slacks and sports short hair, her appearance a curious masculine-femininity that culminates in ‘too taut lips’, ‘little sharp predatory teeth’, and wan features that ‘didn’t look too healthy’.⁹ Freed from a mother’s supervision and emboldened by a father’s allowance, she enjoys considerable personal and social mobility. Readers new to the novel cannot know that Carmen has pride of place in the opening scene because, as a murderer, she instigates the narrative. Despite knowing her background, scholars routinely treat the meeting from Marlowe’s perspective and thereby miss its function as a hardboiled set piece: that is, as the initial encounter of the femme-fatale criminal and her detective adversary.¹⁰ Responding to Carmen’s interest, Marlowe reveals his profession. Once she grows dissatisfied by his patter, she accuses him of being a tease—quite the gender inversion—and then takes her thumb, which is ‘thin and narrow like an extra finger’, and ‘bit it and sucked it slowly, turning it around in her mouth like a baby with a comforter’.¹¹ Taking the measure of a stranger is one thing; intimating fellatio with an older man quite another. Like her femme-fatale predecessors in Depression-era realism,

⁶ Chandler, p. 3.

⁷ In a superb account of literary realism, Brooks argues for the predominance of sight in works that would represent reality. It follows that novels promote the practice of ‘seeing through the roofs and facades of the real to the private lives behind and beneath’. *Realist Vision*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁸ Chandler, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Hollywood screenwriters, by contrast, often signaled their understanding of such a meeting’s importance in the crime films of the day. See, e.g., *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1945) in this regard.

¹¹ Chandler, p. 6.

Carmen seduces the sleuth to misdirect his attention and compromise his understanding. Her double ploy works when he concludes, disparagingly, that thought must be difficult for her. Readers who see as the detective does can easily pass over the issue of whether, as a child-woman, she is undergoing or mimicking regression. Further signs of what will become a narrative-long decline occur when Marlowe, stunned by Carmen's collapsing into his arms, tells the family butler that he "ought to wean her. She looks old enough".¹²

The second person Marlowe encounters, General Guy Sternwood, is the ostensible reason for his visit. Amply foreshadowed, their meeting occurs beyond the garage in a greenhouse with a dramatic domed roof. Its architectural drama is, however, no match for a jungle of orchids sporting "nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men".¹³ By intimating wealth and alluding to the decadence associated with such novels as *À Rebours* (1884), Chandler establishes the exposition and threatens to destabilize it.¹⁴ His references to meat, fingers, and death suggest that the space poses threats to species' boundaries, if not also to life. Individually, the wheelchair-bound patriarch recalls the officer, perhaps from the Mexican-American war, whose portrait hangs above a fireplace mantel in the entranceway, but Chandler distinguishes his vitality from the languor of the general by likening the latter's features to 'a leaden mask, with the bloodless lips and the sharp nose and the sunken temples and the outward-turning earlobes of approaching dissolution'.¹⁵ An expert in physiognomy would delight in such symptoms but would see them as signs of actual more so than 'approaching dissolution'. What matters most here are a decadent milieu and the causes of an aristocrat's decline.

As the smell of orchids fill the room—an odor that Sternwood sternly likens to prostitutes—a butler offers Marlowe a late-morning brandy. When the general was able to drink (and, presumably, buy sex workers), he enjoyed his liquor topped by champagne, much as a decadent would. Marlowe reaches for a cigarette, only to stop, but the general insists that he too will enjoy the smoke and 'sniffed at it like a terrier at a rathole'. Data crucial to grasping his precarious health follow: "A nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy", Sternwood confesses, before adding, "You are looking at a

¹² Chandler, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴ *À Rebours* played a prominent role in *Dorian Gray* by inciting Dorian's decadent pursuits, in effect compelling his degeneration. As Wilde wrote in a letter of 15 April 1892, "The book in *Dorian Gray* is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans's *À Rebours*, which you can get at any French booksellers'. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, (New York: Harcourt, 1962), p. 313. Aristocratic decline is so prevalent a force in modern novels as to offer an array of uses to later writers.

