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A Comparison of Great Depression Escapism in *The Thin Man* (1934) and Wartime Realism in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

David Gordon

Many children have grown up thinking the world used to be black and white, and many high schoolers thought people in the 1700s spoke in iambic pentameter. Art shapes how we view life in the past, but its antiquated technology, societal restrictions, and stylistic choices obscure the truth. How can films accurately portray relationships when they cannot even show a married couple sleeping in the same bed? Of course, those very same stylistic choices and restrictions are also products of their times and often reveal things in less explicit ways. *The Thin Man*'s (Dyke, 1934) easy-going murder investigation, contrasted with *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941)'s grittier depiction, shows how film noir changed throughout the years to reflect a changing society's views towards drinking, detective stories, women, and escapism. While Dashiell Hammett wrote the source material for both around the same time, the production and popularity of their film adaptations speak to the culture in which the films were released. *The Thin Man*'s release in 1934 was in the midst of the Great Depression, and to escape their hardships, people went to see escapist films where relationships, drinking, and crime-solving were fun. *The Maltese Falcon* also depicts all those things but was released on the cusp of America's involvement in World War II, and the American people wanted to see their hardships reflected on screen. This essay contrasts the two decades' cultural differences and asks how those differences changed noir films as time passed.

One of the most prominent cultural artifacts in *The Thin Man* (Dyke, 1934) is the exuberant drinking, which starkly contrasts with *The Maltese Falcon's* (Huston, 1941) much more serious portrayal. Miklitsch says that "if drinking in [*The Thin Man*] lubricates social relations, in [*The Maltese Falcon*] it mediates the rivalries among... men" (2014, p. 238). However, *The Thin Man*'s drinking feels even broader than that -it feels like a joyous view of life (Dyke, 1934).

While it was still a hot-button issue, Prohibition in the United States ended in 1933, and people were clearly eager to get back to drinking (if they even stopped in the first place). The first time Nick Charles (William Powell) is seen in the film, he instructs the bartenders how to shake a martini properly before drinking it himself. He compares shaking martinis with different musical rhythms and does it with

obvious pride, experience, and enjoyment. Nora Charles (Myrna Loy) then comes to Nick trailing behind their dog Asta, who she says "dragged [her] into every gin mill on the block." She asks Nick how many martinis he has had and matches him. Later, Nick wakes past midnight, pours himself a drink, and gets right back in bed. In nearly every scene they appear in the film, Nick and Nora are drinking. In fact, excessive drinking was the only negative note the censors had about the film (Mooney, 2014, p. 30). Considering how much the main character's lives revolve around it, it is not surprising. It is used as a social lubricant in the first party scene, where Nick calls drinks "ammunition," but it is also used as an excuse to avoid responsibilities and clear talking. At one point, a reporter asks Nick about the case, and he says that "It's putting me way behind on my drinking." In his 2002 review of the film, Roger Ebert notes that Nick drinks with a "capacity and wit that real drunks fondly hope to master," it truly is escapism in that mastering it is just not possible. Nobody has the free time or alcohol tolerance for living like Nick and Nora seem to, but in The Great Depression, it must have been nice to watch.

As with *The Thin Man*, the censors complained of excessive drinking, but *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) has a different view of alcohol and life in general (Mooney, 2011, p. 65). The film was released in late 1941, with WWII well underway in Europe and America's involvement imminent. Where *The Thin Man* finds merriment in drinking, considering the imminent war, it isn't surprising to see it treated with a much greater seriousness here. When Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) gets home after seeing his partner's dead body, he sits alone on his bed and fixes himself a drink in his dark apartment. The bottle is on his nightstand and within reach of his bed. It's one of his only visible signs of grieving his dead partner.

Later on, after much build-up, Sam Spade meets the villainous Gutman for the first time over drinks. Miklitsch argues that drinking in *The Maltese Falcon* is used to mediate rivalries (2014, pp. 238). Still, Mooney's assertion that drinking throughout Hammett's novels is used as a "medium of a contest between characters" rings truer (2014, p. 28). I would argue that while they drink while trying to mediate, the drinking itself is used as a weapon. As Gutman pours Sam a drink, he says, "I distrust a man who says when. He's got to be careful not to drink too much because he's not to be trusted when he does." It seems like Gutman is challenging Sam to drink and talk as much as he can. Sam meets nearly every challenge in the film head-on, and this one is no different. Sam Spade doesn't say when and never shows signs of being drunk. Drinking is more of a means of measuring each other up and getting into one another's heads. It seems Gutman does get to Sam when Sam gets up in a fit of anger, makes threats, and smashes his glass, but as he storms out, we see that he's smiling, and he smiles again as he notices his hands are shaking. His whole fit of temper was a calculated act that he could completely control. He "won" the battle for dominance by pretending to lose his composure and smashing the drinks. His hands shook out of fear, but it's a rare moment of weakness only the audience sees, like when he drinks alone.

