

Are there homosexual characters in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*?

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Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) contains three characters, Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook and Caspar Gutman, who have been identified as either homosexual or heterosexual, depending on how critics have read certain passages of the novel (Naremore, 52; Gregory, 89; Irving, 82; Keating, 42; Marling, 1983, 72; Marling, 1995, 127; Slide, 70; Willett, 38). There is very strong textual evidence of the homosexuality of Joel Cairo, an effeminate foreigner who joins forces with Caspar Gutman in a quest for the Maltese falcon, and Wilmer Cook, a young hired gun in the employ of Caspar Gutman. In the case of Joel Cairo, he is referred to in the text as "queer" and "the fairy." (425, 471) In the case of Wilmer Cook, he is called a "gunsel," a word meaning a young homosexual "kept" by an older man (486). For Caspar Gutman, similar direct textual evidence is lacking, but he is largely thought to be homosexual because he is the older man who "keeps" the young Wilmer Cook.

In spite of this textual evidence, critics often hedge their affirmations about these characters and their homosexuality by using words like "possibly" (Slide, 3) and "presumably" (Slide, 70), and they often displace academic responsibility onto other critics saying things like "three [characters]—Cairo, Wilmer (...) and Gutman—have been identified as gay" (Willett, 38). Recently, the critic Bill Delaney has advocated that Wilmer is a heterosexual, using textual evidence, rather than critical testimony, to support his claim (Delaney, 105). In this paper, I will explore the text of *The Maltese Falcon* and recent scholarship on the novel examining the most significant references to the sexual identity of Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook and Caspar Gutman.

HAMMETT'S THE MALTESE FALCON

Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* was first published as a serialized novel in *Black Mask* from September 1929 to January 1930, and almost immediately in book form by Alfred Knopf in 1930. Over the two years during which Hammett

wrote the novel, he wrote more than 250,000 words, equal to half the bible (Marling, 1995, 127). I believe it is reasonable to assume that the result of such prolific and selective writing is a very polished text in which Hammett wrote everything with intensified exactness and heightened consciousness. Therefore, I will emphasize the primary importance and authority of the text over the critical writings about it.

The Maltese Falcon has often been called the best detective novel ever written. Indeed, it contains all the elements of a great hard-boiled detective novel, including one of the major hard-boiled detective prototypes, Sam Spade, neatly balanced with one of the major femme fatale prototypes, Brigid O'Shaughnessy. *The Maltese Falcon* is a tale of greed, betrayal, and sexual confrontation. Brigid hires the Spade & Archer detective agency for some surveillance work, but shortly afterwards Spade's partner, Miles Archer, is murdered. Spade, who becomes the prime suspect in the murder investigation, must solve this murder in order to dispel suspicion, but he increasingly becomes attracted to Brigid. He soon finds himself immersed in her pursuit for the Maltese falcon, and he eventually comes into possession of it. In a climactic scene in Spade's apartment, the "fall guy" scene, the detective tries to negotiate a deal with Brigid's adversary, Caspar Gutman, and Gutman's colleague, Joel Cairo. Spade agrees to deliver the falcon under the condition that they give him a "fall guy" who the police can arrest and charge for committing the various murders that have occurred. He suggests Gutman's sidekick Wilmer, so they knock Wilmer unconscious in order to hand him over to the police easily. When the falcon arrives and turns out to be a fake, Wilmer takes advantage of the confusion to escape, and Spade allows Gutman and Cairo to leave. Thus Spade finds himself with the fake falcon, but without a "fall guy." Spade calls the police and tells them where to find Gutman, Cairo and Wilmer, and the falcon. When the police come to his apartment, he hands over Brigid for the murder of his partner, which she actually did commit.

