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**STUDIEN ZUR ENGLISCHEN  
UND  
AMERIKANISCHEN LITERATUR**

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**Jopi Nyman**

**Hard-Boiled Fiction  
and Dark Romanticism**

**19**

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**PETER LANG**  
Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften

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# STUDIEN ZUR ENGLISCHEN UND AMERIKANISCHEN LITERATUR

Herausgegeben von Günter Ahrends

Band 19



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## Hard-Boiled Fiction and Dark Romanticism

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This book is dedicated to Kristiina.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

American hard-boiled narratives abound with tough males and dangerous women, gloomy cities and their dangerous streets, love, death, and violence. Through pathos and disappointment the encounters of their protagonists are removed from a simple realistic framework and explored in a romantic manner reminiscent of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville. This study deals with the representation of romanticism in hard-boiled fiction, a tough-edged popular genre which emerged and flourished in popular magazines and novels during the American 1920s and 1930s. In another context I have argued for an interpretation of hard-boiled fiction as a masculine romance in which the object of the romance is power, not love.<sup>1</sup> In this study my point of departure is slightly different. I intend to explore some of the ways in which hard-boiled narratives construct a world in which *romanticism*, *the romantic*, and *romance* function as alternatives to the harsh world of social and cultural change. It is the intention of this study to aim at an explanation of the genre's application of romantic features: how hard-boiled fiction draws from the traditions of romanticism and romance. Since the genre is explicitly gendered, I will also discuss the gendered ideology and the limitations that it imposes on the genre.

While it has been more common to discuss American hard-boiled fiction of the 1920s and the 1930s as a mere variant of detective fiction,<sup>2</sup> in this study the genre is expanded so that other kinds of writing from the period, most notably that of Ernest Hemingway, are discussed as forming part of the hard-boiled genre. Thus, in this study the genre of hard-boiled fiction is defined through ideology rather than formal criteria. It promotes a mas-

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1 See Jopi Nyman, *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

2 See, for instance, Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Penguin, 1985).

culinized view of the autonomous individual and locates him in a tough and competitive world. The genre uses tough-edged language not only to convey an impression of the violent streets but also to show social relations based on power and prestige. Although the surface of the genre speaks for an interpretation of the genre as a realistic form with an emphasis on verisimilitude, in this study it is my intention to point out that while the genre relies on romantic conventions it also thwarts them to present an ideological view of the individual amidst a violent world. Rather than a mere isolated and limited literary genre, hard-boiled fiction is a cultural and historical phenomenon and deserves a cultural reading that does not repeat the critical commonplaces voiced by formalist genre critics and social reductionists. The term hard-boiled fiction cannot be restricted to detective fiction but the genre can be located in a different framework in which popular and high fictions are seen as interacting. In short, this study will attempt to explain in detail how and why this genre not only relies on romantic-like narrative strategies, Gothic, and the romance but also rewrites them for its own purposes.

The novels under study in chapters three and four of this monograph are classics in the genre. They are Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929),<sup>3</sup> James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934),<sup>4</sup> Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935),<sup>5</sup> and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937).<sup>6</sup>

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3 Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (1929; London: Pan, 1975). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *RH*.

4 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain* (1934; London: Picador, 1985). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *TPART*.

5 Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* in *Four Novels by Horace McCoy* (1935; London: Zomba Books, 1983). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *TSHDT*.

6 Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not* (1937; London: TriadGrafton, 1972). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *THAHN*.

While the hard-boiled male, as represented in the genre, tends to show signs of sentimentalism and romantic yearning, in the end he prefers to live his life for himself, concentrating on the fulfilment of his own needs alone according to the requirements of the individualist tradition. Hard-boiled fiction cannot be seen merely as a traditional romance with a happy ending. Because it tends to draw upon the generic repertoire of dark Romance and Gothic, in the early parts of this study this genre will be discussed as a latter-day rewriting of Gothic.

This study relies on the notion of romance as a significant part of the American experience. Romanticism and romance are inherent in the basic idea of America as a land of opportunity and as a new world. Nineteenth-century American literature fully embodies the two sides of romance: death and love, heaven and hell—they all are present in much of Edgar Allan Poe's writing, for instance. The narrative of the young nation can be seen as a narrative of romance and thus also as a narrative of many possibilities. According to Toni Morrison, romance

had everything: nature as subject matter, a system of symbolism, a thematics of the search for self-valorization and validation—above all, the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities. It offered platforms for moralizing and fabulation, and for the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, and terror—and terror's most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened.<sup>7</sup>

Following Morrison's emphasis on significance of the other side of romance as an important element in American literary history, it can be argued that the tradition of American romance is also explored in hard-boiled narratives. As I will argue in chapter two, locating hard-boiled fiction in literary history, the genre can be

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992; London: Picador, 1993) 37.

seen as another version of dark romance, as a romance of darkness, bleakness, and gloom. Its characters wander in a world of despair, searching for redemption but never achieving it totally. In these narratives of terror and violence hard-boiled men struggle to construct a valid and strong identity amidst social and political blurring. While they want to avoid the pitfalls of darkness, they seldom succeed in their tasks but lose their fight.

