

Pulling Them up by Their Bootstraps: Raymond Chandler and the Mystery

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Often, authors are shunted into one of two categories. They are either Literary (capital L) authors or they are popular (said with a sneer) writers. Authors write high prose, their work is canonized, and they are studied in ivory towers across the land. Writers are read in private, where no one can see you, then discarded with mock disdain, because the work was ‘drivel,’ ‘low brow,’ and ‘popular.’ Genre writers are popular writers. Some occasionally are canonized, long after the fact. Jane Austen, it seems, could be called a popular writer of her day. Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Wilkie Collins, and Edgar Allen Poe are all genre writers who still appear in the canon. But it is very rare, almost unheard of, for a genre writer to be canonized. For every one that is, there are thousands that are not.

Among the genre writers stands a man, Raymond Thornton Chandler (1888-1959). Chandler writes not only popular fiction, but pulp fiction. He writes the lowest of the low brow. He writes detective novels, murder mysteries. And yet, somehow, he is elevated to the status of Author. His works are canonized. Why, and how, did this happen? And is this a slight against detective fiction, saying that only his work is ‘worth’ considering? Is this saying that Chandler, along with a few choice others (Conan Doyle, Christie, Collins, Poe, etc) has been pulled out of the muck of the genre and escaped into a form that has ‘value’? Or is it, perhaps, a commentary on the evolution of the genre?

In a vague attempt to answer these questions, we will examine several articles about Chandler and his canonization. We will start with his own words and end, hopefully, with a look into the future of his influence.

I have a personal story to tell about this The Simple Art of Murder. When I was a freshman in college, I took a course about murder mysteries. In it, we started off by reading all the locked-room mysteries, all the arm chair detectives that run around in British mysteries. About half way through the semester, we were about to hop across the pond and look at American mysteries. By way of introduction, we were given this essay about murder from this guy Raymond Chandler. I'd never heard of him.

I read the essay, and was immediately enraged. This Chandler jerk was aggressive, antagonistic. He was attacking the mysteries I had come to love. He attacked the whole genre. He said things like “[T]he good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way.” (54) This upset me a little; he was suggesting that you can't tell the difference between a good mystery and a bad one. But I was willing to accept that he meant more that bad mysteries are just poor imitations of good ones.

Then he went further. He talked about how mysteries included wild chance, how the detectives had no business being detectives, and how unbelievable it was that the police let them do their job. He said that the murderers could only succeed because of the incredible (and unbelievable) set of coincidences that followed the crime. “[A] murderer who needs that much help from Providence must be in the wrong business.” (56) He said that the mysteries were ridiculous. “Only a halfwit could guess it.” (56).

His aggression didn't stop there. He let loose with both guns, pounding against the British. “The English may not always be the best writers in the world, but they are incomparably the best dull writers.” (56) I was in a rage. How could this jerk say these

things? Who does he think he is? I started foaming at the mouth, thinking about how critics so often tear down a work, when they themselves couldn't even hope to do better. I'd like to see this Chandler guy write anything. Probably couldn't write his way out of a paper bag.

I said as much in class. And was promptly served a large enough portion of humble pie to keep me throughout my entire academic career. I write the words "Remember Raymond Chandler" On my notebooks whenever I start to get incensed about a class.

The truth of the matter is, Chandler was not only a master of the novel, but he was also a master essayist. This particular essay was a perfect introduction to the hard boiled American detective. It was written by one. Chandler used a language and an attitude in this essay that set up the way American detective novels are (or should be) written. He used clever turns of phrase ("[T]here are no dull subjects, only dull writers" (57)) to attack those who had come before, aggressively asserting his position in the world. He continued to use this phrasing to describe how a detective should be, and what the world he lives in ought to look like.

It's not a pretty world for Chandler. It's a world of mean streets, of dangerous characters and dangerous situations. To navigate this world, a detective must be a hero. He must be neither tarnished nor afraid (59). He has to have principles, and he has to stick to them. As Chandler wrote,

"He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. ... He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge; he is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his

age talks—that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. . . . If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. Such is my faith.” (59)

Chandler’s detective was a very specific man. And that man wrote the essay. He wrote it with a rude wit, with a disgust for sham and a contempt for pettiness. He wrote it with the ideal that if there were enough writers like him, the world of the mystery would be a safe (ie, high brow) place to live in, without becoming so dull as to not be worth reading.