Both the Black Mask serialized text and the Alfred Knopf book text contain the word "gunsel," but only the Alfred Knopf book text contains the expression "gooseberry lay." (Ferris 1972, 71). According to Steven Marcus's notes on the Library of America edition of the text, "gunsel" means "punk; young companion of a tramp; passive homosexual" (Hammett, 966); and "gooseberry lay" means "stealing clothes from a clothesline." (Hammett, 966) There is ample evidence that Dashiell Hammett was trying to trick *Black Mask* editor Joseph "Cap" Shaw when he inserted these expressions in the original Black Mask serialized publication: writer Erle Stanley Gardner (1965) and a number of critics (Barzun & Taylor 1971; S.J. Ferris 1972; William Nolan 1969, 1983; Slide 1993; Wesley Schlotzhauer Jr. 1989) have all documented how Hammett tried to use "gooseberry lay" as bait in order to enable him to slip the word "gunsel" past Shaw's watchful eye. Apparently Hammett's tactic worked as planned, since "Cap" Shaw censored the expression "the gooseberry lay," thinking it contained a homosexual reference, but did not censor the word "gunsel," thinking it referred to someone carrying a gun (Slide 1993, 70). Having proved his point, Hammett then defended the inclusion of both expressions in the Alfred Knopf book publication; yet a similar anecdote has also been documented regarding Alfred Knopf editor Harry Block,

who is reported to have requested that Hammett delete some of the “homosexual parts” (Slide, 70). It is interesting to note that since Hammett used the word “gungel” in this very popular novel, since “gungel” has been misinterpreted so often since then by influence of the segment “gun,” and since the word appeared three times, not only once, in the 1941 John Huston film, the word has now actually acquired these meanings: Webster’s Third New International dictionary “a gunman” (1012), and the New Oxford Dictionary of the English Language “a criminal carrying a gun” (819). Barzun and Taylor even go so far as to define “gungel” as a “young homosexual killer” (xxix).

In my opinion, Hammett’s effort to disguise the homosexual identities of Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook and Caspar Gutman, by making them ambiguous and ambivalent goes far beyond the introduction of these two expressions and encompasses large sections of text. In the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate how Hammett wrote them in such a way that these characters could be identified as both homosexual and heterosexual depending on the key in which these segments were read. In no case are the sexual identities of these three characters made unambiguous and absolutely clear.

JOEL CAIRO

There can be little doubt that Joel Cairo is an effeminate male, and most critics have interpreted this as meaning that he is a homosexual character of a very effeminate type. Examples 1 and 2 make it clear how critics have reached this interpretation:

Example 1

- “The girl returned with an engraved card –Mr. Joel Cairo.
“This guy is *queer*,” she said.
“In with him, then, darling.” said Spade. (my italics, 425)

Example 2

- [In the Belvedere, Joel Cairo’s hotel, to Wilmer Cook, who is trailing Cairo]
“Where is he?”
“Who?”
“The *fairy*.” (my italics, 471)

In the classic 1941 John Huston film, in place of “the fairy” in example 2, Spade says “Cairo.” However, neither the word “queer” nor the word “fairy” indicate absolutely that Cairo is homosexual, but they could simply refer, in the case of “queer,” to Cairo’s foreignness, or, in the case of “fairy,” to his effeminacy. Joel Cairo could also, therefore, be interpreted as a heterosexual character who is an eloquent, overly fashionable, and uncommonly astute foreign criminal; and his effeminate conduct and extravagant appearance could easily be attributed to the fact that he comes from a foreign culture in which affection between males and flamboyant appearance are culturally acceptable.

Wilmer is the character that most intrigues critics of the novel, as the word “gungsel” and the expression “gooseberry lay” are both in reference to him. Wilmer Cook is a young, unscrupulous, violent, verbally unskilled, and, above all, very masculine character.

