

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

SPRING QUARTER

JUNE 2008

TEACHING FILM: JANE AUSTEN TO HAMMETT

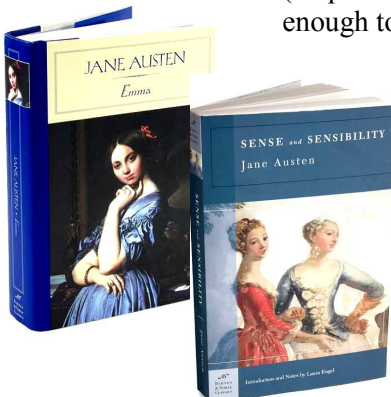
By Dr. Howard Lachtman

When I proposed a class on “The American Mystery Novel and Its Film Versions: Van Dine to Ross Macdonald” at University of the Pacific four decades ago, the review committee decided it had the merit of novelty and the flaw of irrelevancy. One professor stated that such a class might deserve consideration in the future when a film studies program came into existence; another said it belonged more properly to popular culture studies; a third thought that film could be a useful adjunct to literary studies. A fourth posed a riddle: If detective fiction was not as yet a recognized genre study and had no role in literary studies (though one could conceivably study Poe’s groundbreaking detective stories as part of 19th-century American literature or Faulkner’s “Knight’s Gambit” collection in modern fiction studies), on what basis could one argue that the mystery film had any business in the college classroom?

A decade later, I taught just such a class at the University of California at Berkeley Extension in San Francisco. What had happened in the intervening decade? For one thing, popular culture studies had blossomed at many colleges and universities. There was lively interest in American and international films. And young professors were actually managing to persuade committees that the best detective fiction and science fiction might have some claim to literature.

Jane Austen at Humphreys

Today, film options abound. A student in my English 101 class is thinking of writing a paper that would compare the original novel and modern film version of Jane Austen’s “Emma” (she could take a similar approach with “Persuasion” or “Pride and Prejudice” or “Sense and Sensibility”). She wants to discuss a film she’s enjoyed about the author herself--“Becoming Jane.” She could add the Austen groupies in “The Jane Austen Book Club” and Laurie Viera Rigler’s “Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict,” a new novel in which a thirtysomething Los Angeles Austenite and career woman is magically transported back in time to the world of Jane Austen. That world is (surprise!) quite different from 2008; fortunately, the time traveler has read Austen faithfully enough to prepare her masquerade. Does she meet Jane Austen in person? Will Jane be kind to her adoring fan? Will she disclose her private life? Her writing secrets? Will there be a film version of this charming fantasy? Will the sun rise tomorrow?



My 101 students compared the 1952 film version of Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (which I screened for them) with the 1936 short story. The issue for their writing was how well or badly the story had been “translated” into a visual medium. Why had Hemingway’s ending been altered to a “Hollywood ending”? Why was the role of women expanded and what purpose did the three women in the film serve? Which

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

version of Harry, the embittered author-protagonist, did students prefer? I was able to tell them what it was like to see the film on its first theatrical release and how it influenced my own boyish and naïve interest in becoming a writer.

Mystery Stories in the Classroom

Mystery fiction and film are offered today at a number of American colleges. My daughter Courtney, an elementary school teacher, took just such a class when she attended the University of Arizona at Tucson and sent me her exams to see if I could achieve a passing score. Such classes provide insight into the nature of popular literature and the reasons for its longevity. “Popular literature isn’t popular because it’s about nothing,” as Elliot Gilbert once said. A University of California at Davis professor, editor, essayist, and mystery fiction writer, Gilbert pioneered the teaching of the mystery as literature and authored the groundbreaking text in the field—“The World of Mystery Fiction” (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1983).