¹⁵ Chandler, p. 9.

very dull survival of a rather gaudy life, a cripple paralyzed in both legs and with only half of his lower belly”’. The power of vice (i.e., in a ‘gaudy life’) has enduring effects (on a man’s decline toward death).¹⁶ Here, the novel’s account of the marked transition from decadence to degeneration is less personal than discursive.¹⁷ Like evolution, with which it shared a conception of time, the theory of degeneration grew out of a concern with extinction as proposed by the pioneering geologist Sir Charles Lyell. In its early guises, the term signaled variation. By mid-century, after French naturalists used the idea of dissolution in novels and experimental medicine investigated human decline in earnest, the term came to mean atavism or savage regression. At the center of these changes stood Bénédict Augustin Morel, whose studies showed that persons sicken in response to working conditions, poor hygiene, and chemical stimulants. Their illnesses took many forms, including epilepsy, hysteria, imbecility, insanity, and nymphomania. What made *dégénérescence* degenerative was its capacity to impact not only the organism itself, but its progeny as well. A man’s alcoholism, it follows, could compel his son and daughter to become neurotic. Their children, in turn, might display worse symptoms (should the transmissible germ not skip a generation). What was once a healthy stock could thus regress through morbid deviation, extending the defects generationally and, as critics following the Lamarckian logic insisted, socially.¹⁸ Writ large, degeneration was thus a progressive condition with regressive outcomes.

As the general licks his lips over Marlowe’s brandy and cigarettes, the exposition sharpens. Readers learn that the detective once worked for District Attorney Taggart Wilde, a man with ‘the frank daring smile of an Irishman’,¹⁹ and whose chief investigator recommended him to Sternwood. It would be quite a leap to go from D. A. Wilde to Oscar Wilde, from the narrative present in Los Angeles to the London past, if the novel did not itself do so. First, it emphasizes insubordination as an aspect of Marlowe’s and the general’s character. The two daughters, moreover, are initially characterized as “‘both

¹⁶ Chandler, p. 10.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault’s account of how ‘Western man’ changed into ‘a confessing animal’ has received considerable attention from scholars. Less discussed is his subsequent claim that a ‘metamorphosis of literature’ occurred when persons linked identity to spoken sexual secrets, as medico-scientific discourses required. The novel, as arguably the most social of genres, routinely incorporates scientific discourses and insists upon both their characterological and narrative force. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 59.

¹⁸ For evidence of the hysteria that degeneration theory produced during Chandler’s life, see Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895). A fine account of the role of degeneration in medicine can be found in Janet Oppenheim’s *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Chandler, pp. 137-38.

pretty and both wild”²⁰. For her part, Carmen enjoys the pleasures of class mixing—no small matter at Wilde’s trial—and Vivian produces three failed marriages before turning thirty.²¹ From here, the novel’s decadent tableau expands to encompass blackmail, a pornography business (the owner of which Chandler specifies to be homosexual), gambling, illegal drug use, and more blackmail—all subjects that Wilde made his own in *Dorian Gray* and elsewhere. No Victorian, the general ends the meeting by giving the detective two jobs: the first concerns Arthur Gwynn Geiger, who is the second man to blackmail Carmen; the second, merely implied, involves the puzzling disappearance of Vivian’s husband, Rusty Regan.

The last meeting of Marlowe and a family member occurs after Vivian calls Marlowe to her bedroom. The gaze that observed the landscape now lingers over a seductive drunk who seeks, rather than supplies, information. At issue is Regan’s disappearance, and at the back of it, Carmen’s violent actions. First-time readers of the novel do not know that Regan is one-month dead—a fact obscured from the diegesis until its second climax—and Vivian is anxious to learn if Marlowe is tasked with finding him. He is not, a fact that ends her contentious, and lie-ridden interrogation of him. He leaves the house persuaded that the scornful general’s assessment of his daughters is apt. Outside, he views the hills that first held his gaze. Looking past them, he sees the oilfield from which the family derived its wealth. In the liminal space between the house and his office, between the job and its beginning, he reflects on how the family established a business only to move away, leaving the derricks and their sumps out of sight and, presumably, mind. Readers unfamiliar with the American idiom might miss the point of his movements, whether physical or visual. Specifically, Marlowe ‘heads south’ through the house and ‘goes down’ to meet the general, two phrases evocative of decline. Chandler’s careful setup thus recalls the past—a man’s corrosive appetites and subsequent decline, a family’s source of wealth—only to obscure it, a process of recognition and erasure²² that the Sternwood women experience first-hand. Arrogantly, the detective then misreads his job as being uncomplicated rather than vice-ridden, forgetting that the

²⁰ Chandler, p. 12.