Example 3 contains Sam Spade’s first encounter with Wilmer Cook in the lobby of a hotel. Notice how Wilmer looks at Sam Spade and the hotel detective’s neckties, obvious phallic symbols (Herman, 224), six times in a matter of just two pages. Expressions similar to *gazes with hazel eyes under curling lashes*, with obvious effeminate undertones, begin here and are repeated throughout the book. Finally, the word “belly” seems to stand out strangely in this passage; it is used later in the description of Caspar Gutman and again during the “fall guy” scene.

Example 3

- His clothing was neither new nor of more than ordinary quality, but it, and his manner of wearing it, was marked by a hard masculine neatness.

Spade asked casually, “Where is he?”

(...) He looked with small hazel eyes under somewhat curling lashes at Spade’s chest. (...) “What?”

“Where is he?” (...)

“Who?”

“The fairy.”

The hazel eyes’ gaze went up Spades’s chest to the knot of his maroon tie and rested there. “What do you think you’re doing, Jack?” the boy demanded.

“Kidding me?”

“I’ll tell you when I am.” (...) “New York, aren’t you?”

The boy stared at Spade’s tie and did not speak. Spade nodded as if the boy had said yes and asked: “Baumes rush?”

The boy stared at Spade’s tie a moment longer, then raised his newspaper and returned his attention to it. “Shove off.” (...)

“You’ll have to talk to me before you’re through, sonny” (...)

The boy put his paper down quickly and faced Spade, staring at his necktie with bleak hazel eyes. The boy’s small hands were spread flat across his belly. (...) “I told you to shove off. Shove off.” (...)

(...) You’re not in Romeville now. You’re in my burg.” (...) “Well, where is he?”

The boy spoke two words, the first a guttural verb, the second “you.”

(...) “If you want to hang around you’ll be polite.”

The boy repeated his two words.

[Spade goes and gets Luke, the hotel detective, to throw Wilmer out.]

“What do you let these cheap gunmen hang out in your lobby for, with their tools bulging in their clothes?”

(...) “What do you want here?”

The boy stood up. Spade stood up. The boy looked at the two men, at their neckties, from one to the other. (...)

Luke said: “Well, if you don’t want anything, beat it, and don’t come back.”

The boy said, “I won’t forget you guys,” and went out. (471-472)

Example 4 is the segment of text in which the word “gungsel” appears. Notice that Wilmer gazes at Spade’s chest twice.

Example 4

- The boy's eyes were wide open and dark with white pupils. Their gaze ran over Spade's body from shoulders to knees, and up again to settle on the handkerchief whose maroon border peeped from the breast-pocket of Spade's brown coat.

"Another thing," Spade repeated, glaring at the boy: "Keep that *gunsel* away from me (...) I don't like him." (...)

The boy, staring at Spade's chest, repeated the two words he had twice spoken in the Belvedere lobby. (my italics, 486-487)

Example 5 is the segment of text in which the expression "gooseberry lay" appears.

Example 5

- "How long have you been off the *gooseberry lay*, son?"

The boy did not show that he had heard the question.

"Did you ever - ?" Spade began and stopped. (...) He did not address the boy again. (my italics, 495)

In spite of the evidence of Wilmer's homosexuality in these passages, there is also evidence that Wilmer is heterosexual. In relation to the text cited in example 3, Delaney argues that since Wilmer's clothing is "marked by a hard masculine neatness," Wilmer must be a heterosexual (104).

4. CASPAR GUTMAN

There is no direct textual evidence that would allow us to say that Gutman is homosexual, but there is evidence that Hammett wanted the reader to think of Gutman in some evidently sexual way. In the following description of Gutman and his fat body, notice how the reader seems to see him from the inside out, from his nude body (egg, bubbles) to the clothes he wears over it. Also notice how the word "belly" appears in this passage.

