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## *Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, Working- Class Consumers, and Pulp Magazines*

by ERIN SMITH

*Into this underworld of literature [pulp magazines] most of us never dive unless, like Mr. Hoover's Committee on Recent Social Trends, we are curious about the literary preferences of those who move their lips when they read.*

—*Vanity Fair*, June 1933<sup>1</sup>

THE JUNE 1933 ISSUE of *Vanity Fair* featured an exposé of the literary underworld entitled “The Pulp: day dreams for the masses.” It maligned pulp magazine writers as ignorant hacks, denigrated pulp readers as (at best) marginal literates, and deemed these magazines “gaudy, blatant, banal,” representative of “the incursion of the Machine Age into the art of tale-telling.”<sup>2</sup> *Vanity Fair*’s disdain for pulp magazines was fairly representative. Named for the untrimmed, rough wood-pulp paper on which they were printed, pulp magazines were unambiguously “trash,” cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of pulp titles crowded newsstands during their heyday in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, their garish covers competing for the attention of their ten million regular readers.<sup>4</sup> Although most often featuring lurid scenes of sex and violence on their covers, these 7 x 10 inch magazines were remarkably unassuming on the inside. Column after column of uninterrupted, densely packed print greeted the reader, punctuated only by an occasional pen-and-ink line drawing and a few pages of ads clustered at the front and back. Between 1896 and 1953, a reader could expect to pay between five and twenty-five cents for roughly 130 pages of stories—a great deal of fiction for the money.

1. Marcus Duffield, “The Pulp: day dreams for the masses,” *Vanity Fair* 40.4 (June 1933): 26.

2. Duffield 26-27.

3. On the history of pulp magazines, see Lee Server, *Danger Is My Business: An Illustrated History of the Fabulous Pulp Magazines* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1993); William F. Nolan, *The Black Mask Boys: Masters in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction* (New York: Morrow, 1985); Tony Goodstone, ed., *The Pulp: Fifty Years of American Pop Culture* (New York: Chelsea House, 1970); Frank Gruber, *The Pulp Jungle* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne, 1967); Harold Hersey, *Pulpwood Editor: The Fabulous World of Thriller Magazines Revealed by a Veteran Editor and Publisher* (New York: Stokes, 1937); Ron Goulart, *Dime Detectives* (New York: Mysterious, 1988) and *Cheap Thrills: An Informal History of Pulp Magazines* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1972). General histories of magazines include John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) and Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1956), although neither treats pulp magazines at length.

4. The figures are based on a survey by A.A. Wyn, a pulp publisher (Peterson 309).

The pulps were direct descendants of nineteenth-century dime novels, cheaply produced fiction published by companies like Beadle & Adams or Street & Smith that targeted the urban working classes between the 1840s and the 1890s, a few titles enduring until World War I.<sup>5</sup> The first pulp magazine was Frank Munsey's *Argosy*, an all-fiction weekly periodical that competed with dime novels for an adult, male audience. When changes in postal regulations made it prohibitively expensive to distribute dime novels through the mail, many of the largest dime novel publishers simply repackaged their cheap fiction as pulp magazines, continuing to feature favorite series characters like Nick Carter or Buffalo Bill. Street & Smith, the largest dime novel publisher, switched over to pulp format in 1915. The pulp magazine business boomed between the wars, driven by falling costs and expanding levels of literacy. Well into the twentieth century, pulp magazines adhered to nineteenth-century publishing practices, eschewing heavy use of advertising and relying on cheap production costs and newsstand sales to stay in business.<sup>6</sup> Hard-boiled detective fiction emerged from this much-maligned world of pulp magazines, originating in *Black Mask* in the early 1920s, although it subsequently appeared in countless other pulp publications including *Dime Detective*, *Detective Fiction Weekly*, *Clues*, and *Detective Story*.

### I. Reconstructing Readers

ALTHOUGH EVIDENCE is scant, the readers of pulp magazines were widely held to be socially and economically marginal. They were working-class, young, poorly educated, and often immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Although pulp publisher Harold Hersey claimed pulp readers came from all walks of life, he did concede that the majority were probably office or factory girls, soldiers, sailors, miners, dockworkers, ranchers, and others who worked with their hands. One survey by Popular Publications found that the typical reader of their pulps was "a young, married man in a manual job who had limited resources and lived in an industrial town."<sup>8</sup>

5. On the production and distribution of dime novels, see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987) chap. 2; and Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) chap. 1.

6. On pulp magazines as business enterprises, see Hersey 11-28; Peterson 69; Tebbel and Zuckerman 341.

7. On pulp readership, see Hersey chap. 1; Frank Schick, *The Paperbound Book in America: The History of Paperbacks and Their European Background* (New York: Bowker, 1958) 56; Leroy Lad Panek, *An Introduction to the Detective Story* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1987) 159-60; Goodstone xii; Nolan 29; William S. Gray and Ruth Munroe, *The Reading Interests and Habits of Adults: A Preliminary Report* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 84, 150, 206-07; and William Frank Rasche, *The Reading Interests of Young Workers* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1937) 10, 12. Louis Adamic, "What the Proletariat Reads: Conclusions Based on a Year's Study Among Hundreds of Workers Throughout the United States," *The Saturday Review of Literature* XI, no. 20 (1 Dec. 1934): 321-22.