Professor Gilbert was a personable guest in my University of California mystery film class and enjoyed his discussion with my students. The students told him they were intrigued by film issues of crime and justice and by the fun of period-piece fashions, high talk, street talk and stereotypes. They’d begun to appreciate the complex mythology of the detective as redeemer of wrongs, restorer of the social order, rescuer of the falsely accused, symbol of rationalism or the limitations of rationalism, patrician or hardboiled operative, cerebral or intuitive methodologist, arranger of destinies and architect of “the fitting punishment” (sometimes inviting the police as he unmasked the culprit; sometimes dispensing his own brand of justice/revenge).

“I think the mystery is serious in that it is directed toward important issues,” Gilbert told my class. “Almost all major ideas appear in them.”

At some very deep level, he confessed, the voice of his old Milton instructor told him that what he was doing wasn’t quite respectable, but then, that old Milton instructor never appreciated how “respectable” the moral order of Hammett and Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald could be. It was more than the escapist fare that some critics alleged, Gilbert argued.

“No literary genre, however much it may be devoted to pure entertainment, can grow and develop for nearly 150 years unless it’s rooted in the most universal human concerns,” Gilbert said. A San Francisco reporter who interviewed Gilbert put it another way: “The mystery story, long dismissed as lowbrow trash, is now gaining entrée to the halls of academe. Readers who once settled down with ‘mindless entertainment’ are now being told that, all along, they were partaking of the philosophical questions of the age.”

How to Teach (and Think) about Film

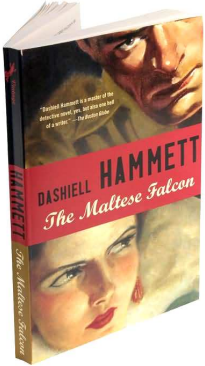
How well do films reflect those age-old questions? I had the occasion to ask and answer that question recently when I presented five lectures on American crime and detection classics at the Stockton San Joaquin Public Library. This was in conjunction with The Big Read, a nationwide reading awareness program of the National Endowment for the Arts. The featured work this year was Dashiell Hammett’s “The Maltese Falcon,” the third and best film version of which capped our series. After examining the overconfident private eye in “Chinatown,” the tragedy of the writer-sleuth who played detective at his peril in “Sunset Boulevard” and the stoic barber who narrates a mystery that is part small town comedy and part Greek tragedy in “The Man Who Wasn’t There,” we were ready to review John Huston’s 1941 film adaptation of “The Maltese Falcon” and compare it to the Hammett original.



How might this be done in the classroom? One could, for starters, examine the simple, direct and vernacular prose style with which Hammett, no less than Hemingway, revolutionized American writing. “The Maltese Falcon”

(Continued on page 3)

is today an important work of literature that represents and transcends the detective story genre. Huston's faithful adaptation captures this quality on the screen, dealing as it does with the various obsessions (love, power, treasure) that enslave all the characters and ensure their defeat. One can point to Hammett's wide and continuing influence upon films and television, though Hammett's sense of authenticity (he was a retired private detective) and sly sense of humor elude many of our crime-writing and crime-filming contemporaries.



An instructor can also utilize this film to show how the detective story is both entertainment and a vehicle for serious or literary themes. He can examine the reasons (chiefly fidelity to the novel, casting and pacing) why the 1941 version succeeds where two earlier efforts (1931 and 1936) failed. By doing so, he can help students appreciate why the "Falcon" remains a model mystery movie, graced by incisive dialogue, economic yet atmospheric photography, and a beautifully interlocking set of performances from players who seem to have stepped off the pages of the novel.

Is there such a thing as a detective film series that would be ideal for teaching purposes? The phrase "film detective" brings to my mind Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade in the "Falcon," as Philip Marlowe in "The Big Sleep," as the soldier turned sleuth and avenger in "Dead Reckoning," as the escaped convict desperate to prove his innocence in "Dark Passage," and as the volatile Hollywood writer under police suspicion in the offbeat film noir "In a Lonely Place." A comparison of these five films would be a course of instruction in itself, defining the wide-ranging possibilities of the screen detective via the differing roles of an acclaimed actor during one of the most creative decades of American filmmaking.