Example 6

- The fat man was flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks and lips and chins and neck, with a great soft egg of a *belly* that was all his torso, and pendant cones for arms and legs. As he advanced to meet Spade all his bulbs rose and shook and fell separately with each step, in the manner of clustered soap bubbles not yet released from the pipe through which they had been blown. His eyes, made small by fat puffs around them were dark and sleek. Dark ringlets thinly covered his broad scalp. He wore a black cutaway coat, black vest, black satin Ascot tie holding a pinkish pearl, striped gray worsted trousers, and patent-leather shoes. (my italics, 480-481)

Critics have largely supposed that Gutman is a homosexual because he is the man who "keeps" Wilmer. However, Gutman also has a daughter, Rhea Gutman, who appears only in the novel and not in the 1941 Huston film. Therefore, one could also suppose that Gutman is a heterosexual because he is Rhea Gutman's father. One critic, Ralph Willett, has put forward the idea that Gutman could be a bisexual. Willett suggests, rather outlandishly in my opinion,

that Gutman's daughter could actually be Gutman's mistress in disguise (38). But whether Rhea Gutman is Casper Gutman's lover or his real daughter, and whether Wilmer is his kept boy or not, I believe that Hammett wanted us to perceive Gutman as a man of ambiguous sexuality.

5. THE "FALL GUY" SCENE

The "fall guy" scene, which encompasses two chapters (XVIII, The Fall Guy, and XIX, The Russian's Hand), is the only one where all three of these characters are together. Since it contains such an enormous amount of material to analyze, I feel it is better approached thematically in order to isolate significant features.

In this scene Wilmer Cook is referred to four different times by Sam Spade as "the punk," which is new and interesting, especially when taking into account that one of the meanings of this word according to both the Webster's and Oxford dictionaries is "a youth used as a homosexual partner" (1844) and "passive male homosexual" (1504) respectively. In the classic 1941 John Huston film in place of "the punk", Spade says "gungel" on two occasions.

Major language play occurs with the words "daughter" and "son" in this scene. The text in example 7 is perhaps the best example of Hammett's deliberately ambiguous wording. Notice how the equivocal expression "daughter of yours" rather than the unequivocal "your daughter" is jarring and draws attention to the language of the passage itself. Notice also how Hammett uses the word "belly" for a third time and that Wilmer is looking under curling hazel lashes at Sam Spade's chest again.

Example 7

- "That daughter of yours has a nice belly," he said, "too nice to be scratched up with pins."

The boy in the doorway took a step forward, raising his pistol as far as his hip. Everybody in the room looked at him. In the dissimilar eyes with which Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Joel Cairo looked at him there was, oddly, something identically reproving. The boy blushed, drew back his advanced foot, straightened his legs, lowered his pistol and stood as he had stood before, looking under lashes that hid his eyes at Spade's chest. The blush was pale enough and lasted for only an instant, but it was startling on his face that was habitually so cold and composed. (544)

It is obvious that Wilmer assumes that he is directly alluded to and that he is being provoked, because he takes a step forward and raises his pistol; then he lowers his pistol and steps back after realizing that this has been a provocation, and he blushes. What is the basis for Sam Spade's provocation of Wilmer? Sam Spade's provocation of Wilmer, in Bill Delaney's opinion, is to be found by reading the passage in a strictly heterosexual key. Delaney bases his argument on the fact that Wilmer Cook could actually have been in love with Gutman's daughter Rhea, even though there is no textual evidence to support this, and on the fact that the passage should be read fairly literally (105). Before the "fall guy" scene, Rhea

Gutman appeared in another scene in which she had supposedly been drugged so that she would not be able to tell Sam Spade where her father, Cairo and Wilmer had taken Brigid O'Shaughnessy in order to kill her. However, in spite of the drug she had been given, Rhea apparently managed to keep herself awake by scratching herself on the belly with a large bouquet pin, which Spade saw with his own eyes when Rhea pulled up her clothes and showed him her belly full of scratches. Therefore, assuming that Wilmer and Rhea were in love and read the passage literally, the passage can be interpreted as follows: Spade, speaking to Gutman, provokes Wilmer by saying that he has seen for himself that Gutman's daughter (daughter of yours), who Wilmer is in love with, has a very beautiful belly, and that letting her scratch it up (literally) with the bouquet pin (pins) was regrettable. Wilmer, thinking Spade is talking about his girlfriend, would feel that he must save face against Spade, because, in front of three other people, Spade has flaunted the fact that he has seen Wilmer's girlfriend's naked body.