8. Hersey 7-9; Bold 7-8.

Research from the University of Chicago library school in the 1930s confirms these reading patterns.<sup>9</sup> One study found that 55% of the pulp magazine audience had only a grade-school education, 29% had a high-school education, 7% had some college, and 9% had college degrees. Detective and adventure pulp magazines were read roughly ten times more often by residents of a working-class Chicago neighborhood than by middle-class residents of a St. Louis suburb.<sup>10</sup> In fact, contemporary cultural commentators lamented that workers read little else besides pulp magazines.<sup>11</sup>

The other format in which hard-boiled detective stories sold well was the paperback, which appeared on the scene in 1939 with the launching of Pocket Books.<sup>12</sup> The paperback cost little more than a pulp magazine (twenty-five cents), targeted many of the same readers, and largely replaced the pulp magazine when its market folded in the years following World War II. A 1941 survey of 40,000 readers by Pocket Books confirmed that low prices had made book buyers of people who sounded remarkably like the readers of pulp magazines: "locomotive engineers, musicians, mechanics, salesmen, clerks, waitresses, writers, editors, schoolteachers, ranchers, and farmers."<sup>13</sup> Many paperback publishing houses, particularly those specializing in mysteries (Dell, Avon, Popular Library), were started by men who had learned how to sell cheap fiction in the pulp magazine business.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, paperbacks were scandalous for the same reasons pulp magazines were. One historian describes paperbacks as "little more than second-rate trash. Literary flotsam. Schlock turned out to appease a gluttonous mass appetite for sex and sensationalism."<sup>15</sup>

9. The best summary and analysis of this material is Stephen Karetzky, *Reading Research and Librarianship: A History and Analysis* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1982). Those studies that focused on the reading of factory workers specifically include Gray and Monroe; Rasche; and Hazel Ormsbee, *The Young Employed Girl* (New York: Woman's P, 1927) 75-95.

10. Gray and Monroe 149; Douglas Waples, *People and Print: Social Aspects of Reading in the Depression* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1938) 150-52.

11. This claim was commonplace in both the popular press and the scholarly work of librarians and adult educators of the period. For examples from library research, see Gray and Munroe 84, 150, 206-07; and Rasche 10, 12. For an example from the popular press, see Adamic. Adamic's findings are challenged by Robert Cantwell, "What the Working Class Reads," *The New Republic* 17 July 1935: 274-76. Cantwell argues that most of the readers checking Twain, Shaw, Hardy, and the Greek classics out of the public library were working class.

12. Although Alfred Knopf published Hammett, Chandler, and George Harmon Coxe as quality Borzoi mystery hardcovers, the vast majority of sales of hard-boiled detective novels were always cheap paperback reprint editions. Detective, mystery and suspense fiction was the largest special category on general bestseller lists, but almost never appeared on hardcover lists before 1965. The bulk of initial hardcover runs were sold to lending libraries. Alice Payne Hackett, *70 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1965* (New York: Bowker, 1967) includes figures for three Hammett and Chandler novels on the all-time bestsellers list. Hammett's *The Thin Man* sold 1,398,445 copies between its initial publication in 1934 and 1965, of which 1,363,000 were paperbacks. His *The Maltese Falcon* sold 1,098,001 copies total, of which 1,085,800 were paper. Figures for Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* are 1,388,220 total copies, of which 1,384,340 were paperback. For a discussion of the world of the hard-boiled paperbacks, see Geoffrey O'Brien, *Hardboiled America: The Lurid Years of Paperbacks* (New York: Reinhold, 1981).

13. Tebbel and Zuckerman 296.

14. Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton, 1984) chap. 5.

15. Davis xi.

Sometimes the hard-boiled detective fiction in pulp magazines and the hard-boiled fiction in paperbacks were the same fiction. Many hard-boiled detective novels were minimally edited reprints of serials from pulp magazines. Readers of Raymond Chandler's novels will have a disturbing sense of *déjà vu* reading his pulp fiction, since the novels' characters, plots, and whole pages of dialogue were "cannibalized" from the pulp fiction he published in *Black Mask* and *Detective Fiction Weekly*.

Readers of pulp fiction, then, included people from all walks of life, but the majority were probably craftworkers and laborers, clerks, and small shopkeepers, representatives of the "producing classes."<sup>16</sup> Many were young and poorly educated, and the rhetoric produced by librarians, journalists, and other culture workers about them is marked by a missionary zeal to uplift their reading tastes. Perhaps the best evidence that the audience for pulp fiction was comprised of the economically and socially marginal is the dearth of data available. Mass-market magazines during this period did a great deal of market research about middle-class consumers. That these widely practiced techniques were not applied to pulp magazine audiences suggests that publishers did not believe their incomes were large enough to make them attractive targets for national brand advertising.

Pulp audiences were also divided by gender. Romance pulps were for women; the vast array of action and adventure pulps, for men. Hard-boiled detective fiction was marketed as particularly manly fare. *Black Mask*, the most important publishing outlet for hard-boiled detective fiction between the wars, was subtitled "The He-Man's Magazine." Editor Joseph Thompson Shaw published an editorial in 1933 in which he described the ideal *Black Mask* reader:

He is vigorous-minded, hard ... responsive to the thrill of danger, the stirring exhilaration of clean, swift, hard action ... [he is] a man who ... knows the song of a bullet. The soft, slithering hiss of a swift-thrown knife, the feel of hard fists, the call of courage.<sup>17</sup>

What did these working-class, male readers make of the detective pulps they bought in such large quantities? How did they appropriate these mass-produced fictions to meet their psychological and social needs? Although wealthy people with access to education and print media leave all sorts of evidence—diaries, letters, autobiographies, personal libraries, etc.—which give testimony to what they read and how they read it, the "marginal" readers of pulp magazines who interest me were of a social and class position that made it unlikely they would leave behind this kind of evidence. However, the ads that targeted workers in pulp magazines between the wars offer a wealth

16. On the use of this term in the nineteenth century, see Denning 45-46.

17. *Black Mask* XVI, no. 2 (Apr. 1933): 7.

of clues to the kinds of subjects created or addressed by pulp magazines, their primary preoccupations, and the ways they made sense of the world.