²¹ Wilde’s second son was named Vyvyan, which American audiences might easily pronounce like Vivian.

²² In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida borrows the notion of ‘sous rature’ (under erasure) from Martin Heidegger. As translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recounts, the move enables Derrida to draw attention to the ways that signs, including individual words, account for and, soon thereafter, efface their origins. The traces that persist may be indicated by using crossed-out words. A cross-through shows that a sign is necessary but insufficient both to the process of thought and the problems of being. Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface’, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. xiv-xvii. With respect to *The Big Sleep*, Chandler introduces the Sternwoods—accounting for their presence—so that he may largely deny their narrative importance in favor of his protagonist-hero’s search for truth amid the traces of their language and decadent behavior.

general compared it to “removing morbid growths from people’s backs”²³, an operation sure to involve the illness of more than one patient.

* * *

At Loose in the City of Angels

Having si(gh)ted the Sternwood estate, with its grotesque patriarch and sex-addled daughters, Chandler turns to places in Los Angeles where other decadents can be found. The first is Rare Books and De Luxe Editions, Arthur Gwynn Geiger’s establishment. Its storefront is unimpressive; its interior, well-appointed. As part of casing the joint, Marlowe assumes a manner of fussy femininity. Geiger is not in, but a customer reveals that the sitting area obscures a door. There is little reason for the detective to feign a homosexual stereotype, beyond seeking a laugh and nodding to the theme of decadence, since neither Geiger nor his assistant know who he is. It is no less necessary to hide books—unless they are pornographic. Concealing them speaks to their influence, a visible power so feared in the nineteenth century that reading causes Emma Bovary’s descent into adultery and Dorian Gray’s pursuit of erotic lawlessness. As these cautionary tales insist, it is a short step from a book’s incitements to pursuing the ecstasy of erotic love, or encamping in a dockside opium den with prostitutes. Marlowe fails to meet Geiger, but he does elicit a description of him from another bookseller. A declining figure, he is forty or so and fat, “goes without a hat, affects a knowledge of antiques and hasn’t any. Oh yes. His left eye is glass.”²⁴

The novel’s set-up in place, Chandler has Marlowe stake out the storefront as men and women—under the eyes of the cops—leave the store. Here, near Las Palmas, city dwellers go about their lives juiced by a book or two; Geiger services their desire; and gambling dens ring with boozy laughter. Historians of hardboiled narrative make much of the corruption that exists when police are bought off and judges spend evenings with bootleggers and criminals. In this respect, they follow Chandler’s elegiac conclusion to “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944).²⁵ But such an approach can conceive of corruption as a fact of modern life—a mere reality effect—rather than as threatening and

²³ Chandler, p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁵ “The Simple Art of Murder”, *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 977-92 (pp. 91-92). The best critique of the essay is by David Glover and Cora Kaplan, who argue that it is ‘an attempt to moralize an amoral or lawless public world, keeping intact its genealogies of masculine privilege ... but always discriminating *within* the hyper-masculine demotic, weeding out the degenerates and the truly vicious underclass’. See ‘Guns in the House of Culture? Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular’, *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 213-24 (p. 215).

consequential.²⁶ Chandler's point, even this early in *The Big Sleep*, is darker. He intimates that family, setting, and behavior combine to create character, a process that the Sternwoods individually and collectively exemplify.

In narrative terms, the problem for readers is that stakeouts and a tailing, largely inert parts of the action, will not compel interest much beyond showing a detective at work, and so Chandler reintroduces his femme fatale. Carmen arrives at Geiger's Laverne Terrace residence, eager and alone, having navigated darkness in a pounding rain. Let inside, she ingests ether and laudanum until, slipping in and out of consciousness, she sits naked before a hidden camera, poised to be blackmailed anew. Geiger's flash photograph makes her scream: 'It had a sound of half-pleasurable shock, an accent of drunkenness, an overtone of pure idiocy', Marlowe relates from outside the home, adding, 'It made me think of men in white and barred windows and hard cots with leather wrist and ankle straps fastened to them.'²⁷ In his flash reaction to the flashbulb, the detective grounds a young woman's character in vice—recalling her father's unsolicited confession—and predicts its degenerative and spatial futures.²⁸ The storyline, as if uncomfortable with a woman's decadent experimentation, pivots from her state of mind to a gumshoe's predictions, and what must *truly* matter: a detective's murder investigation. Readers would be wise to exercise less interpretive haste, since Carmen, not Marlowe, is at the scene's center, and it is her role to be its victim and agent.

