

Raymond Chandler, Lecture 2: Individualism, Violence, and the Other

In Chandler's world, individualism, corruption, and violence, which has become a means of expression, have replaced the community-oriented, stable, and relatively safe village world of Agatha Christie novels.

1. Chandler's novels are filled with extreme individualists who are terrified of relationships with others.

- a. Individualism in the sense of "self-reliance" is not bad; it is an orientation that encourages people to take care of themselves and stand up for their beliefs.
- b. But excessive individualism, which is what we see in this novel, is rooted in scarcity of resources and the fear of attachment to other people. The rules/rationale for individualism in this world:
 - i. no one can depend on anyone else
 - ii. relationships are formed around money and fear, not emotional attachment (Lindsay Marriott and Jessie Florian, for example)
 - iii. avoiding relationships is a survival strategy (example: Lieutenant Randall)
 - iv. extreme emotional attachment is dangerous (Moose and Mr. Grayle, both of whom have excessive attachments to "Velma," are fatally injured by her; see Anne Riordan's summary of those relationships on 286-7)
- c. Detectives are typically individualists - outsiders with no emotional relationships to anyone except their sidekicks – but so far their individualism has not been extreme; even though they don't partake of relationships with others, they respect those relationships. Example: even Sherlock Holmes, who eschews romantic relationships of all kinds, keeps a picture of Irene Adler in his desk because of his admiration for her.
- d. Criminals are also typically individualists – remember Ralph Paton telling Sheppard, "I've got to play a lone hand" in the key ellipsis in Sheppard's narrative – who are able to commit crimes because they don't care about anyone else. Velma/Helen Grayle is an example of someone who seems to be attached to others, but who is not, and who easily destroys others as a result. The two black widow spiders that Randall kills when he and Marlowe investigate Jessie Florian's house are metaphors for Velma/Helen Grayle – both of them potentially fatal (209).

2. Mobility and anonymity, characteristic of city life, make destructive individualism possible.

- a. The novel's setting, Los Angeles, is an urban sprawl made up of innumerable smaller towns and boundary-less areas such as the ocean where Brunette's gambling ships are anchored. Each area has its own set of rules, its own "rulers" (formal and informal) and its own unique qualities; it is difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate between them.
- b. It is very difficult to keep track of individual identities. Both Amthor and Sonderberg both manage to disappear when their crooked businesses come under police scrutiny. Of Amthor, Marlowe says "he's a bad hat. . .an international con man. Scotland Yard has his prints, also Paris" (287). Likewise, "Velma" manages to leave her life behind and change her identity several times without most people noticing. Only a cop with a "camera eye as rare as a pink zebra" is able to recognize her eventually.
- c. Many, though not all, crimes go unsolved. The illusion that "crime doesn't pay" is no

- d. longer part of people's thinking. The novel reveals how in the 1940s the lives and murders of black people were inconsequential to law enforcement. Nulty is insulted because he sees a "shine killing" as beneath his interest. Dmitrios Aleidis, the barber being sought by Marlowe at the beginning of the novel, is never found. Much slips through the floorboards.
- e. Because individual identities are so potentially changeable, it is very difficult for the detective – or the reader – to know "who is who." Only people like Moose, who is so physically and temperamentally distinctive that he can't hide his identity, remains the same throughout the text. Other characters are constantly changing their identities or taking on "roles," such as Second Planting, the "Hollywood Indian."
- f. Marlowe consciously makes fun of people's playacting by mimicking them and giving them nicknames. For example, when dealing with Second Planting, he starts speaking in a Hollywood version of "Indian talk" to mirror the way Second Planting is talking with him (140-143). He playfully assigns the name "Hemingway" to the likeable but corrupt Bay City cop Galbraith who checks him into Sonderborg's flophouse.
- g. The ability to change one's identity offers people social mobility – the opportunity to "move up the social ladder." This means that many of the people in this world are "on the make," constantly trying to be something better than what they were born into.

3. Corrupt bureaucratic police replace the "bumbling police" of earlier detective narratives. Galbraith: "Cops don't go crooked for money; they get caught in the system" (231).

- a. bureaucracy – a twentieth-century concept – is urban life's response to the need for a government agency to oversee public welfare. Cities are too large to be taken care of by a single doctor, detective, or magistrate; now teams of people are needed to oversee civic order. The role of the family or community has been taken over by the agency.
- b. However, these government bureaucracies have become malevolent instead of benevolent. Their large scale has made corruption possible; in conjunction with the extreme individualism identified above, the bureaucracies have become corrupt.
- c. In FML, the police are a key emblem of corrupt bureaucracy. Some examples:
 - i. **Police are both incompetent and dishonest.** In previous detective fictions, the police have been incompetent and sometimes destructive, but always honest. Now they are both incompetent and dishonest. "Hemingway" says "A [policeman] can't stay honest if he wants to. . . . That's what's the matter with this country. He gets chiseled out of his pants if he does. You gotta play the game dirty or you don't eat" (232).
 - ii. **They offer protection rackets:** Bay City cops work for Jules Amthor, who lives in Stillwood Heights; they remove, threaten, and beat up people like Marlowe who become too inquisitive. They operate in league with crooks like Dr. Sonderborg, who hides criminals, tries to extract information from people like Marlowe, and dispenses dope.
 - iii. **They buy and sell political offices:** The Bay City police chief, John Wax, refuses to help Marlowe until Marlowe drops the Grayle name. Immediately Wax capitulates: "he changed so completely it was as if another man was in his chair" (223) because Grayle is one of the mayor's chief campaign contributors. Wax knows his cops are corrupt. Cliff Riordan, Anne's father, was fired from Wax's position for refusing to go along with Brunette and his mob.
 - iv. **They are racist:** At first Marlowe tags Nulty as "poor enough to be honest," but later discovers that Nulty is an extreme example of the lazy and bigoted police officer. Nulty refuses to do his job because he thinks "shine killings"

are beneath him. Nulty proposes a “kickback” system with Marlowe to avoid doing his own work.