Ad men could easily measure the effectiveness of the ads placed in pulp magazines because most were mail-order ads.<sup>18</sup> Mail-in coupons included a tracking number to identify the magazine or group of magazines from which the reader had clipped the ad, giving the advertiser an accurate count of consumers reached through a specific periodical. Often pulp advertisers paid according to the quantity of orders received rather than a fixed amount for the advertising space.<sup>19</sup> This kind of consumer feedback loop allowed advertisers to pinpoint the most effective advertising appeals for a particular reading public. As a consequence, patterns in the kinds of successful ad appeals made to working-class readers over a period of decades are a rough indication of some of their most pressing concerns and preoccupations.

One of the most striking aspects of these ads is their preoccupation with what advertising historian Roland Marchand calls “the parable of the first impression.”<sup>20</sup> In a large, complex urban world, social exchanges increasingly took place between strangers. These strangers, with no prior knowledge of one another’s character or history, had to make judgements about each other based on appearance alone. In such a world, bad breath, poorly-cut clothes, or a tacky living room could indeed spell disaster for one’s career or social life. These ads paid intensely close attention to self-presentation, acknowledging that one’s social mobility depended to a great extent on the skill with which one purchased and displayed commodities. One assembled a “self,” so to speak, from a variety of consumer goods, and one “read” the social order by becoming fluent in the language of commodities.

The parable of the first impression was part of a larger transformation of American culture around the turn of the century. Warren Susman distinguishes between a nineteenth-century culture of character (tied to the needs of a producer economy of scarcity) and a twentieth-century culture of personality (tied to the needs of a consumer economy of abundance).<sup>21</sup> These cultures were competing worldviews, residual and emergent, that often coexisted in uneasy tension. If “character” was essential for maintaining the social order in an economy requiring hard work, thrift, and self-sacrifice, then the new consumer economy of abundance called for a “personality” which

18. Pulp magazines were unusual in that they continued to run mail-order ads into the 1950s. Slick-paper magazines, which relied more heavily on advertising to make a profit, had largely abandoned this kind of advertising by 1900 (Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* [New York: Verso, 1996] 186).

19. Hersey 72. On advertising in pulp magazines more generally, see Hersey chap. 5.

20. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 210-16.

21. Warren Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 271-86.

desired self-realization—specifically through the purchase of certain consumer goods—rather than self-denial. The cluster of terms which go with the culture of character, Susman maintains, have to do with one's (essential, fundamental) moral fiber: "duty," "work," "honor" and, most importantly, "manhood." The culture of personality focused attention on people's surfaces or social performances—manners, personal grooming and clothing—rather than on moral concerns.

Pulp ads and the pulp detective fiction with which they were published attempted to rethink identity in light of an emergent consumer economy and the culture of personality that went with it. In Susman's terms, pulp magazines were engaged in negotiating an uneasy rapprochement between a residual, artisan culture focused on work, production, and "character" and an emergent culture of personality that focused on consumption and display of commodities. They took up such questions as: What constituted "manhood" in a world where skilled artisanal work and the family wage that used to accompany it were both eroding? Where did it leave a working man when his social position depended increasingly on the consumer goods he could (or could not) afford to buy? Could a worker reconcile his artisanal character with the impression management increasingly necessary to get ahead in the modern world?

The tensions between a residual culture of character and an emergent, commodity-linked culture of personality are readily apparent in a group of ads from *Black Mask*. Like the ads in upscale magazines, pulp ads were forever making a reader aware of his possible failings in self-presentation and the social and professional consequences of these faux pas. The pulp ads were different, however, in the amount of text given over to explaining to readers the worldview out of which such concern for self-presentation arose. If upscale magazines were addressing middle-class readers who had learned impression management as a matter of course, pulp ads had to make a case for self-fashioning, which, to judge from the length of most of these ads, did not come at all naturally.<sup>22</sup> The long-winded didacticism of these ads is striking. One explained:

In this day and age attention to our appearance is an absolute necessity if you expect to make the most out of life. Not only should you wish to appear as attractive as possible for your own satisfaction, which is alone well worth your efforts, but you will find the world in general judging you greatly, if not wholly, by your "looks." Therefore it pays to "look your best" at all times. Permit no one to see you looking otherwise; it will injure your welfare! Upon the impression you constantly make rests the failure or success of your life.<sup>23</sup>

22. Pierre Bourdieu argues that different classes have different levels of interest in self-presentation, levels of awareness directly related to the material and symbolic profits to be reaped from the labor market for qualities of appearance. See *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) 202.

23. *Black Mask* II, no. 3 (Dec. 1920).

This ad was promoting a device that promised to straighten and beautify crooked or ugly noses, a device marketed specifically to southern Italians and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who lacked a classical (ethnically unmarked) profile. Rather than merely asking, “Why didn’t you get that promotion? Could it be your nose?” (as I suspect an upscale version of the ad might have read), the ad had to expend a great many words explaining how the appearance of your nose might conceivably be related to your career trajectory.

Periodicals targeting working-class readers, then, ultimately had to work a great deal harder than those targeting wealthier readers to get the same message across. The message—that “selves” are assembled from commodities purchased in the marketplace, and that they can be (re)assembled at will to please different audiences—came easier to bourgeois readers than to working-class readers, since it was continuous with professional work experiences in a way it was not for laborers.