However, the Rhea Gutman episode and the supposed references to Rhea in the "fall guy" scene are very enigmatic for scholars of *The Maltese Falcon*. Even for scholars such as Delaney, who vouch for the very literal heterosexual reading, Hammett's vague use of "daughter of yours" and the inaccurate use of "pins" must at the very least be considered sufficiently jarring and ambiguous to merit a deeper reading of this passage. Delaney believes that the Rhea Gutman scene and the references to Rhea in the "fall guy" scene were created by Hammett with a very special effect in mind (personal communication); I concur with Delaney on this point, but, whereas Delaney says Hammett's goal was exclusively to show Wilmer's loyalty to Gutman through a strong heterosexual relationship with Gutman's daughter, I believe Hammett intentionally wrote this scene with sufficient ambiguity to make a homosexual reading of it possible as well.

In my opinion, therefore, the passage could also be read in the following homosexual key: Spade, speaking to Gutman, provokes Wilmer (daughter of yours = your homosexual lover) by saying that it would be too bad to have to shoot him (scratch him up) in the "belly" with bullets (pins). According to this reading, Wilmer, thinking Spade is talking about him, would feel that he must defend himself physically against Spade, because Spade has practically threatened to shoot him. At this point Spade could be armed (just moments before, Wilmer wanted to search him for a gun but Spade and Gutman would not allow him to do it), and Spade already has Wilmer in mind for his fall-guy. Later, Spade even suggests that if Wilmer does not want to cooperate with them by being the "fall guy", they could arrange to have Wilmer shot by the police for resisting arrest (Hammett 1930, 549).

The language play regarding the words "daughter" and "son" continue further in this scene. Gutman makes three references to how the degree of fondness he feels for Wilmer is the same as the fondness he would feel for a son. It is fairly evident that one could read the extracts in example 8 in a homosexual key (son=young lover) or a heterosexual key (son=son-in-law).

Example 8

- "I feel towards Wilmer just exactly as if he were my own son. I really do. *But* if I even for a moment thought of doing what you propose, what in the world do

you think would keep Wilmer from telling the police every last detail about the falcon and about us?" (549)

- "(...) I couldn't feel any different towards Wilmer if he was my own flesh and blood –*but* I'll consider it a personal favor as well as a sign that you've accepted my apologies, sir, if you'll go ahead and outline the rest of it." (550)
- "Well, Wilmer, I'm sorry indeed to lose you, and I want you to know that I couldn't be any fonder of you if you were my own son; *but* –well, by Gad!– if you lose a son it's possible to get another –and there's only one falcon." (563)

The "fall guy" episode in Sam Spade's apartment contains evidence that it is a much more emotional encounter than one might ordinarily suspect in what is basically a business transaction. In example 9, notice how the emotion of the encounter serves to support the fact that there are possibly strong homosexual bonds, as Gutman could feel a sexual and emotional desire for Wilmer. But this emotion could also be explained from a heterosexual point of view, as Gutman could in fact feel real affection for Wilmer, his future son-in-law.