The next time he meets Gutman, they drink again, but having "lost" their battle the first time, Gutman cheats. He spikes Sam's drink, taking away his control. None of these moments in the film betray any sense of enjoyment from drinking, but they are instead using alcohol as a means of keeping a masculine front. The first time it's a coping mechanism that represses whatever he's feeling; in the second, it's a battle for control. This is a far more intense worldview than *The Thin Man*.

The most considerable similarity between the two adaptations' portrayals of drinking is probably the high value that is placed upon being functional. In 2014, Mooney noted that this finds its source in a lot of Hammett's work, where "drinking calibrates character and is the medium of a contest between characters" (p. 28). Nick Charles may always be teetering on the precipice of drunkenness, but he never falls off, and there is always a sense that he is more lucid than he lets on. It also leaves the audience wondering: if he can solve so much without trying, what could he do sober? He is not composed like Sam, but he is in control enough. In a similar vein, Sam Spade is nearly always a master of himself. His outburst of rage is implied to be on purpose when you consider his smile afterward, and throughout the film, he is always conscious of his position and angle to make it better. This is evident in the way he keeps his cool under the threat of torture at the end and how he leverages his knowledge to keep himself safe while openly plotting against people in the room.

The next point of comparison is how different Nick Charles and Sam Spade's investigation methods are. When Nick gathers the suspects at the film's end, he's asked who the murderer is. He bluntly responds, "I don't know. But I thought if we all had a little get-together, we might be able to find out." Throughout the film, he goodnaturedly listens to everyone's testimonies, and people he had previously sent to jail do not hold it against him. Sam, on the other hand, handles his problems more coarsely. Throughout the film, he often tells Brigid, the femme fatale, that he thinks she is lying. He antagonizes Wilmur ceaselessly and steals his guns only to give them to Gutman, seemingly just to prove he could. When Cairo pulls a gun on him, he takes him out and takes the gun, even though he has nothing to hide. Later in the film, he discusses who to blame right in front of the people that would suffer from the plan. When deciding whether to send Brigid to jail, he tells her plainly and even weighs his options right in front of her. Time after time, he takes the most direct approach.

Nick seems friendly enough that he would take the case just to help an old acquaintance or because the reporters and police want him, but while he keeps his eyes open for clues, he never lets on much interest. When asked why he is in town, he deflects and says it is because his "wife is on a bender," and he is trying to "sober her up." When asked about the case itself, he merely says it's putting him behind on his drinking. Nora also seems mainly indifferent to any moral obligation to find the killer and just finds mysteries and shadowy figures exciting. She mentions that the girl is in a tough spot and wishes Nick would help, but it is only one of many ways she tries to convince Nick to take the case. She tells him to do it because it sounds

like a "good case" or an "interesting case" when she first hears about it and says she wants to see Nick work. After Nick takes out a man holding them at gunpoint, she complains that she did not get to see the action. When it seems like the mystery is solved, she becomes disappointed it happened without their involvement, and Nick betrays little active interest in the case until over halfway through the film when the police are on the wrong track. Only then does he leave the house with the purpose of investigating. Even then, in the scene following, he still denies he's working on it.

These attitudes are not uncommon for their time. Comparing Nick's character with similar ones from the time period, this era has been called the "heyday of the debonair private detective" (Mooney, 2014, p. 33). As a character in The Depression, Nick has a very lavish lifestyle. He briefly explains in the film that he was a detective, but now that he has married Nora, he just has to manage her family's businesses. Managing them must not be too hard because he is not once shown actually doing it in the film. Like his attitude toward alcohol, Nick jokes about money, saying he cannot take the case because he is too busy ensuring Nora does not lose any of the money he married her for.

Hypergamy does not seem to have been an option for Sam Spade, who's still working as a private detective and trying to earn a dollar wherever he can. He is clearly not a rich man, which is juxtaposed in the film by Gutman, who is. Gutman has the time to take planes and track the Falcon for 17 years, but Sam does not seem to do much besides work. At the end of the film, he takes a chance at gunpoint to keep some of Gutman's money. Much earlier, when talking to Brigid, he mentions that she paid him enough money that he would not question her story, then later tells her to give him literally all of her money. He tells her that if she needs money, she can pawn her stuff.