Having broken into the home, Marlowe sees Geiger three-shots dead. Carmen, sitting motionless in a tall chair, is dissolute; her mask-like demeanor suggests that asylum-life may not be far in the future. Indeed, so great is her drug intake that ether can be smelled on her breath from several feet away. Marlowe investigates the crime now and later, after returning Carmen to the family estate. The novel doubles down on the investigation of the body because 'murder is an act of infinite cruelty'²⁹ that must be redressed, but also because the femme fatale, her contributions to the action done, must return to the domestic sphere. Since Chandler is more comfortable with men than women, and certainly with men like Marlowe more so than men like Geiger, he has his detective-hero erase the femme fatale's plotting and resume control of the action. Alone in the Geiger residence, he comments on its Chinese art and the Japanese prints so prized

²⁶ For an account of the predictive power of realistic description, see Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 141-48 (p. 142).

²⁷ Chandler, p. 39.

²⁸ The word 'flash' can signify 'an association with the underworld'. See the commentary in Raymond Chandler, *The Annotated Big Sleep*, ed. by Owen Hill, Pamela Jackson, and Anthony Dean Rizzuto, (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 2018), p. 151.

²⁹ 'The Simple Art of Murder', p. 990.

by fin-de-siècle decadents. Not to be outdone by his character, Chandler demonstrates a command of realistic description by cataloging the household's rugs, cushions, divan, lamps, desk, chairs, more cushions, and discarded clothes—all from Marlowe's perspective.

Complicating this transfer of narrative authority, a second man with ties to Carmen, Owen Taylor, dies that night. Taylor, the family chauffeur, once took her to get married in Yuma. Scorning his offer, she chose to enjoy their illegal travel across state lines and, as Bernie Ohls, the chief investigator for D. A. Wilde, recounts, “to kick a few high ones off the bar and have herself a party”.³⁰ Taylor is thus the romantic in the relationship, and she its hard-living decadent. Such gender inversions extend to Vivian who, dressed in ‘a mannish shirt and tie’, meets Marlowe to discuss her sister on the morning after Geiger's murder. Intent on impeding his search for Regan as she cleans up after Carmen, she surveys his office-apartment thoughtfully: “Well, you *do* get up”, she says, before referring to Marcel Proust, whom she labels “a connoisseur in degenerates”.³¹ Connoisseurship is apparently in no short supply here.

Having opened the meeting by mentioning Regan's disappearance, Vivian asks Marlowe to handle yet another blackmailing of her sister.³² Agreeing, he returns to Laverne Terrace, where Carmen greets him by sucking her thumb. She again tries to seduce him, but drug use and exhaustion cause a loss of focus. Her ‘smile would wash off like water off sand’, Marlowe observes, in a dissolute metaphor, ‘and her pale skin had a harsh granular texture under the stunned and stupid blankness of her eyes.’³³ The detective can perhaps be forgiven for having little patience with an adult who acts like a spoiled child, but readers should take the decadent intent behind the metaphor of having been ‘spoiled’ seriously. Chandler intends that her signs of decline be read as evidence that a quite-young person is neither what she once was developmentally, nor what she should be.

Despite being so sick that she gets likened to a convention-drunk, Carmen returns to the crime scene on her own initiative and in search of the film. Upon arrival, she is savvy enough to bide her time until she learns what Marlowe has uncovered. When he asks who killed Geiger, she changes tactics, as a femme fatale will do, and devolves into a

³⁰ Chandler, p. 59.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

³² Eighty years removed from the Great Depression, readers can easily miss the fact that pictures of an influential family's naked daughter would be especially scandalous against the backdrop of largely Catholic California.