Other ads focused more specifically on dress. For example, Lee ran a series of advertisements for work clothes in *Black Mask* in the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>24</sup> Most of these were comic-strip ads featuring working-class men who ceased languishing in their dead-end jobs and got promoted once they were alerted to the importance of dressing for success in Lee overalls. The protagonists of these ads, the “everymen” with whom readers were expected to identify, were unambiguously blue-collar workingmen—carpenters, bricklayers, machinists, etc.<sup>25</sup> Yet Lee ads attempted to map a white-collar way of purchasing and inhabiting clothes (for their appearance vs. their function) onto these workers. One 1941 Lee ad explained:

Do you LOOK the deserving man you are? Many men think they are “stalled,” when actually they are just sidetracked because their real ability is disguised by ill-fitting “ordinary work clothes.” The remedy is simple. You can have that smart, get-ahead appearance with popular Lee “promotion clothes.” They draw favorable attention to you and your work at no extra cost.<sup>26</sup>

There is an odd mapping of a surface model of identity onto an older, depth model in this ad. The self-presentation will not get you the promotion per se, it will merely make it possible for your work/character (“real ability”) to become visible. The wife of one of the newly promoted Lee-clad workers summed up how it works: “You had the ability all the time! Lee overalls made you look the part!”<sup>27</sup> Ad writers were attempting to “sell” workers on impression management by maintaining that their artisanal world and the world of commodi-

24. See, for example, *Black Mask* XX, no. 8 (Oct. 1937): 3; *Black Mask* XX, no. 9 (Nov. 1937): 3.

25. *Black Mask* XIX, no. 12 (Feb. 1937): 3.

26. *Black Mask* XXIV, no. 2 (June 1941): inside back cover.

27. *Black Mask* XX, no. 9 (Nov. 1937): 3.



ties did not, in fact, conflict. In this ad, at least, wise commodity purchases *help* a working man get recognition for his skill and expertise.<sup>28</sup>

## II. *The Detective and the Commodity*

SUCCESSFUL ADS THAT ran in pulp magazines steadily for several decades hailed readers as workers concerned with learning bourgeois rules of self-presentation, a concern also addressed by the hard-boiled fiction published alongside them. Hard-boiled fiction's obsessive interest in clothing and interiors testifies to its preoccupation with how these apparently "trivial" matters were deeply enmeshed with the (re)production of class hierarchies.<sup>29</sup> For example, Raymond Chandler's 1939 *The Big Sleep* opens with a discussion of just what the best-dressed private eyes are wearing these days. Detective Philip Marlowe explains:

I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.<sup>30</sup>

This passage makes clear that those with family fortunes present themselves and conduct themselves differently from the working classes. They dress in matching, conservative colors and understated, repeating patterns; they place great importance on a close shave; they believe one's appearance is intimately linked to one's success in life. Such modes of self-presentation differed markedly from those of the working classes in the early twentieth century. Working men valued work clothes for their function rather than their appearance, and working-class women frequently made great sacrifices in order to have the money to "put on style"—flashy hats, gaudy-colored finery, obvious makeup—in which to go out on the town.<sup>31</sup>

28. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas argues that capitalist societies draw on the borrowed legitimacy of past cultural values and beliefs (the patriarchal family, religion, etc.) to justify the current capitalist order, although capitalism itself contributes to the destruction of these very institutions. In this case, the rise of consumer culture, intimately linked to mass production and the de-skilling of artisanal work, is invoked as a way to further a skilled workman's interests. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975) 71-75.

29. Few scholars have commented on the omnipresence of descriptions of commodities and consumer goods in hard-boiled detective fiction. Fredric Jameson argues that these descriptions are evidence of the writers' sophistication about consumer culture ("On Raymond Chandler," rpt. in *The Poetics of Murder*, ed. Glenn Most and William Stowe [New York: Harcourt, 1983] 122-48). Dennis Porter argues in *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) that the pleasure readers experience has far less to do with the denouement which restores cognitive and social order at the end of the detective story and much more to do with the tension (experienced by the reader as suspense) between the drive toward a solution and closure and the delaying, impeding sections of description (including clothing and interiors) which slow progress toward that end. R. Gordon Kelly argues that the skills and cognitive styles modeled by the detective are necessary skills for making one's way in modern life, skills that include the ability to draw conclusions about the background and reliability of experts on whom we must rely based on their self-presentation (R. Gordon Kelly, *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life* [Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998]).

30. Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939; New York: Vintage, 1992) 3.

31. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986) 65.

Juxtapose this with Marlowe's description in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) of Moose Malloy, a description Chandler lifted directly from a short story he wrote for *Black Mask* in the 1930s:

He wore a shaggy borsalino hat, a rough gray sports coat with white golf balls on it for buttons, a brown shirt, a yellow tie, pleated gray flannel slacks and alligator shoes with white explosions on the toes. From his outer breast pocket cascaded a show handkerchief of the same brilliant yellow as his tie. There were a couple of colored feathers tucked into the band of his hat, but he didn't really need them. Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food.<sup>32</sup>

In this passage, Moose is the perfect opposite of Philip Marlowe, who took care to be conservatively dressed when calling on a millionaire. Moose's loud clothes call attention to him as he walks along the anonymous byways of the city, a direct violation of the bourgeois conduct manuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which urged making one's self inconspicuous on the street.<sup>33</sup>

However, Moose's apparel makes perfect sense when considered from within a working-class worldview. Sunday clothes (as distinct from merely functional work clothes) "were visible displays of social standing and self-respect in the rituals of church-going, promenading and visiting" in working-class communities in the early twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> In the story, Moose has just been paroled after eight years in prison, and he is in search of his long-lost love, Velma, to whom he intends to propose marriage. His outrageous costuming, then, is a ritual adjunct to his wooing. He dresses in his ostentatious best to communicate the significance and gravity of the occasion to Velma and any bystanders who might witness their reunion.

