

Notes on Raymond Chandler's "Red Wind"

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Raymond Chandler's claim to a place in the canon of American literature seems to be gaining ground. In 1995, the Library of America dedicated two volumes to Raymond Chandler. Chandler's collected short fiction was finally released in 2002 (in an Everyman's Library edition). The May 2004 issue of *American Heritage Magazine* contained an article by Allen Barra which listed the people who have, in the judgment of the writer, had the greatest influence on popular culture in America over the last fifty years; Raymond Chandler was listed third. Barra says, "[A]lthough Chandler evokes the forties as does no other American writer, his real influence was to be on later decades" (26-7). Barra goes on to assert that Chandler "helped create the look and feel of film noir that haunts Hollywood to this day" (27). Most significant for instructors of literature may be the fact that the recently released Seventh Edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. D* includes Chandler's short story "Red Wind." Chandler has always been recognized as an important author in Great Britain; this prompted Chandler to write in a 1952 letter: "In England I am an author. In the USA just a mystery writer" (*Selected Letters* 320). Perhaps his reputation in the United States is finally (to use a rather tired phrase) "transcending the genre" of detective fiction.

"Red Wind" was first published in the January 1938 issue of *Dime Detective Magazine*. Critic William Marling calls "Red Wind" a "lesser effort, despite its reputation" (65). Chandler himself, in contrast, told Hamish Hamilton in a 1948 letter

that he considered the tale to be one of his best (*Raymond Chandler Speaking* 218).

Marling is perhaps a bit harsh in his valuation; “Red Wind” is one of the most fully developed of Chandler’s short stories, possessing a complete Chandler hero named John Dalmas—a wisecracking, chess-playing, simile-delivering, chivalrous private detective¹. Chandler biographer Jerry Speir notes the many “stylistic affinities” that “Red Wind” shares with Chandler’s novels (98). Though most of these elements are present in earlier stories, Peter Wolfe points out that in “Red Wind” Chandler avoids “stock characters and settings.” This allows Chandler, Wolfe says, to “write with verve, concentration and conviction” (104).

There are several additional noteworthy elements upon which an instructor seeking to effectively teach “Red Wind” might wish to focus. The story concerns a confluence of several of Chandler’s favorite plot elements—blackmail, a necklace, and pearls. As the title indicates, Chandler utilizes weather as a motif. In this case, the hot, dry Santa Ana winds that plague southern California autumns are used to foreshadow violence and death. Calling these winds “red” might evoke thoughts of blood, passion, violence, and perhaps even communist influence. The opening paragraph of the story, a description of the wind, is surely one of the most striking and frequently quoted passages from Chandler’s fiction:

There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that

¹ In fact, “Red Wind” was republished years later with the name of the protagonist changed to Philip Marlowe (the protagonist of each of Chandler’s novels). This was apparently done with Chandler’s approval, indicating that there is no significant difference between Marlowe and Dalmas. Many editions of the story today use Philip Marlowe as the protagonist. I refer to him as Dalmas here for two reasons—it is the original name, and it is the name used in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen.

You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge. (1541)

The story does indeed open with private detective John Dalmas sitting alone in a cocktail lounge drinking a remarkably full glass of beer. The only other people present are the young bartender and a drunk throwing back glasses of straight rye whiskey. The relative peace of a quiet drink is interrupted when a man enters and asks if they have seen a tall, pretty brunette with a “print bolero jacket over a blue crêpe silk dress” (1542) It becomes clear that Chandler is implying that this man, initially identified as Waldo², is homosexual (or at least Dalmas thinks he is); Dalmas says Waldo had a white handkerchief that “peeped coyly from his pocket” and a “tight voice [he] didn’t like” (1542). The drunk at the bar, later identified as Al Tessilore, recognizes Waldo and shoots him. In case the reader did not pick up on the implication of homosexuality, Dalmas later muses, “I was thinking that Waldo had described the girl’s clothes in a way the ordinary man wouldn’t know how to describe them. Printed bolero jacket over blue crêpe silk dress. I didn’t even know what a bolero jacket was” (1545). Critics have noted for years the presence of potentially homoerotic (and homophobic) undertones in Chandler’s writing. Though Chandler seems to have rejected the idea when raised in 1949 by Gershon Legman (*Selected Letters* 188), it hangs over much Chandler criticism³; “Red Wind” provides a good introduction to the theme.

² This character is known to Tessilore as Waldo, but the reader soon discovers that he has several other names as well—Joseph Choate (as he is known to his most-recent employer) and A. B. Hummel (as he is known to his landlord).