³³ Chandler, p. 76.

fit of hysteria that reminds him of ‘rats behind the wainscoting’ and readers of her rat-sniffing father.³⁴ Two aspects of character vie for attention; the first, aptly enough, is physical decline. But more is evident in her presence than that she is coming out of an ether, opium, and alcohol haze. Because readers of hardboiled literature respect the detective’s centrality, they—like Marlowe—misconstrue Carmen as being peripheral to the action. They thus elide the fact that it took willpower—each term being operative—to assemble, from an evening’s broken memories, what she had done and then drive across town. Mobile and smart, she responds to being questioned by Marlowe with three lies of omission and seven of commission, no small accomplishment for someone who watched a man bleed out at her feet hours earlier. Acutely aware of how she will be seen, she then plays up her emotions, acting as if a hysteric, so that the sleuth who threatens her freedom may think she is too far gone to be an adversary. Throughout, Carmen assumes an elusive identity, since she functions, in Marlowe’s too-quick estimation, as the general’s daughter, a degenerate-in-the-making intent upon damaging herself and others. To a detective’s way of thinking, she is largely separate from the crime rather than central to it, and therefore present but absent. Contrary to his as well as readers’ horizon of expectations,³⁵ however, she controls much of the interrogation and so, by withholding crucial information, advances a plot at risk of its own enervation.

The entrance of Eddie Mars means that two sisters, each an impediment and a criminal, will share the action with male antagonists. A wealthy gambler, Mars ‘looked hard’, Marlowe observes, ‘not [with] the hardness of the tough guy. More like the hardness of a well-weathered horseman’.³⁶ Carmen knows the gambler, West Hollywood being a small town, and she gathers her resources and eyes him directly. Hardboiled, he responds with his only smile in the scene and a shrug. The indeterminate signs are resolved when he says she “‘can dust’”.³⁷ Once the men are alone, the plot returns to the crimes at hand. Mars explains that he owns the house; Geiger is its tenant; and the girl is unknown to him. The blood on the floor could be something that a stranger did. Marlowe

³⁴ Ibid., p. 79. Peter J. Rabinowitz contends that ‘Chandler’s vision can be crystallized’ in this twice-used phrase. He adds that ‘the apparent respectability of the world masks a fundamental core of horror: corruption, perversity, death’. It may be more accurate to say that such a ‘fundamental core’ is a causal chain. See ‘Rats Behind the Wainscoting: Politics, Convention, and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 22.2 (1980), pp.224-45 (p. 231).

³⁵ For the ways that readers are predisposed by genre to read, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 23.

³⁶ Chandler, p. 81. Of course, Mars’s contrast case is General Sternwood, an ill-weathered horseman who, late in life, becomes a father, only to be crippled while playing polo.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 83. Carmen leaves Marlowe *in the dust* twice in as many scenes, an idiomatic phrase that speaks to the car culture of California as well as to the femme fatale’s mobility. She is thus to be read as Car-men, which is to say as being fast and in possession of considerable gender fluidity.

suspects that Mars's influence with the cops extends to Los Angeles, but even a well-connected, Lugar-holding racketeer is vulnerable once victimless crimes like pornography and gambling devolve into blackmail and murder. Neither man wants the police alerted, and so they end in a standoff, but not before Marlowe, pressing a point, asks about Mrs. Mars, who is said to have gone missing with Regan. Correctly, he reads the ensuing silence as a threat.

Carmen may have left but she is not home, since servants do its feminine labor, and her father's disdain for his daughters is no secret. Instead, she becomes a detective on the trail of the compromising photos. Readers learn that Carmen and her first blackmailer, Joe Brody, were lovers, which explains how Carmen knows where Brody lives. She enters the apartment by pushing him back, 'a little revolver against his lean brown lips'.³⁸ No society dame, despite having the requisite wealth, she names him as Geiger's killer. Brody reaches for the gun; her shot just misses.³⁹ Carmen may be slight and ill and given to strange oral gestures, but she is deadly. Now, 'giggling and hissing', with 'a little froth at the corners of her mouth', she demands the pictures before, readers presume, an actual fit commences.⁴⁰

By returning Brody, a blackmailer, to the narrative, Chandler does more than bring the first half of his novel closer to its resolution; he brings Carmen closer to the action. Brody knows her as the family's chief liability. Complicating matters, he is African American. Carmen's class mixing with Taylor is thus a variation on real miscegenation, and both express her erotic freedom-cum-decadence, particularly in the context of race relations in early-20thC America, where anti-miscegenation laws were commonplace.⁴¹ Marlowe gets her pictures; Brody, for his part, is killed by Geiger's much-younger lover, whom Marlowe will corral for the police. With these developments, the job that the detective was hired to do is done, and a check for five hundred dollars, sealing the deal, is in the mail.