By dominant bourgeois standards, this social faux pas is particularly glaring. Moose is *so* loudly attired, he even calls attention to himself in a mixed neighborhood of blacks and southern and eastern European immigrants like the Greek barber Marlowe is trying to track down when he spots Moose. None of these groups, Marlowe notes dryly, is particularly known for its subdued styles of dress. We know that Moose is one such immigrant because Marlowe describes his features ("curly black hair and heavy eyebrows that almost met over his thick nose") and his bearing ("like a hunky immigrant catching his first sight of the Statue of Liberty") in stereotypical terms. Moreover, Moose needs a shave and appears to Marlowe as the kind of man who "would always need a shave," who would never be able to pass for respectable, however hard he tried.<sup>35</sup>

32. Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940; New York: Vintage, 1992) 4.

33. John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990) 169.

34. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* 63.

35. Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* 4, 3.

In this description, Marlowe is reading what Pierre Bourdieu calls “bodily hexis”—dress, bearing, speech, and manners—as redundant and overlapping signifiers of class position. It is through such details, which testify to our history of relative poverty or abundance, that class hierarchies are (re)produced.<sup>36</sup> Tastes in such seemingly trivial matters as clothing or food or interior decoration, then, are crucially important indicators of class and power relationships at work in the world. Marlowe, completely fluent in reading clothing and manners as signs, passes on the expertise to less savvy readers.

Bourdieu argues that professionals and white-collar workers pay a great deal of attention to their appearance, investing much time and money into self-presentation, because professional labor markets reward these efforts. Working men reap next to no material benefit from meticulous attention to dress which has nothing to do with one’s promotion on the shop floor.<sup>37</sup> The bourgeois preoccupation with the appearance of clothes should be juxtaposed with working-class concerns about the function of clothing—its durability, its value for the money. A shave and socks with clocks on them are not likely to increase one’s earning power in mills, mines, or factories (so why bother?), but there are real social and economic returns from such things among the managerial classes.

Hard-boiled fiction’s lessons in self-presentation, then, were lessons in the rules of bourgeois life, a demystification of the games the ruling class played. The politics of such a project were fantastically ambivalent. Mastering the bodily hexis of the hereditary bourgeoisie might further an individual worker’s social mobility, but it did nothing to address the wages or working conditions of laborers as a class. However, the wide diffusion of bourgeois dress and manners theoretically had some socially destabilizing effects. If everyone possessed them, how could social hierarchies based on them be maintained?

Marlowe’s flippant self-description at the opening of *The Big Sleep* has a pedagogical function, but its irony complicates how the lesson worked. Although he is dressed to please a millionaire, Marlowe’s breezy description of the scene ultimately casts him as superior to the “dress for success” mentality. He plays the game, but is careful not to take it too seriously. Similarly, his tone addresses readers as savvy analysts of clothing and other class cues who are nevertheless superior to the game of impression management. The ironic tone might also encourage readers to feel that they were already in-the-know, bolstering their self-confidence while instructing them.

36. Bourdieu 241.

37. Bourdieu 202.

Marlowe's flippancy about self-presentation models the attitude of the hereditary bourgeoisie toward cultural capital. In Bourdieu's model, people who come by their cultural capital honestly (by birth and breeding) display the self-confidence, casualness, and easy familiarity of the hereditary bourgeoisie; the upwardly mobile lower classes (who get their cultural capital exclusively at school and from books) give themselves away through their angst-ridden attention to correctness.<sup>38</sup> Hard-boiled fiction codified and systematized for workers the "legitimate" taste of the upper classes, but its hard-boiled heroes were not at all intimidated by it. The detective had the same easy casualness, the same sense of privilege and self-confidence, as the most dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat. Marlowe and his colleagues not only taught "legitimate" modes of self-presentation through clothing and interior decoration, but also the "legitimate" way of deploying such knowledge—casually, with an air of entitlement, of "bluff."

Marlowe's sympathy for Moose in *Farewell, My Lovely* reveals a class solidarity. Moose's old girlfriend takes advantage of him; the police believe him to be a heinous criminal; but Marlowe thinks Moose deserves a break. As a largely absent presence for most of the book (the police keep arresting the wrong swarthy, loudly dressed 6'5" tall man), Moose is nonetheless the most appealing of the characters. He is a simple man—not a sophisticated manipulator of impressions, not a savvy performer of the rituals of polite society—merely a man who is what he appears to be. Marlowe may have become an astute reader of the signs of distinction the upper classes employ, but he is, at heart, a working man whose functional aesthetic has affinity with Moose's own.

However critical of the culture of personality and the commodities that supported it, hard-boiled fiction trafficked in what Jean-Christophe Agnew calls a "commodity aesthetic," that is, "a way of seeing the world in general, and the self and society in particular, as so much raw space to be furnished with mobile, detachable, and transactional goods."<sup>39</sup> Under such an aesthetic, clothing and interior decoration became not just representations of or likenesses of selves, but "interchangeable with those selves, something out of which those selves were at once improvised and imprisoned, constructed and confined."<sup>40</sup> Hard-boiled fiction's engagement with commodities, then, was an engagement with different worldviews, with ways of conceiving of selves. Moreover, these worldviews were articulated through both class and gender.