³ Accusations of homosexuality in Chandler’s protagonists date back to the 1949 publication of Gershon Legman’s *Love & Death: A Study In Censorship*, in which Legman says that Marlowe is “clearly homosexual” (qtd. in Mason, 97). See Michael Mason’s article “Marlowe, Men and Women,” pp. 246-8 of Tom Hiney’s *Raymond Chandler: A Biography*, pp. 51-5 of Peter Wolfe’s *Something More Than Night*:

Another typically Chandlerian element that is introduced in “Red Wind” is chess as an interest for the protagonist. Chess as a device of plot, setting, and theme is developed more fully in *The Big Sleep*, published the following year, but chess does play a key role in “Red Wind.” When Lola Barsaly (the woman in the blue crêpe silk dress) enters Dalmas’s apartment, the first thing she notices is a chessboard with “a chess problem set out that [Dalmas] couldn’t solve” (1547). Al Tessilore arrives, intent upon killing Dalmas (who was a witness to Waldo’s murder). He also immediately notices the chess set and assumes that a game in progress means another person is in the apartment; Lola is indeed still there, but she is hiding in another room. Dalmas tells Tessilore, “It’s a problem [. . .] Not a game” (1550). It is not clear what it might mean that Dalmas views chess, with its war between anachronistic kings, queens, knights, etc., as a problem, rather than a mere game. This may be a comment on the nature of modern (or postmodern) life itself. It is also unclear why Dalmas plays the game alone. This solitary entertainment may be a comment on the loneliness of a man seeking justice in a world that mocks such outdated conventions as justice and honor. Andrew Mathis contends that Dalmas’s solitary chess game implies that “only he himself is worthy of knightly combat; all other opponents are beneath the game” (48), while Richard Schickel calls his games “the psychic defenses of the lonely man” (159). Chandler brings these implications closer to completion in *The Big Sleep*, but perhaps he had not quite realized it here. The chessboard is eventually knocked over when Dalmas subdues Tessilore; Mathis suggests the image of scattered chessmen represents a rejection of certain elements of knighthood, as if “chivalric rules of combat no longer apply” (48-9). This may be, as the only reason

The Case of Raymond Chandler, pp. 31-3 of Toby Widdicombe’s *A Reader’s Guide to Raymond Chandler*, or pp. 110-5 of Jerry Spier’s *Raymond Chandler* for deeper discussions of this debate.

that Dalmas is able to defeat Tessilore is because Lola distracted Tessilore; in other words, the damsel in distress rescues the knight, an obvious inversion of the traditional pattern of romance narratives.

Dalmas is shown to be a brave and chivalrous hero. After he witnesses Tessilore fatally shoot Waldo and flee, Dalmas runs after him without thought of his own safety. Tessilore is already driving away; Dalmas tells the reader, “I got its license the way I got my first million” (1542). Even in the face of life-threatening danger, Dalmas makes a humorous wisecrack, perhaps indicating that he is resigned to engaging in noble, dangerous, and futile acts. His noble nature is demonstrated through his relationship with Lola. After Lola distracts Tessilore in Dalmas’s apartment (allowing Dalmas to disarm and subdue Tessilore), Dalmas tells Lola, “That buys me [. . .]. Anything I have is yours—now and forever” (1552). Lola asks Dalmas to find a pearl necklace that Waldo (whom she knows as Joseph) has stolen. The pearls were a gift from a now-dead lover named Stan Phillips. Dalmas does find the pearls, but discovers that they are high-quality fakes—Bohemian glass. To prevent Lola from ever discovering this fact, Dalmas has another set of fakes made up with the original (and distinctive) clasp. Lola assumes that Waldo/Joseph sold the originals. Dalmas then drives to the ocean and throws the original pearls into the water. The only logical reason for Dalmas to do all this is to protect Lola’s memory of Phillips; Marling criticizes this scene as “excess sentiment” that “torpedoes the tale” (66), but it does establish Chandler’s hero as a knight who will do whatever he must to protect his lady fair.

Chandler’s use of racial stereotype in “Red Wind” seems more sophisticated in its rhetorical effect than his previous short stories. The story is a mixture of various

ethnicities: Caucasian, Hispanic, and Russian. One might expect a pulp story from the 1930s to conform to a largely negative portrayal of ethnic Otherness, but that is not the case here. In what I posit represents a pattern in Chandler's novels, "Red Wind" is the first of his stories where he manipulates cultural stereotype to alternately fulfill and thwart his readers' expectations. Chandler creates almost a caricature of the foreign Other in the character of Eugenie Kolchenko. Kolchenko is the mistress of Lola Barsaly's husband, who calls her a "white Russian [that he] met in Shanghai" (1564). Though she is Russian—which perhaps plays on the readers' fears of communism—Kolchenko is herself a menagerie of foreign markers. She wears "miniature temple bells" as earrings (1561). Her home has a tiger skin, a few Navajo rugs, and a few Turkish rugs on the floor. Other decorations include a Chinese screen and a tall Chinese lantern. Finally, she speaks in an absurd accent that sometimes sounds as German as it does Russian. Kolchenko delivers lines such as "We-el, what ees it, little man? You want sometheeng? You are lost from the bee-ootiful party across the street, hein?" (1561) and "Goddam, these hot wind make me dry like the ashes of love" (1565). Further complicating her apparent ethnicity is that fact that "Hein?" is a French word that roughly translates as "huh?".⁴

