

The Falcon as a Symbol

The Maltese falcon really existed, if not in a form Hammett's readers would recognize. It dates back to the Knights of Malta, a religious order founded as the Knights Hospitaller in the year 1080 to provide care for poor and sick pilgrims to Jerusalem. In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain gave the order a large territory, including Malta, in exchange for an annual fee of a single — live, not bejeweled — Maltese falcon. Even though it has no territory today, the order survives and is considered a sovereign state, with observer status at the United Nations.

Dashiell Hammett drew on the history of the Knights of Malta when creating the plot hook for *The Maltese Falcon*. He explained this historical influence by saying simply, "Somewhere I had read of the peculiar rental agreement between Charles V and the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem." The Crusades probably intrigued Hammett because of their mythic association with the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus at the last supper. The association with the Crusades subtly elevates Sam Spade to a knight on a noble errand, a ploy that intensifies the quest and, considering how ignoble many of Hammett's characters are, mocks it at the same time.

Falconry, the sport of using trained birds to hunt small prey, dates back thousands of years. Well-trained birds were prized for their beauty, skill, and practicality. A fearsome hunter, the falcon has long been a symbol of prowess and ruthlessness — not unlike Sam Spade, the detective who pursues it in Hammett's novel. Early Christians borrowed pagan symbols like the falcon, but altered their meaning to reflect their own values. Because they are relentless hunters, wild falcons often symbolized

evil, while tamed falcons represented Christian conversion and repentance. Coats of arms from the Middle Ages often included falcons as a symbol of a pursuer, one who will not rest until his objective is achieved. This single-minded imperviousness to distraction, too, can't help reminding readers of Spade and his fellow falcon-hunters.

A valuable prize that everyone in a story is chasing, as with Hammett's falcon, is sometimes called a "maguffin." Film director Alfred Hitchcock popularized the term to describe the elusive objects that so many of his heroes and villains pursued. In each case, the nature of the object is less important than how much everyone wants it.

In the book, greed destroys any hope the characters have for contented lives, yet they cannot give up the chase. They are driven by uncontrollable yearnings that eat away at their humanity and contaminate relationships. Reversing the lead-into-gold transformation familiar from alchemy, the Maltese falcon has been reduced from gold to lead, and down with it go the lives of all who vainly chase it.