38. Bourdieu 66.

39. See especially Jean-Christophe Agnew, "A House of Fiction: Domestic Interiors and the Commodity Aesthetic" 135 and Karen Halttunen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality," *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989).

40. Agnew 136.

*III. Class, Gender, and the Commodity Aesthetic*

THE PREOCCUPATION WITH reading identities from appearances begins on the first page of Raymond Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake* (1943). Private Detective Philip Marlowe enters the headquarters of the Gillerlain Company to meet with Derace Kingsley, a new client who is an executive with the firm. Gillerlain, a cosmetics company, shows great concern with putting its best face forward to visitors:

The Gillerlain Company was on the seventh floor, in front, behind the swinging double plate glass doors bound in platinum. Their reception room had Chinese rugs, dull silver walls, angular but elaborate furniture, sharp shiny bits of abstract sculpture on pedestals and a tall display in a triangular showcase in the corner. On tiers and steps and islands and promontories of shining mirror-glass it seemed to contain every fancy bottle and box that had ever been designed. There were creams and powders and soaps and toilet waters for every season and every occasion. There were perfumes in tall thin bottles that looked as if a breath would blow them over and perfumes in little pastel phials tied with ducky satin bows, like little girls at a dancing class. The cream of the crop seemed to be something very small and simple in a squat amber bottle. It was in the middle at eye height, had a lot of space to itself, and was labeled *Gillerlain Regal, The Champagne of Perfumes*. It was definitely the stuff to get. One drop of that in the hollow of your throat and the matched pink pearls started falling on you like summer rain.<sup>41</sup>

The Gillerlain Company uses its lobby to display its wealth and modernity. They have decked themselves out in imported rugs, elaborate furniture, and art that testifies to their prosperity and cosmopolitan tastes. Unlike the over-stuffed clutter of Victorian parlors, the lobby features the clean lines of modern design—hard, metallic and glass surfaces, abstract art, and cold colors that evoke the sharp, shiny surfaces of planes, trains, and other aerodynamic, modern machines.<sup>42</sup>

The sculptures, art for art's sake, are displayed on pedestals that raise them above the economic work of the office into an aesthetic realm. Like the office art, the actual products of the company, cosmetics and perfumes, are displayed above the utilitarian world. Although it is the business of the company to produce these goods, they wish to present them to the world as having no relationship to the labor and raw materials from which they came. Presented as aesthetic goods rather than economic ones, these creams and soaps and toilet waters are displayed in expensive containers on mirror glass, focusing attention once again on images rather than uses. Moreover, their function is to create attractive surfaces on people, to present beautiful faces that may or may not reflect the souls within.

41. Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake* (1943; New York: Vintage, 1992) 3-4. Subsequent page references are in the text.

42. My reading of this interior is particularly influenced by "Design" in William Marling, *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain and Chandler* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995) 72-92; Agnew; and Halttunen. For a useful juxtaposition of this modernistic design motif and its classical complement in advertising of the 1920s and 1930s, see Marchand 127-28.

Marlowe recognizes the evidence of material wealth in the lobby décor and the customary distanced, aesthetic way of interacting with the world that arises from it. Pierre Bourdieu calls this worldview the “aesthetic disposition” or “the pure gaze” and argues that it is the fundamental distinguishing factor separating the hereditary bourgeoisie from the lower classes, whose functional aesthetic/ethos refuses the distinction between art and life, the privileging of form over function:

[N]othing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works ... and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even “common” ... or to apply the principles of a “pure” aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress or decoration, for example.<sup>43</sup>

However, the tone of Marlowe’s final comment deflates the image of beauty, ease, and leisure created by the prior accumulation of detail. “Matched pink pearls ... falling on you like summer rain” evokes a fantasy of leisure, wealth, and luxury goods, but Marlowe is not fooled by it. Waiting to see his client, he looks the place over. “You can’t tell anything about an outfit like that,” he insists, “they might be making millions, and they might have the sheriff in the back room, with his chair tilted against the safe” (6).

Marlowe’s immunity to the spell of consumer culture and the spectatorship it encourages arises from his own economic and social situation. As an independent entrepreneur, Marlowe belongs to an older economic order. The slick, modern surfaces produced by big corporations selling their consumer goods are nothing to him. When Kingsley, Marlowe’s client, admonishes him for his less than cordial manner, Marlowe replies, “That’s all right ... I’m not selling it” (7), a response Kingsley takes as a personal insult. That Kingsley is selling *his* demeanor and appearance becomes increasingly clear when after “march[ing] briskly behind about eight hundred dollars’ worth of executive desk and plant[ing] his backside in a tall leather chair,” Kingsley admits that “I have a good job here, but a job is all it is. I can’t stand scandal. I’d be out of here in a hurry if my wife got mixed up with the police” (8, 14). Marlowe does not have a posh, air-conditioned private office, but at least his seedy place of business is his for keeps.

It is no accident that Gillerlain is a cosmetics company. The cosmetics industry came of age with commodity culture, experiencing phenomenal growth between 1890 and 1930.<sup>44</sup> The beauty culture of the early twentieth century, centered in expensive, urban salons designed to service the needs of

43. Bourdieu 40.

44. On the history of the cosmetics industry, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Holt, 1998) and “Making Faces: The Cosmetics Industry and the Cultural Construction of Gender, 1890-1930,” *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, 2nd ed., ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 1994) 372-94.

elite white women, was at first quite critical of visible cosmetics. Rather than painting the face, entrepreneurs like Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden focused on beauty regimens which included diet, exercise, breathing, rest, and appropriate cleansing to achieve a healthy, balanced lifestyle that would allow one's natural beauty to become apparent. Visible cosmetics, then, were at best a stop-gap measure to cover the imperfections in one's skin while one excised the imperfections in one's life that caused them.