Detective Ybarra, one of the two police detectives in the story, represents a complex construction of ethnicity, placing him in stark contrast to Eugenie Kolchenko's absurd parody of foreignness. Ybarra is Mexican, while his partner Copernik is Caucasian. Based on the other ethnic portrayals in "Red Wind"—Miss Kolchenko and a

⁴ A student of mine—Vera Tuz, herself from Belarus (a former Soviet state)—suggested in class discussion that this mélange of foreign markers might serve two purposes, showing the position of Russia in both Europe and Asia and also demonstrating Ms. Kolchenko's desire to become a part of the American "melting pot."

dead Uruguayan hustler named Leon Valesanos, for example—one might reasonably expect Copernik to be the better of the two police detectives. By the end of the story, though, it becomes clear that Copernik is a stupid, brutal, unethical brute of a cop, while Ybarra is thoughtful, intelligent, and trustworthy. Throughout the story, Copernik calls Ybarra “guinea,” a racial slur usually directed at those of Italian descent; Copernik is perhaps too ignorant to be even an effective racist (though the term had a broader meaning during the early twentieth century). Such racial portrayals might surprise modern readers, given the fact that “Red Wind” is an example of 1938 pulp fiction. While Chandler may simply be trying to surprise his readers by straying from their expectations of racial stereotype, this sort of ethnic portrayal lends credence to the idea that Chandler was not the unapologetic racist that some critics have suggested; Chandler did not view himself as a racist; he even refused to join the La Jolla tennis club because they would not accept Jewish members (Hiney 254).

One final element that cries for analysis is the Freudian phallic imagery suggested by the guns in the story. There is an inverse relationship between the size of the gun that a character carries and the masculine power that the character seems to possess. The largest gun in “Red Wind” is owned by Leon Valesanos, the dead “Uruguayan hustler” found hanging in Waldo’s apartment. Leon’s gun is a 9 millimeter Mauser, “a gun you can blast through a wall with” (1559). Dalmas argues that this gun “made [Leon] a professional” (1559). The fact that Leon has been killed by the bare hands of Waldo demonstrates that a big gun does not make a man powerful (even if he is a professional killer). In stark contrast to Leon is Al Tessilore, also a “professional.” Tessilore carries a .22 pistol, which Dalmas says means Tessilore is the sort of professional who doesn’t

“make mistakes” (1543). It is Tessitore who killed Waldo, placing him clearly above both Waldo (and also Leon) in terms of masculine power. The story’s most prominent remaining gun is the “small automatic with the pearl grip” wielded by Lola Barsaly (1547). Lola does not know how to use her gun, however, leaving the safety on throughout the story; her potentially masculine symbol of power is thus effectively neutralized. This lack of knowledge may also indicate that Lola’s inability to handle a gun mirrors her inability to hang on to her husband (who later tells her that he is divorcing her). The character with the greatest degree of masculine power is John Dalmas, who does not even carry a gun. Dalmas’s willingness to venture forth unarmed is perhaps a testament to the confidence that he possesses in his masculine power—Dalmas has no Freudian compensation issues. His self confidence is warranted, as he is the one left standing at the close of the story.

In my own first-year composition classroom, I use “Red Wind” as the text for a literary analysis essay. I do so for several reasons. First of all, I think that Chandler *is* an underrated writer. Secondly, I have found that the vast majority of students enjoy the story; many students have asked me for advice on what else to read by Chandler⁵. Thirdly, it contains many elements—theme, character, symbolism, etc.—that make for good topics for a literary analysis essay. Finally (and perhaps most importantly), there are very few critical sources that analyze the story; this reduces the opportunities for plagiarism (though I may be sabotaging this feature with this essay) and forces students to think critically for themselves. The insights into the story that students provide are astounding. I am delighted each semester that my own understanding of the story is

⁵ I usually recommend that students begin with Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, though I think that his finest novel is *The Long Goodbye*.

deepened by the critical readings of my undergraduate students. As such, “Red Wind” is an instructive text for student and instructor alike.

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