

Hard-Boiled Fiction and Hammett's Writing Style

Hard-boiled fiction is a literary term describing unsentimental stories and novels about violence, corruption and sex, particularly among society's criminal element, and combining unflinching realism with an often flippant sense of humor. The name comes from hard-boiled eggs, whose last trace of softness has been thoroughly boiled out of them. The writing is gritty, understated, and tough. The stories are often set in large cities where graft and corruption are commonplace. The hard-boiled hero is usually a man at odds with society, whose motivation stems not from monetary reward but from a personal code and the search for truth.

Many hard-boiled detective novels were first published in serialized form in such pulp magazines as *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*. Popular from the 1920s through the 1950s, pulp magazines took their name from the cheap wood-pulp paper on which they were printed.

In an era before television brought entertainment into American homes, short stories were commonly popular with the public. Hammett wrote more than eighty short stories and five novels. His stories were popular in the pulps, his serialized novels found mainstream publishers, and filmmakers have enthusiastically adapted his work to the screen. He is credited with bringing detective fiction from pulp into the literary mainstream.

His crisp writing style and use of slang brought the language of the streets to the page, creating an urban realism that registered strongly with the public. He developed his style by writing case reports during his stint as an operative for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. This "just the facts" approach colored his writing, creating

highly readable, fast-moving stories. Hammett strove for the highest standard in dialogue, setting, and pacing.

Stylistically he has been compared to his contemporary Ernest Hemingway because they share a similar minimalist approach to writing. Like Hemingway, Hammett employs a spare style with plain sentence structure and fairly accessible language. Both are considered masters of dialogue. Conversations in their books convey messages beyond the literal meaning of the page's words.

But the pacing of Hammett's writing and his penchant for hairpin plot turns are what first endeared him to readers of the pulps, and later to millions of fans of detective fiction. *The Maltese Falcon* has an intricate series of plot twists, but the story is told in a straightforward, uncomplicated way. Hammett's style influenced a host of later writers of detective fiction, including Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Walter Mosley.