The "mass" line of cosmetics which sold in drugstores, however, abandoned "true" beauty principles to embrace visible artifice, particularly that made popular by film actresses whose close-up photos were used to promote the lipstick and mascara they wore in films to working-class women. Makeovers focused on creating different "looks" through obvious use of color. These looks, the fashionable faces which women in the 1920s and 1930s could change at will, were like the roles of screen stars. Where the beauty culture method had one true face to go with each individual, each new woman of the 1920s could choose any number of fashionable faces, each designed to please a particular audience.

*The Lady in the Lake* focuses on the disappearance and subsequent murder of two such fashionable women: Derace Kingsley's wife Crystal and Muriel Chess, wife of the caretaker at the Kingsleys' mountain cabin. Both disappear on the same night, and neither is found until over a month later. One body (identified as Muriel Chess) is pinned under a pier in the lake near the mountain cabin. Marlowe spends most of the text tracking the other woman (identified as Crystal Kingsley), who is strangled in her apartment shortly after meeting with him. At the center of the novel is a case of reversed identities. The lady in the lake was actually Crystal Kingsley, and the blonde woman Marlowe spends the novel tracking is not Crystal but Muriel Chess. It seems the various cuckolded husbands, ex-husbands, and lovers of these two reckless blondes keep mistaking one for the other, because they are so inept at reading the (painted and costumed) surfaces with which these women present them.

The two women are, in fact, quite different. Everyone believes Crystal Kingsley is "a reckless little idiot with no brains and no control," but Muriel Chess is a "cold-blooded little bitch" in Marlowe's summary statement (208-09). The Crystal Kingsley her husband describes is "young, pretty, reckless, and wild," prone to drink and easily seduced by men who take advantage of her (15). She is such a poor crook she cannot even get away with the petty shoplifting in which she periodically engages. Muriel Chess has a previous life as Mildred Haviland, accomplished liar, murderer, and blackmailer. She is so clever that she fools most of the men in this novel most of the time. Only the bellhop Marlowe questions at one point understands how easily the

men can be manipulated: "These small blondes are so much of a pattern that a change of clothes or light or makeup makes them all alike or all different" (97). For example, recognizing his wife's clothes and her jade necklace, Bill Chess promptly identifies Crystal Kingsley's blonde corpse as Muriel. Even Marlowe fails to identify Muriel Chess. In their first encounter, she introduces herself as Mrs. Fallbrook, the landlady. She claims to have been poking around the rented home of Crystal Kingsley's playboy lover, Chris Lavery, trying to collect her overdue rent:

She was a slender woman of uncertain age, with untidy brown hair, a scarlet mess of a mouth, too much rouge on her cheekbones, shadowed eyes. She wore a blue tweed suit that looked like the dickens with a purple hat that was doing its best to hang on to the side of her head. (107)

When Marlowe encounters her again, masquerading as Crystal Kingsley, he does not recognize her: "I tried to make up my mind whether her face was familiar or just such a standard type of lean, rather hard, prettiness that I must have seen it ten thousand times" (199). Marlowe confesses that he "got a rather different idea" of her from Kingsley (the husband) and Lavery (the dead lover), but he fails to make anything of the discrepancy. She looks enough like Crystal Kingsley that he can dismiss her sharper intellect and "quiet secret face" (203). Marlowe talks to Muriel for over half an hour before realizing she is the "landlady" he saw at the scene of Chris Lavery's murder. He could not connect the "slim, brown-haired girl in coal black slacks and a yellow shirt and a long gray coat" with the landlady in the loud purple hat, blue tweed suit and "messed-up makeup" (199). Having assembled different selves for each occasion from clothing and cosmetics, Muriel/Mildred effectively *makes* herself a different person where the unsophisticated male observers are concerned.

There are, in fact, far too many cosmetics for Marlowe's comfort in *The Lady in the Lake*, evidence of the duplicitous nature of the consuming women at the center of the case. When searching through the contents of Muriel Chess's dressing table, Marlowe notes that "there was the usual stuff women use on their faces and fingernails and eyebrows, and it seemed to me that there was too much of it" (87). The murder scene in Lavery's house is also marked by an excess of cosmetics and costuming. There is face powder spilled on the dressing table and dark lipstick smeared on a towel hanging over the waste basket. Even after Lavery's body has grown cold, enough perfume lingers in the air to testify to there being too much of it as well (114).

All sorts of important epiphanies hinge on costuming in this novel.<sup>45</sup> Muriel Chess's double life as Mildred Haviland is unveiled by an anklet from

45. Such epiphanies were common in hard-boiled fiction. See, for example, Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1931; New York: Viking, 1989) where the solution to the murder of a senator's son hinges on the absence of a hat and cane at the murder scene.



her ex-husband, which she had cut off her ankle and hidden in the powdered sugar at her new husband's place. "A woman's hiding place," Marlowe calls it, after the sheriff admits he never would have found it had he not clumsily knocked over the whole box accidentally (84). The police pin the murder of Chris Lavery on Crystal Kingsley, because the black and white suit in which she was last seen at a hotel in San Bernadino is hanging in Lavery's closet. Marlowe begins to suspect that Muriel Chess met with foul play when he finds a peach silk and lace slip in her drawer: "silk slips were not being left behind that year, not by any woman in her senses" (87). The murder of the dope doctor's wife is proved not to be a suicide by her high-heeled dancing slippers, whose heels were oddly unmarked by her supposed suicide walk down the rough concrete path to the garage (188). Marlowe finally recognizes Muriel/Mildred as Chris Lavery's "landlady" when tipped off by another detail of costuming. The dark landlady must be Muriel, he decides, since the loud purple hat, so awful with the (dyed) dark hair, would have looked quite sharp on a blonde (208).