However, his motivation for investigation is not just for money by any means. None of his reasons are as lackadaisical as Nick Charles', but he gives various reasons throughout the film. At one point, he says he has to investigate to clear his name with the police, who want to lock him up. This is backed up by how intent he is to find another fall guy at the film's end. He also seems determined to do whatever people do not want him to, so the police telling him to back out probably felt like a challenge that he wanted to face. Then again, the fact that his partner died is another reason and the one that he lists at the end of the film, at least before listing a more believable reason: his interest in Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

Brigid is established as someone sexually attractive to Sam even before she appears on the screen when Effie says, "You'll want to see her … she's a knockout". Brigid's overt sexuality was increasingly downplayed in the adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) book until the 1941 film adaptation, which Mooney theorizes is a reflection of society's attempt to control the women who threaten the men (Mooney, 2011, p. 65). Interestingly, Brigid's dangerous side also seems to attract Sam. On two separate occasions, Sam is told that Brigid is dangerous (once by Gutman and once by Brigid herself), and on both occasions, Sam smiles in response. He frequently calls her a liar to her face and seems to enjoy doing it. At one point,

he gets mad at her because she is only ever bought his loyalty with money. She asks what else she could buy him with, and he responds by kissing her. It is an attraction based on lust and excitement.

Sam's assistant, Effie, seems like she should win his affection because she is everything a woman was supposed to be back then. She was completely loyal to Sam, risked herself to protect Brigid and the Falcon for Sam, patched Sam up when he got hurt, and was the only one Sam trusted enough to explain the whole situation to. She appears to be his only ally. Yet, despite calling her "angel" and "precious," he hardly seems to view her as a woman. At one point, he even tells her: "You're a good man, sister ."The traditional view of gender roles had been threatened in this period, and suddenly the more flawed and dangerous woman was the one that caught Sam's attention.

Nora Charles, on the other hand, has some of the stereotypical qualities that women were supposed to have (loyal, understanding of transgressions, support) while also having a couple of new post-jazz age and post-prohibition inhibitions (enthusiasm for partying, lack of children, some independence). This combination of traits was very popular among her adoring public, who called Myrna Loy the "perfect wife," and resulted in a string of roles as wives in films through the thirties (Leider, 2011, p. 168). One of her friends even claimed that "the widespread male desire to marry Myrna Loy helped to boost the marriage rate in the 1930s" (Leider, 2011, p. 165). Still, while her popularity was true, she did not boost marriage rates, as rates of marriage actually fell as people waited through the depression. This, in turn, might suggest another way that *The Thin Man* was escapism. People could not marry, so they saw a film where they could see and experience what it might feel like to have a happy marriage.

Between 1934 and 1941, the public's perception of media shifted. The early 1930s found people seeking escapism. Busby Berkeley, Astaire and Rogers, and screwball comedies turned The Great Depression into comedy, music, and spectacle. The 1940s saw a rise in films like William Wyler's home front dramas and noir films that generally reflected the hard times. This is reflected in all the aspects of *The Thin Man* and *The Maltese Falcon* discussed above. Interestingly, neither is really about what they initially seem to be.

In his 2002 review of *The Thin Man*, Roger Ebert compares the dialogue to Roger and Astaire's dancing, points out that "the plot is so preposterous that no reasonable viewer can follow it," and states that it is "a murder mystery in which the murder and the mystery are insignificant compared to the personal styles of the actors." This is backed up by Frances Goodrich, one of the screenwriters, remembering the director, W. S. Van Dyke, telling her, "I don't care anything about the story; just give me five good scenes between those people" (Mooney, 2014, pp. 34). *The Maltese Falcon* is even clearer that it is not really about the Falcon when it turns out to be a fake.

So instead, they are about the people and their ways of life, and Nick and Sam's ways of life were what people wanted to see in the eras they were produced within. Nick Charles' drinking is unrealistic and

extravagant. Sam Spade drinks to maintain a strong masculine front in the face of a much less happy world. Nick Charles takes nothing -including murder- seriously and lives in an idle world where he hardly works. Sam Spade lives in a world where his partner gets killed for doing his job, and the rich and poor alike fight each other for the promise of money. Nick Charles is happily married to a woman he loves and trusts. Sam Spade knows a woman he trusts, but the woman he loves is duplicitous and dangerous. Nick Charles reflects a post-prohibition world trying to recover from the depression through escapism. At the same time, Sam Spade more darkly mirrors America's feelings towards their impending war involvement and shifting gender roles. It was never *really* about a thin man or a Maltese Falcon, after all.

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