My abbreviated plot summary notwithstanding, the novel is not done. Chandler goes to considerable length in Marlowe's ensuing meeting with the police and District Attorney Wilde to identify the murderers and their motives, a wrapping-up process that belongs to a mystery's penultimate scene, whether classical or hardboiled. Such scenes

³⁸ Chandler, p. 102.

³⁹ Gruesomely, a 22-caliber bullet goes through a person's skull once, before deflecting about the brain.

⁴⁰ Chandler, p. 105.

⁴¹ Readers can disavow crime and still hold that Brody's attempt to grab the gun from Carmen is correct in an America where lynching of African American men was a real threat throughout the early 20thC, especially in circumstances where any type of relationship with a white woman was even suspected.

affirm a detective's mastery over criminals, right domains that crimes have wronged, and prepare readers for the moral closure of the denouement. Contrary to convention, Chandler turns his detective loose—at the novel's precise midpoint—to commence a second investigation so at odds with readers' expectations as to belie recognition. Marlowe justifies working without a client by noting that the blackmail which led to his being hired is unresolved. In deference to the general, he would make sure that Regan was not in on it, a choice which promises further revelations about the family's decadence and that shifts a detective-narrator to a missing-persons case that the police are content to sit on.

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The Force of a Femme Fatale's Gender Performance

By breaking his narrative in two, Chandler challenges the conventions of detective fiction and compels readers to return to the novel's plot and the energies that move it from complication to reversal to extension to completion. A critical return necessarily recalls its central characters, for their decisions will propel the action, now that the police consider the murders solved. That Marlowe searches for Regan because he feels responsibility to his client must be taken on faith, since Sternwood is a degenerate as repulsive as the rats and spiders that Chandler likens him to. Carmen is herself undergoing a rapid decline. But because she set the narrative in motion by killing Regan; experimented with drugs and sex so often that she became vulnerable to blackmail; and remains tied to Mars and his fellow racketeers—the men paid to dispense with Regan's body—her importance to the diegesis should be elevated, not put under erasure. Thus, an unsatisfied detective, working on his own dime, and a femme fatale eager to inherit a dying father's wealth, face off in what remains of a novel that is increasingly populated by gangsters.

Despite Chandler's intervention, the division of labor informing hardboiled narrative is ongoing, giving antagonists like Carmen and Mars a command of time that representatives of the law lack. Specifically, their function is to imagine, plot, and commit a crime, thereby inciting at least two storylines. The first of these relates to the crime and its aftermath. The police will intervene, as they must, and a second representative of the law often does so as well, interventions that comprise the next storyline. Late to the action, the detective, whether public or private, investigates events beyond his ken. If the femme fatale's approach to time is therefore prospective, a representative of the law sees

and thinks retrospectively.⁴² Looking backwards disadvantages a detective from the first, since his knowing antagonists—working well ahead of him—enjoy considerable mobility and choice in the present. Should the criminal be a woman, she uses these twin advantages to circumvent norms governing domesticity. In other words, while the detective investigates what has occurred, the femme fatale moves to both impede his progress and plan new crimes, if not also her escape. Tactically, she does this by performing femininity—enacting, that is, a changing identity—in much the way described by feminist critics today.⁴³ But, as the examples of Carmen and Vivian show, she does more, at once exaggerating her erotic availability and borrowing behaviors associated with masculinity, making their ends (and guns) her own. Despite spending much of the novel offstage, constrained by her gender and family history, Carmen emerges at key points to frustrate Marlowe’s investigation, an effort Vivian contributes to as well. Her deft counterplotting includes withholding information, lying, investigating independently, naming Brody as Geiger’s killer rather than boyfriend Taylor, attempting murder, and talking her way into a detective’s apartment. The bedroom scene is especially relevant to Marlowe’s grasp of the family’s criminal ties, since it occurs when Carmen misreads his directive to ‘Go on home and wait for me’.⁴⁴ Marlowe meant for her to go to the estate, but she exploits the unintended ambiguity and, days later, breaks into his office-apartment. Sprawled naked across the bed, she promises aggressive, not compliant, sex. Again, her giggling reminds him of rats, a species-degenerating metaphor that itself recalls the family’s jungle of orchids, and she worries her distended thumb in ways that readers have come to expect. Once rejected, she faces him on her hands and knees, animal-like: ‘The hissing noise came tearing out of her mouth as if she had nothing to do with it. There was something behind her eyes, blank as they were, that I had never seen in a woman’s eyes.’⁴⁵ Chandler has diagnosed her atavism, but Marlowe has yet to. Carmen, he