On the most literal level, these epiphanies suggest that costuming and self-presentation are a matter of life and death, that such "trivial" details signify much larger issues to which one must attend. These items of apparel are object lessons, then, material demonstrations of the importance of attending to one's self-presentation and the self-presentations of others. This is not to say that hard-boiled fictions were merely "Dress for Success" manuals—that they simply laid out the different modes of self-presentation characteristic of different classes of people. Hard-boiled fiction had some value judgments to make about commodity culture and the (feminine) consumers who were its most enthusiastic subjects.

Marlowe's preference for men—slightly scruffy men—whose rough edges testify to their lack of interest in misleading self-presentation is obvious in *The Lady in the Lake*. Sheriff Jim Patton of the isolated mountain community appeals to Marlowe precisely because of his functional approach to dress. Marlowe describes him:

He had a sweat-stained Stetson on the back of his head and his large hairless hands were clasped comfortably over his stomach, above the waistband of a pair of khaki pants that had been scrubbed thin years ago. His shirt matched the pants except that it was even more faded. It was buttoned tight to the man's thick neck and undecorated by a tie.... The star on his left breast had a bent point.... I liked everything about him. (53)

The sheriff's lack of pretension, his desire to represent himself exactly as he is, is a refreshing contrast to the outrageously costumed, outrageously dishonest, consuming women who wreak havoc with Marlowe's case.

In *The Lady in the Lake*, Chandler articulates class through gender, setting the virility of working-class men and women against the effeminacy of

wealthy women and men. The “working men,” for example, include Marlowe, the rural sheriff in his weathered khakis, and Kingsley’s secretary, Adrienne Fromsett, who qualifies as a “man” in Chandler’s terms. She costumes herself in a steel gray business suit, a blue shirt and a man’s tie, and her tough-guy act keeps Marlowe effectively in his place. Her manly credentials are evident not only in her masculine apparel and tough demeanor, but also in her frugally furnished apartment. Her paycheck, she tells Marlowe, is so small that she cannot even afford to buy the Gillerlain cosmetics her company sells (129). Her income, if not her gender, has placed her outside consumer culture.

These residual remnants of artisan culture are increasingly beset by consuming “women” of all sorts—carefully costumed playboys (Lavery), executives in fancy offices (Kingsley), and the little blondes with their too-full closets and excessive makeup who are at the center of the novel. However successfully these “women” consumers dupe the commodity-illiterate men over the course of the novel, they are ultimately killed off in acts of violent narrative retribution. Lavery is shot in his shower (significantly, while he is primping to go out), and the two brutally murdered blondes end up in decidedly unpretty poses (the ghastly waterlogged corpse in the lake, the strangled and mutilated body in the hotel room).

This novel, then, clearly set out rules by which a residual artisan culture of manly producers and an emergent commodity culture of feminine consumers operated. Like hard-boiled fiction more generally, it served as both a guide to reading the social order as it was inscribed in differently classed bodies and homes and a critique of the consumer society that conceived of identities as surfaces assembled from the raw materials of commodity culture. Although Chandler explains the operations of both worlds, he clearly articulates a nostalgic preference for the world of artisan producers, a preference articulated in terms of the everyday artifacts through which power relationships are (re)produced. In hard-boiled fantasy, a working man’s weathered khakis are always preferable to the designer suits of wealthy women, and the monastic domiciles of hard-boiled heroes are superior to the ostentatiously furnished homes of the wealthy.

Raymond Williams closes his 1958 *Culture and Society* by suggesting that working-class culture is basically collective in nature, whereas bourgeois culture is characterized by ideas, institutions, and structures of feeling that are profoundly individualistic.<sup>46</sup> If Williams is correct, then pulp detective magazines were an uneasy class *mélange*. John G. Cawelti described the hard-boiled private eye as “a marginal professional carrying on his business from

46. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Harper, 1966) 327.

the kind of office associated with unsuccessful dentists, small mail-order businesses and shyster lawyers,” and Leslie Fiedler was probably right to describe him as an “honest proletarian.”<sup>47</sup> Hard-boiled private eyes worked on the wrong side of the tracks, spoke a tough, colloquial slang, and were continuously doing battle with employers and police to defend their right to carry out their investigations their way. Hard-boiled private eyes were, however—first and foremost—individuals. They did *not* belong to professional organizations for private eyes. Hard-boiled writing’s celebration of proletarian worldviews was offset by careful instructions in consumerist ways. It recognized consumption—the strategic purchase and display of commodities—as important to the reproduction of class hierarchies, but hailed workers as *individual* consumers. In contrast, the contemporaneous labor movement’s strategy of encouraging shoppers to “look for the union label” emphasized class solidarity in the face of structural and institutional inequalities. Hard-boiled fiction’s preoccupation with clothing and interiors, then, was evidence of a larger concern with how identities are formed and read. Readers of this fiction were hailed simultaneously as savvy creatures of commodity culture and defenders of artisanal character in a world increasingly overrun by (effeminate) consuming/performing subjects. Pulp detective fiction shaped male workers into consumers by selling them what they wanted to hear—stories about manly artisan heroes who resisted encroaching commodity culture and the female consumers who came with it.

47. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976) 144; Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Anchor, 1992) 498.