Example 9

- [Gutman] "This is an attitude, sir, that calls for the most delicate judgment on both sides, because, as you know, sir, men are likely to forget in the heat of action where their best interest lies and let their *emotions* carry them away." (my italics, 553-554)
- In a voice choked horribly by *emotion* the boy cried, "All right!" and jerked his pistol up from his chest. (my italics, 554)
- *Tears* were in Cairo's eyes and his red lips worked angrily, forming words, but no sound came from between them. (my italics, 555)
- Gutman had put the boy in a rocking chair and stood looking at him with *troubled* eyes in an uncertainly puckered face. (my italics, 555)
- Gutman's face was grey and his eyes were *clouded*. He did not look at Spade. He looked at the floor and did not say anything. (my italics, 556)
- Gutman's face had lost its *troubled* cast and was becoming rosy again. (my italics, 557)
- [Cairo tries to comfort Wilmer on the sofa in Spade's apartment, but irritates him to the point that Wilmer punches Cairo and makes him scream, which brings Brigid O'Shaughnessy into the living room to see what has happened.] Spade, grinning, jerked a thumb at the sofa and told her: "*The course of true love.*" (my italics, 568)

In this scene Cairo comforts Wilmer so much that critics have assumed that this is proof that Cairo and Wilmer are both homosexuals. However, Wilmer punches Cairo in the face at the end of the scene, and Delaney assumes that this is proof that Wilmer (though not Cairo) is a heterosexual (Delaney, 104). I feel that neither opinion is warranted because violence against a male homosexual is not necessarily proof of male heterosexuality; nor is affection between males necessarily proof of male homosexuality. Wilmer's behavior is probably not rooted in sexuality at all, but rooted in Cairo's overbearing conduct. In example 10, Cairo whispers in Wilmer's ear five times and puts his arm around his

shoulders 3 times, behavior which is overbearing enough to test anyone's patience.

Example 10

- Cairo left his armchair and went over to the boy. He put his hand on the boy's shoulders and started to say something. The boy rose quickly to his feet shaking Cairo's arm off. (563)
- Cairo moved over and whispered in the boy's ear. (563)
- Cairo had his arm around the boy's shoulders *again* and was whispering to him. (my italics, 563)
- Cairo edged closer to the boy on the sofa and began whispering in his ear *again*. The boy shrugged irritably. (my italics, 566)
- Cairo, still muttering in the boy's ear, had put his arm around the boy's shoulders *again*. Suddenly the boy pushed his arm away and turned on the sofa to face the Levantine. The boy's face held disgust and anger. He made a fist of one small hand and struck Cairo's mouth with it. Cairo cried as a woman might have cried and drew back to the very end of the sofa. (my italics, 567-568)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The answer to the title of this paper, then, is a definite yes ... and no. I do not believe that it was Dashiell Hammett's mission to carve in stone the interpretations of the sexuality of the three characters discussed here, nor do I believe that literary scholars should attempt to carve in stone any concrete interpretations of Hammett's novel. I hope to have shown through very close readings of selected segments from *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) that these three characters contain elements of both the homosexual and heterosexual. Such was Hammett's effort in encoding the ambiguous and ambivalent sexuality of his characters that, in 1930, over seventy years ago, he created a rich, enigmatic text that critics and readers are only beginning to appreciate today.

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SAAS (Spanish Association for American Studies)

Edita:

Ediciones Almar
(Gripo editorial ambos mundos)
Compañía, 65
Teléf. 923 21 46 88 - Fax 923 21 87 91
37008 Salamanca
E-mail: colegio.espana@helcom.es
Página web: edit-ambosmundos.com

© The authors/Los autores

Cover design/Diseño de cubierta: The Editors/Los editores

Cover photo/Foto cubierta: Fachada de la Universidad de Salamanca

Printed in Spain
ISBN 84-7455-076-9
Depósito Legal: S.172-2002

Imprime:

Imprenta Kadmos
Salamanca, 2002

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ACTAS DEL V CONGRESO SAAS
(SPANISH ASSOCIATION FOR AMERICAN STUDIES)

**POWER AND CULTURE IN AMERICA:
FORMS OF INTERACTION AND RENEWAL**



Edición a cargo de
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DANIEL PASTOR GARCÍA
MANUEL GONZÁLEZ DE LA ALEJA

4, 5 Y 6 DE ABRIL, SALAMANCA 2001