Teaching "The Maltese Falcon": The Detective as Hero and Victim

A key issue in teaching "The Maltese Falcon" is how Hammett viewed his fictional sleuth in relation to his own career as a private investigator. An employee of the Pinkerton Agency, Hammett did what any detective does: he investigated; he questioned; he shadowed suspects; he traced missing persons; he used routine methods and procedures to solve crimes. But in creating Sam Spade, the author indulged himself. He created a character who is both true to the profession and unlike any detective who ever practiced it. In the 1934 preface to the reissue of the novel, Hammett confessed that Spade had no original: "He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would have liked to have been and in their cockier moments thought they approached. For your private detective does not want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander or client."

The supreme irony is that Spade, the seemingly invulnerable and invincible hero, loses everything in the end—love, money and the shield of arrogant self-confidence (just as Nicholson's Jake Gittes does in "Chinatown"). The falcon proves to be a fake; it forces Spade to confront what is real and what is not about himself and the values by which he lives. The film's moment of greatness comes when the emotionally shaken Spade tries to explain his professional code of honor to a distraught murderess who cares nothing for honor or human life. She swears she loves him; maybe she does. She insists that Sam loves her; maybe he does. But the police are knocking on the door and the detective has seconds to decide whether redemption is possible for the wayward woman or himself. It's no wonder that the film ends with Sam trying to explain to a bewildered homicide cop that the presumably priceless falcon represents "The stuff that dreams are made of." In that wistful and unexpected Shakespearean allusion, we recognize that "The Maltese Falcon" has made the long leap from pulp fiction to literature. It's much more than "merely a mystery"—and no ordinary film.



Dr. Howard Lachtman is an adjunct instructor in the Liberal Arts Department at Humphreys College.

WHO'S A META FOR?

By Dr. Richard Chabot

Does It Really Meta? Part I



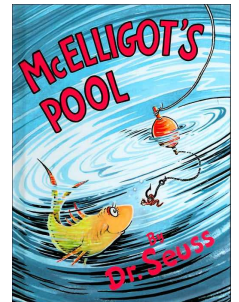
I was thinking of the graduates about to leave our college, attaining greatness, each in their own way, just as the staff here at Humphreys have worked daily to help them learn, attain, ascend. . . and then? Well, to metamorphose, to attain a meta-state, become meta-men. However silly this word play is and fun it is to think about graduation day, it's certain that our students have gotten some hard work done if not attained a degree of greatness. But none who walk the stage, applauded by classmates and proud parents, will leave our college without having undergone change. I regularly remind my students that they are undergoing some form of metamorphosis, are altering their being, their state of awareness. While they may have come to Humphreys to improve a paycheck or become more independent, or possibly just for the joy of learning, every quarter of toil and study will trans-

form their being, alter their awareness of self, and perception of others around them. I try to warn students that continued exposure to college will lead them to reading, rhetoric, and rational thought, followed by lost friends, dejected lovers, and worried family members. Oddly enough, many of the students I've talked to actually look forward to the transformation, hoping to achieve a different if not higher state of being.

Let's be honest and recognize that being an eloquent and well informed college graduate, and desiring changes of quality and direction in (*insert some issue of interest here*) will lead to your being labeled elitist and out of touch by others. Let's go further and recognize the utter nonsense that makes up such an accusation. I've never taught my students to be right or to have all the answers. I much prefer them to stop taking right and wrong as a gut-level given, to stop being embarrassed in the qualities of their educated minds, and to start asking some of the questions while questioning the lack of answers our world is in need of. True, friends will drop you from their FaceBook page or relatives may whisper behind your back, but I hope your new awareness, increased incrementally over these many years, will continue to expand even beyond where you are now. Congratulations metas, be proud of the person you have achieved and never stop looking forward to what you have yet to become.