The way he wrote this sucked me in and made a sucker of me. Ever since then, I’ve tried to remember that just because I don’t agree with something doesn’t mean it’s stupid, and just because I don’t like it doesn’t mean it’s bad. Sometimes, the author is just trying to get a rise out of me. This advice has, more than anything else, led me into the field of English.

Is that enough of a reason for Chandler to be canonized and considered an Author rather than a writer? Well, for me, yes it is. But I’m guessing you need more convincing. So let me get into the history of this essay.

In *The Complex History of A Simple Art*, Hickman begins to get into the nitty gritty of why Chandler is considered “[T]he highbrow reader’s detective writer.” (286) She tells the history of The Simple Art of Murder, not just in the numerous publications and versions it has known, but also in its origin. Hickman writes about why Chandler wrote the essay, what inspired him to take up arms the way he did. She also, somewhat more importantly, writes about why Chandler is considered a canonical figure.

Chandler wanted to be more than just a genre writer. He wanted to turn the works of pulp writing into something more stylized, something more important. He was able to do this partially due to his classical education (Dulwich College in England). He was also able to do it because he made a conscious effort to include more than what the formula of the genre required. He focused not so much on the mystery as on the characters and the scenes. That is, he eschewed plot, much the way Hemingway (who Chandler very much respected) did in order to focus more on making the world real and populating it with real people. Because of all this, “It was no surprise that Chandler has been able to surmount the usual resistance to detective narratives ... and attain the legitimacy of inclusion among ‘America’s greatest writers.’” (286)

Though he was looking for something more artistic, Chandler did not look for critical acclaim. More to the point, Chandler disliked criticism, something he and I have in common. Chandler said that “most critical writing is drivel and half of it is dishonest.” (292) What Chandler wanted was to add something to the mystery genre, to make something more artistic. He wanted to include allusion, he wanted to tell stories of modern day knights-errant.

One strange thing that Hickman addresses is why Chandler is considered with such lofty praise while Dashiell Hammett is not. In *The Simple Art of Murder*, Chandler even mentions Hammett as a great and original writer, the first to drop the murder back into the streets where it belongs. Hickman mentions a remark by Ross Macdonald, who once noted that Chandler was nothing special, and that “[W]e all came out from under Hammett’s black mask.” (290) The suggestion is that nothing Chandler did should be given much respect because all he did, essentially, was follow in Hammett’s footsteps.

But Hickman suggests that there is more. She says that *The Simple Art of Murder* is “the central manifesto for the hard-boiled” That is why Chandler should be considered ahead and above Hammett. “Chandler made one contribution that Hammett did not: he advanced a theoretical statement about the idiom of the hard-boiled that crystallized it in readers’ minds.” (290)

So, according to Hickman, Chandler should be in the canon because he was a theorist, because he moved beyond the constraints of his genre, and because he cared about what he was doing. This goes along with my gut, but I’m not entirely convinced. So, to examine more, we turn to Arthur Krystal’s *No Failure Like Success: the Life of Raymond Chandler*.

In this article Krystal talks about Chandler both as a person and as a writer. Here we find not only where Chandler came from, but also how he managed to make the world sit up and take notice of him as a writer. This article speaks of not only why Chandler is and should be in the canon, but also goes back to the earlier question: Is Chandler’s canonization a dig against mystery, or is it part of the genre’s evolution? While there is not a clear answer, there is at least a step towards one.

The basic answer for where Chandler came from is simple. He was born in Chicago, raised in Nebraska, and educated in England (Dulwich College). This background allowed him to “place his stamp on a gaudy and lowbrow form of writing and make it, as he put it, ‘into something like literature.’” (445) Krystal talks about Chandler’s life, about what led him up to his writing, and about why he chose the field he chose.

Chandler spent time working in the supplies office of the Admiralty in 1907, then bounced around between newspapers while writing poems, sketches, and book reviews. Though he managed to publish a few literary essays by 1911, he gave up on writing and moved back to America to become an accountant. (446) Between then and 1932, he goes to war, marries a woman eighteen years his senior, and works him hard. But in 1932, Chandler was fired, and again tries his hand at writing. But instead of writing poetry, he wrote for pulps. Why? Because he could actually make money at it. (447)

So that's the big answer. Why the mystery genre? Because there was money in it. Chandler chose the genre not for a higher purpose, but instead just to line his pockets. He wrote for pulps, which were for the most part terrible, even according to Chandler. But he did "manage to take a genus of pulp writing, the hard-boiled detective story, and invest it with a rude wit and wised-up intelligence that made even readers of serious literature sit up and take notice." (446) Here we see that Chandler did exactly as he was suggesting one should do. He wasn't trying to escape from the genre; he was trying to elevate it. He had to. Chandler wanted to be a serious man of letters, but had failed. And so he turned these aspirations to a field that he could get a toehold in. Chandler brought his style to the work, and it is that style that made the work "something like literature."