In chapters three and four of this study I will explore how hard-boiled fiction represents two narratives with romantic implications. In chapter three, "Waste Lands", I deal with the myth of the waste land, and in the fourth chapter my focus is on the projection of the Gothic landscape of terror onto the landscapes of hard-boiled narratives. In these two sections I will demonstrate the ways in which these hard-boiled novels exploit romantic imagery by portraying violence and frustration in the contemporary society of its readers; the other-worldly quest becomes a quest in this world, populated with contemporary monsters and dangers. In other words, in these sections it is my intention to map out the kind of tropes and themes which hard-boiled romanticism relies on, and to discuss the hard-boiled ideology of these works through its application of them.

Of the four novels under study in chapters three and four, the earliest one is Dashiell Hammett's first novel *Red Harvest*, which has been seen as the first hard-boiled detective novel. While it is not as well-known as his later *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), in some respects it is much more interesting. Combining the structure of the detective story with social and political criticism, *Red Harvest* tells about a detective, the Continental Op, who attempts to restore peace to a violent and corrupt mining town named Personville, also known as Poisonville. The Op faces a corrupt community in which everyone appears to be connected to criminality. In the end the detective himself has to rely on illicit means in order to be able to succeed in his task. In fact, he plans a violent series of murders and plays off the criminals against each other. While this novel explores political themes and discusses gangsterism and social and political corruption,

it is, however, rather a critique than a harbinger of alternative social and utopian visions.

James M. Cain's most widely read novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, can also be defined as a hard-boiled crime novel. Based partly on the famous Ruth Snyder-Judd Gray murder trial of 1927, the novel tells about the passionate triangular drama centred on the tramp Frank Chambers, who by accident ends up in a small roadhouse owned by Nick Papadakis. Frank becomes involved with Nick's wife Cora and together they decide to murder Nick. Their first attempt fails, but later they do succeed and set up a fake road accident to conceal the crime. In this they almost succeed as well, but by an unlucky coincidence Nick appears to have taken a new life insurance for himself just before his death. Consequently, the lawyer from the insurance company presses hard, and it is only with the help of a corrupt lawyer, Katz, that they eventually evade conviction. However, the time spent in jail and their readiness to betray each other to save their own lives threatens their mutual trust. Only at the end, when Cora reveals her pregnancy, do they experience a short period of happiness, but soon Cora dies in a road accident and Frank is charged with murder. The novel ends in romantic pathos.

Horace McCoy's Hollywood novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* is a bleak story of two unemployed actors, Robert Syvertsen and Gloria Beatty, who enlist in a marathon dance contest in the hope of either winning or attracting the attention of a Hollywood agent. The dreams of Robert, a romantic idealist, are contrasted with Gloria's cynical views and the harshness of the period. Because the dance contest does not provide them with fortunes, Robert ends up shooting Gloria according to her own wish. The novel is narrated by Robert as he listens to the judge declaring the death sentence. In many ways McCoy's novel rewrites the codes of hard-boiled fiction: perhaps surprisingly, it is not Robert who is the main, or only, tough guy since many masculine characteristics are projected onto Gloria.

The fourth novel under study in this monograph, Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, is by general critical agreement his worst or least successful novel. His only full-length novel set within the borders of the United States tells the story of the tragic decline and troubles of the fisherman and smuggler Harry Morgan. Trying to support his family of four, Morgan takes on various dangerous and violent errands, of which the last ends in his death. Symbolically the death of Morgan epitomizes the end of proper individualism in America and the end of the American dream; the romantic promises of the American dream are no longer plausible despite the protagonist's wishes. The novel, written in hard-boiled mode with its focus on a tough man, is of extreme importance for the discussion of hard-boiled fiction and in particular its gender ideology.

In the fifth chapter of this study my focus is not so much on romanticism as on the representation of romance and romantic relationships. This section deals with James M. Cain's *Serenade*,<sup>8</sup> a curious novel which to some extent can be seen to subvert the generic and gendered conventions of hard-boiled fiction and its application of the romance in particular. I will argue that as soon as the powerful male of more traditional hard-boiled stories, the subject of the romance, is shown to struggle with his (hetero)sexual identity, the genre's conventions collapse and the more traditional romance so often promoted in hard-boiled narratives becomes slightly different though almost as impossible to achieve. *Serenade* is a problematic novel not only because of its conflict with generic conventions but also because it disturbs its readers in many different ways. As Gregory Forter has pointed out, it is curious that the critics who have commented on the novel tend to misremember the

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8 James M. Cain, *Serenade* in *The Five Great Novels by James M. Cain* (1938; London: Picador, 1985). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *S.*