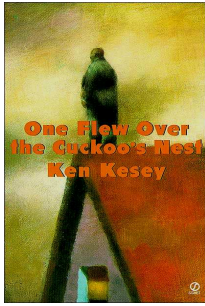
To Meta Or Not To Meta? Part II

Just watched the new animated film *Horton Hears a Who*. Overeducated elitist academic that I am, of course, I'll say that the 1954 book was better. Though I might question the child-rearing psychology Dr. Seuss pioneered, his books were inspirational and transformational for me. *McElligot's Pool* was a favorite, where a young boy imagines the depth and potential of what appears on the surface to be a no-nothing farm pond. The boy knew better, imagined bigger, and showed me as a young boy what wonders await beyond the little black and white world I lived in. . . or, rather, that he lived in. Horton does the same for the reader, but in a much more animated (even without the movie) story about an elephant trusting in himself while resisting the forces of the status-quo that surround him. On its own, *Horton* and the *Whos* make for a fun book with a very overt though touching message, believing in yourself and protecting those who are less powerful.



But there is much more to the story, posturing as a child's moralistic fairy tale when it is really a metaphor for life, one as powerful as *Macbeth* or *1984*. Beyond being strong and brave and true to my friends, I am taught to see beyond the curtain, realize the limitations of the reality presented to me in textbooks, and know that nothing can be taken for granted again. However insistent and demanding others may be, I recognize their ignorance and question their authority. Whatever my sufferings at the hands of however many of society's servants of sameness, I will remain focused and believe in myself, see beyond the limited four walls I am provided with, and press on to know more than what society expects of me.

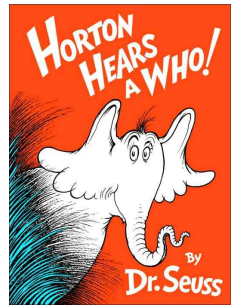
(Continued on page 5)



Thus, *Horton* is metaphor, for us and our lives, and through it Dr. Seuss was able to help children roar. When I occasionally mention Horton, or possibly more modern stories like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as being metaphorical and not meant to be taken literally, the listener's eyes (and ears) glaze over and a fog descends into the room. Most people like the surface tale and tire of the teacher-tells-you moralizing that interferes with the action and fun.

You know what a metaphor is, though the term may throw you. In language it is a direct connection between one and an other, saying your black sheep of a brother is an untamed river in need of a compass (I love mixed metaphors). At graduation time, we hear lots of metaphors, with graduates having crossed mountains while carrying the world upon their shoulders. Such references give us a detailed picture all can understand and relate to but in far less than a thousand words. In story form, a metaphor is that wordless connection between the overt story and the hidden message, a story saying one thing but presenting pictures and symbols that point in another direction or to something timelier and personally relevant.

Sometimes political realities or existing social biases prevent a direct story being told or lesson being taught, so authors and filmmakers use metaphor to get a point across without being thrown in jail, sued, or fired. Dr. Seuss does this, and without children (or adults) being any the wiser. If you ever get jaded with life, tired of the sameness and power of the colorless others who surround you, consider metaphor. Perhaps you should stop focusing on the literal story, close your eyes, and imagine the deeper and much more interesting drama that is unfolding out before you. As in another favorite metaphorical movie, *The Matrix*, disconnect yourself from what is being fed to you and see as you know life can be.



Dr. Richard Chabot is the coordinator of the Community Studies Program at Humphreys College.



Humphreys
COLLEGE

www.humphreys.edu

Main Campus

6650 Inglewood Avenue
Stockton, CA 95207
209.478.0800
Fax 209.478.8721

Branch Campus

3600 Sisk Road, Suite 3-A
Modesto, CA 95356
209.543.9411
Fax 209.543.9413

Humphreys College Newsletter *Supplement*, June 2008

Stanislav Perkner, Editor, sperkner@humphreys.edu

Cynthia Becerra, Co-Editor, cbecerra@humphreys.edu

Leslie Walton, Executive Editor, lwalton@humphreys.edu