Style was very important to Chandler. Krystal even quotes Chandler as saying that "the most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time." (447) Chandler was trying to do things that had not been done. He was trying to show people that they wanted something they didn't even know they wanted. He focused on making the characters real, on making the story

important. He didn't much care for plot. As he once explained, "All I'm looking for is an excuse for certain experiments in dramatic dialogue. To justify them I have to have plot and situation; but fundamentally I care almost nothing about either." (448)

Chandler was writing mysteries, but not because he cared about the mystery. He wrote them because they gave him an excuse to play with language, to experiment with the words people spoke. And certainly, he was a master of this art. Consider exchanges from Chandler's work:

I don't like your manner.
That's all right. I'm not selling it.

Who's your buddy?
Big Willie Magoon. He thinks he's tough.
You mean he's not sure?
(448)

All these exchanges, along with others ("You're not very tall." "I try to be.") show Chandler's wit, and make the hard boiled noir detective what he is. This is where Chandler was a master. This is the "rude wit" Chandler mentioned.

Still, though, there's the question about why Chandler is canonical. As Krystal writes, "Chandler... was the only writer of thrillers whose novels literary types and intellectuals could read above the bedcovers. Yet no matter how much we liked him, we still didn't know where he fit in." (451) Take it as assumed, then, that Chandler is high brow. Take it as assumed that he is a Literary (capital L) writer. Still the question arises of where he fits in. Is he an Author or is he a Writer? He does write genre. Yet he is not a 'popular' writer. While it may be true that "[N]o serious critic thus far has considered Chandler's recent canonization without putting invisible quotations marks around the word..." (455), the question remains of where Chandler fits.

Is Chandler just someone who “took ‘a mediocre form and [made] something like literature out of it.’”? Or is there more to it? Certainly, Chandler fought against the form he was writing. He knew he was, he admitted he was, and yet he kept doing it. “No other genre writer... took such pains both to justify the work and to distance himself from it.” (452) So it seems that perhaps even Chandler didn’t know where he fit in. It seems that he believed that maybe, just maybe, his work being lifted out of the pulps and placed into the ivory tower was a dig against the genre. Maybe the ivory tower is saying that genre is still just ‘popular’ (sneer), but Chandler doesn’t count. He is an Author. He is no more a genre writer than Vonnegut or Shelley or Stoker or Poe.

I don’t feel the question is answered just yet. Maybe it would be best to examine a bit more of the craft of Chandler’s work. Maybe we could examine some of the techniques he used, techniques that perhaps made it possible to read him above the covers.

Which brings us to Daniel Linder and his analysis of The Big Sleep.

In this very brief work, Linder discusses Chandler’s use of irony in The Big Sleep. Most specifically, Linder addresses the use of two words throughout the book. Chandler uses the words *cute* and *giggle* in what is sometimes the most inappropriate places, yet he makes it work.

In The Big Sleep, the character Carmen Sternwood uses these words constantly. She uses *cute* to show her childishness, but also to accentuate her sexuality. Marlowe, the narrator, uses *giggle*, usually to show how Carmen reacts no matter what is going on around her. “In the face of just about any situation, whether meeting a new person or witnessing a murder, Carmen reacts in the same way: she giggles.” (139) The fact that

Carmen, who at one point tries to shoot Marlowe and at another point is drugged, naked, and oblivious to the world, is about as far from a child as can possibly be brings this language into the realm of the ironic.

The use of these words, according to Linder, "...create a brutal linguistic irony that lasts in the reader's mind long after putting down the novel." (140) Chandler's work certainly does have the effect of lasting in the reader's mind long after putting down the novel.