⁴² Prospective thought is an area of considerable scholarly interest in cognitive psychology. For an account of how the femme fatale manages time and perspective, see Larry Shillock, ‘The Global and Local Femme Fatale in *The Maltese Falcon*: A Reappraisal’, *Philological Papers*, 55/56, (2012), pp. 135-52 (pp. 140-41). Fredric Jameson is especially good on the distinction between retrospection in the classic British mystery, which responds to murder by reasserting order, and the American crime novel, where murder is ‘experienced backwards’, giving readers an opportunity to consider time itself, ‘in pure thought, without risks, as a contemplative spectacle which gives not so much the illusion of life as the illusion that life has already been lived, that we have already had contact with the archaic sources of that Experience of which Americans have always made a fetish’. Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality*, (New York: Verso, 2016), p. 5. For an adroit analysis of novelistic time more generally, see James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History*, (London: HarperCollins, 2017).

⁴³ On gender as a dramatic performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 179.

⁴⁴ Chandler, p. 106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

insists, looks at him as if ‘peering from behind a barrel’; and the sisters, taken together, ‘were giving me both barrels that night’.⁴⁶

When sex is figured as hardboiled gunplay, and violence drives the plot as well as readers’ investment in it, a question arises: what force acts as a through-line that makes a family corrupt? As if in response to that query, Vivian confesses to Marlowe that she and Carmen share her father’s blood, adding, “‘It was always wild blood, but it wasn’t always rotten blood’”.⁴⁷ The blood became wild in response to the general’s decadent pursuit of sensation. Thus, a father’s gaudy life of vice compromises his development generally until, having taken a much-younger wife, he compromises her and their offspring specifically. A metonym for family and the desires of two daughters—if not also an allusion to a great, fin-de-siècle writer-decadent—wild blood crosses generations. Related in this way, Vivian and Carmen are harmed by the germ that reproduction transmits. Moreover, once enabled by wealth, decadence compels dissolute behavior which, in a kind of causal extension, can produce degeneration in a child-woman ‘still in the dangerous twenties’.⁴⁸ Late Victorians knew all too well that acting decadently is acting critically. As the example of Wilde suggests, decadents name the social so that it may be subverted—by men who would express a love that dare not speak its name, for instance, and by women who, as Carmen shows, pursue erotic pleasure on their own terms, reject class structures, and partake of drugs that are the proper province of medicine. Given such a litany, she may well have been born only 30 years too soon.

Unfortunately, as (Oscar) Wilde’s trial demonstrates, decadent critique provokes personal and social retribution. When Carmen tricks Marlowe into giving her target practice near the oil sump in which Regan’s body lies decomposing, the plot is poised to repeat its traumatic inception. But the detective, as the novel’s narrator-hero, is capable of his own prospective thought at this point in the diegesis; and he realizes that Carmen’s decline is so pronounced that his early sense of her cognitive disabilities has come true. Her gender performances, so erratic even when she is off drugs, show that the clarity of mind enabling the murder of either an officer in the Irish Republican Army or an experienced detective is beyond her. When this second murder attempt fails, undone by blanks substituted for bullets, a blank-faced, dissolute woman lapses into an epileptic fit, much as Bénédict Augustin Morel might have predicted and that Chandler—insisting upon her familial and experiential histories—has long planned. Thus, unfit, standing at the

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 185-186.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

⁴⁸ Chandler., p. 5.

limits of the estate in the oil field that simultaneously made the Sternwoods wealthy and underwrote its members' far-ranging decadence, Carmen degenerates fully. As Marlowe's narration promised, early-on, atavism like hers requires medical treatment, and so *The Big Sleep* ends with the detective insisting, in a final blackmail, that she be institutionalized before he will turn to the problems that remain with Eddie Mars. Carmen the daughter, the decadent, the sister, the femme fatale is thus put under a final disciplinary erasure that psychiatric institutions—with their men in white and barred windows and hard cots with leather wrist and ankle straps—so often impose. Outside, on the mannered grounds that once so held his attention, Marlowe reflects on the gardens' 'haunted look, as though small wild eyes were watching me from behind the bushes, as though the sunshine itself had a mysterious something in its light', before leaving the Sternwood estate and its daughters behind for good.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Chandler, p. 276.

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