

# THE BIG SLEEP [1946]

by

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Raymond Chandler's complex novel seems to have come magically alive on the screen through Howard Hawks' careful direction and Bogart's persona which seems to be a twin to his character of Philip Marlowe. In creating his hard-boiled hero, Philip Marlowe, Chandler called on the romantic tradition of knights in armor and ladies in distress; though finally even Chandler seems resigned to the impossibility of social change, he begins as a believer, and he retains that belief through most of his work.

*The Big Sleep* is set in Los Angeles. After World War II, those dissatisfied with their present situation, physical and/or psychological, migrated west. When the Pacific Ocean blocked further migration, Los Angeles became the residence and reservoir of the leftovers of civilization, those who could not find hope in further migration. And mythologically, the west is the place of death, the locus of the setting sun. Thus Los Angeles became the perfect Noir City.

Instead of the looming monoliths and endless urban alleyways of the Eastern cityscape, the western city is represented by a physical and moral sprawl, a chain of suburbs full of legal and illegal activities linked by side boulevards and expressways. Chandler saw this and made *The Big Sleep*, like all his other stories set in Los Angeles, a series of journeys across a mythical landscape of darkened bungalows, decaying office buildings, and sinister nightspots. All this under a dark blanket of impermanence and instability. A perfect place of a story that sprouts from its roots in a deceptively straightforward case of blackmail into a multiplicity of crimes and potential suspects that twist round one another to form a morass of human duplicity.

Into this moral and physical morass is plunged Marlow. As Chandler wrote in "The Simple Art of Murder," his critical essay on the genre of detective fiction, "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid." Although Marlowe may seem just a fallen idealist, capable of being physically worn out or romantically duped, he is neither mean, tarnished, nor afraid because, as Chandler said, "The detective in this kind of story must be such a man . . . the best man in

the world." In later noirs, the detective/problem-solver/innocent victim would be very tarnished and very afraid.

For Chandler the intricate web of motivation in *The Big Sleep* are the stylistic analog of the dark streets and lonely houses the movie Marlowe explores. *The Big Sleep*, as film, evokes the chaotic underworld of the novel through setting and visualization rather than plot. Yet, the complexities of the narrative are still there, but they no longer constitute the main ground against which the noir figure of Marlowe is defined. *The Big Sleep* stresses characterization and visual style rather than events and, it ultimately reduces a story line that is irretrievably tangled to minor significance.

The insignificance of the specifics of the plot are illustrated by a (perhaps apocryphal) story. Bogart and Bacall were arguing as to who killed the Sternwood chauffeur. Finally, they went to Hawks, the director, who simply said, "Read the script." When pressed, he read it and couldn't find the answer. So he called up William Faulkner, who wrote the script from the novel. Puzzled, Faulkner called Chandler. Chandler reportedly stated, "How should I know? You figure it out!" and hung up. This type of confusion never hurt the film. The movie is about the people involved and how the process of a criminal investigation affects them, not its results.

The investigative process follows private eye Philip Marlowe as he finds his way through the jungle of gamblers, pornographers, killers, and blackmailers who have attached themselves to the rich old general Sternwood (Charles Waldron) and his two randy daughters, Vivian and Carmen (Lauren Bacall and Martha Vickers).

Some bad guys get killed and others get arrested, we don't much care because the real result is that Bogart and Lauren Bacall end up in each other's arms. "The Big Sleep" is a lust story with a plot about a lot of other things.

Bogart himself made personal style into an art form. What else did he have? He wasn't particularly handsome, he wore a rug, he wasn't tall ("I try to be," he tells Vickers), and he always seemed to act within a certain range. Yet no other movie actor is more likely to be remembered a century from now. And the fascinating subtext in "The Big Sleep" is that in Bacall he found his match.

You can see it in his eyes: Sure, he's in love, but there's something else, too. He was going through a messy breakup with his wife, Mayo, when they shot the picture. He was drinking so heavily he didn't turn up some days, and Hawks had to shoot around him. He saw this coltish 20-year-old not only as his love but perhaps as his salvation. That's the undercurrent. It may not have been fun to live through, but it creates a kind of joyous, desperate tension on the screen. And since the whole idea of film noir was to live through unspeakable experiences and keep your cool, this was the right screenplay for this time in his life.