- v. **They use, then dump, informants:** Nulty’s superior officer Lt. Randall is more upstanding and intelligent, but he is still dishonest; he uses Marlowe to gain information, then withholds information and floats fake leads to confuse him. Marlowe suspects Randall has known what was happening all along: “These boys work fast when they feel like it. I think Randall has had this thing taped for days and was afraid I’d step on the tapes” (287).
- vi. **They punish honest cops:** Individual police officers and administrators who resist corruption are crushed by the system. Both Red Norgaard (the sailor who helps Marlowe board the Montecito) and Cliff Riordan (former police chief of Bay City) are both destroyed for refusing to become corrupt police officers – they lose their livelihoods entirely. Thus, positive individualism becomes a liability, while negative or extreme individualism is a survival tactic.

4. Violence has become the major languages people use to express themselves.

“Remarks want you to make them,’ I said. ‘ They have their tongues hanging out waiting to be said. This thing here’ - I waved the blackjack lightly, ‘is a persuader. I had to borrow it from a guy” (179).

- a. In the world of FML, words are ineffective at persuading people (symbol of broken social contract). Violence and money are much more effective at motivating change.

b. silence offers ambiguity, preserves secrecy, forestalls conflict

- i. often a character will simply remain silent in order to make a point - or refuse to answer a question someone has asked: Marlowe tries unsuccessfully to get Sonderborg to talk by half-joking, “Remarks want you to make them” (179).
- ii. silence protects the individual from reprisal - secrets are kept
- iii. gestures are eloquent (Mr. Grayle appearing at door “with infinite sadness” when Marlowe is making out with Mrs. Grayle)
- iv. The novel’s “invisible writings” are a form of silent communication: the stained business card, the business cards rolled up in the joints, the card inscribed with five words we never learn.
- v. Most of the suspects are being paid not to talk - to remain silent - or to help “silence” someone else.

c. Straightforward language always manifests as a confession or aggression

- i. When Velma kills Moose, her saying “Get away from me, you son of a bitch” is the cruelest thing anyone says in the novel.
- ii. Anne Riordan’s appeals to Marlowe, as when she suggests he “go to bed” at her house, are too frightening to be tolerated, and cause Marlowe to leave.

d. Indirect, wisecracking, metaphoric language allows people to communicate indirectly.

- i. Marlowe’s discussion with the Sans Souci desk clerk, with Amthor, and with Second Planting are classic examples of indirect, metaphoric communication.
- ii. Marlowe frequently makes fun of others and himself - referring to himself as “uninhibited” - when he thinks anyone is taken too seriously. Still, most of these jokes are lost on his comrades and shared only with the reader, or picked up in a stupid way by characters like Nulty, who likes Marlowe’s joke “remind me to laugh on my day off” and repeats it to Marlowe several days later.

- e. **Violence is a language used by those who have been silenced in some other way**
- i. Moose is inarticulate, though naive; he settles disputes by killing people.
 - ii. Velma must work silently or her true identity will be discovered, so she murders people (Moose, Marriott, the detective) to ensure her own survival. Her visit to Marlowe was likely to have resulted in his murder if Moose hadn't arrived.
 - iii. The police and shucksters like Amthor and Sonderborg use violence to silence people who might be likely to betray their own secrets. They can't level with someone like Marlowe, so they hit him over the head as a warning.
 - iv. The highest-ranking, and thus most dangerous, criminals use guns; lesser criminals use saps and their own hands to murder or maim others.

5. **To restore the status quo, *Others* must be eliminated/repressed. Repression functions to eliminate what can't be consciously assimilated. "Pushing under" of volatile material.**

- a. *Others* - those who are different - are destroyed, silenced, or abandoned at the closure of the text. *Others* include
 - i. foreigners and people of color - Sam Montgomery, the bar bouncer, Jules Amthor and Dr. Sonderborg (both run out of town). [The desk clerk at the Sans Souci.]
 - ii. homosexuals/effeminate men - Lindsay Marriot, Laird Brunette, and, to an extent, Moose. [Brunette and "Red" Norgaard saved.]
 - iii. women - Velma/Mrs. Grayle, Jessie Florian, Mrs. Morrison, [Anne Riordan saved].
- b. Why must *Others* be repressed/eliminated?
 - i. Chandler pictures them - not the corrupt false communities of bureaucracy and organized crime - as cause of crimes.
 - ii. Because Marlowe identifies with them too closely. He must repress his love of/relationship to them and affirm his relationship to the male-owned and male-run bureaucracy which before has been identified as the root of all evil.
- c. Are any *Others* exempt/saved?
 - i. One or two members of each group - *Others* who have demonstrated conspicuous loyalty to the bureaucracies Marlowe represents - are "saved" at the end, though abandoned or eclipsed after they have ceased to be useful. (No ongoing relationships for Marlowe.) EX: nameless desk clerk, Anne, Red, Laird Brunette.