I myself am in love with Chandler's love of language. The way he uses language, whether it be talking about "Buying myself a drink" or "He told me to come down to the station, and not to stop for flowers on the way,"¹ to both develop the action and the character of Marlowe, is incredible. The way Marlowe looks at the world, the metaphors, similes, and expressions he use, they all infuse Chandler's work with an electricity that certainly does last in the reader's mind. Is that why he is canonized? Certainly, people have been known to quote Shelley or Coleridge. Frost, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, and Wilde have certainly had their words repeated ad infinitum within the halls of academia. Maybe that's where Chandler fits in.

Then again, maybe it's because of Chandler's use of subtext and symbolism. Maybe it's the effect he's had on the field. In an effort to find out, we turn to Routledge and his discussion of the Self in Raymond Chandler.

In this work we see an examination of the symbolism in Chandler's work. Routledge talks about the descriptions of cars, how each car describes and symbolizes the driver. He talks of how Marlowe's car has a roof that leaks when it rains, so there is always a puddle at his feet. This, Routledge suggests, has "some symbolic resonance for

¹ Both from The Long Goodbye. By Raymond Chandler

his life as a whole” (101). Marlowe is often pulled into events against his will. He cannot avoid some investigations and he cannot avoid certain situations. His involvement in things is as inevitable as getting his feet wet when it rains.

Routledge also discusses how Chandler ignores the real heart of the mystery. Chandler doesn't care what the crime was, nor who committed it. Instead, in Chandler's mysteries, “what John Cawelti calls the ‘human implications’ of the crime are what really matters.” (97) Chandler wants to tell stories about people, and to do that he has to make those people real. He cares about what happens in their lives. The mystery is just an excuse for the search. It is just the impetus for the tale.

Chandler cared about the subtext, what was going on behind the story. Some of his tales were not about the crime at all. As Routledge says, “The difficulty Marlowe faces in *The Big Sleep*, lies in restoring the balance between public and private worlds” (104). What matters to Chandler are the things that are going on that are significant, but not part of the story. He cares about questions of “identity and [the] status of the individual in the twentieth century.” (105)

This could be what elevates him above the pulp writers. Almost certainly it is. Chandler cared about more than the other writers did. He was interested in subtext, in irony, in symbolism. He cared about literary allusion; *The Long Good-Bye* is filled with them, some as blatant as mentioning works that Marlowe “wouldn't have read; it's too long for you.” (LG-B) So there we have another reason for Chandler to be an Author of Literary (capital L) caliber.

But the question still remains, not yet satisfactorily addressed: is Chandler's canonization a dig against mystery, or is it a sign of evolution?

I can't answer that question. I can suggest that Chandler's work has pushed the genre in new directions. One of those directions, certainly, is cyberpunk. "Ever since its emergence in the early 1980s, cyberpunk science fiction has been associated with, and approached through, the hard-boiled detective novels of Raymond Chandler" (Nazare 383). There is a genre that owes much of its style and its existence to Chandler. The streets in cyberpunk are mean, meaner in a lot of ways than Marlowe's streets. The language is full of rude wit, and there is even less acceptance of pettiness. A sense of the grotesque? Absolutely necessary. We can see Chandler's hand in all sorts of things. Who is Rick Deckard (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Or Blade Runner) if not a post-modern Philip Marlowe?

Certainly, cyberpunk rebels against the Chanderlesque. Gibson's Neuromancer has a character named Case, who certainly would not have been Marlowe's friend. "[T]he anti-heroic Case is less a detective figure than a 'case' that someone like Marlowe would be investigating." (386) Yes, Stephenson rebels against Chandler's vision by using language that suggests some extreme vulgarity. But even then, he and others are still paying homage to Chandler. Even then, Chandler is evolving the genre.

And that, I think, is the final say in the matter. Chandler is a Literary Author (capitals L and A). He is also a genre writer. He wrote popular fiction, but was not a hack. Instead, he is canonized. This is not a dig on the genre, and it's not because Chandler stood out so well against all the 'drivel' that his genre is 'usually filled with.' Chandler was canonized because his writing is something like art, because he uses subtext, symbolism, allusion, simile, and characters rather than just plot. He was

canonized because he uses words well, because he engages in “Language made strange,” but also because of his influence on the genre to come.

Chandler may have tried to distance himself from the pulps. But he wasn't escaping from the genre. He was just pulling it up by its bootstraps. He was helping it evolve. So is it a commentary on the genre? I certainly think so. And I think it's an effective one.

Works Cited

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