

Hardboiled Detective Fiction

Hardboiled fiction often contains a surly, mean, unemotional hero who is unimpressed by most situations he finds himself in and by most people he meets. The hardboiled detective is cool and calm and has a witty and often short answer for any awkward question

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. 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 out to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable and he was fiddling with the knots of the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying.

...

She was twenty or so, small and delicately put together, but she looked durable. She wore pale blue slacks and they looked well on her. She walked as if she was floating. Her hair was a fine tawny wave cut much shorter than the current fashion of pageboy tresses curled in at the bottom. Her eyes were slate-grey, and had almost no expression when they looked at me. She came over near me and smiled with her mouth and she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin too taut lips. Her face lacked colour and didn't look too healthy.

'Tall, aren't you?' she said.

'I didn't mean to be.'

Her eyes rounded. She was puzzled. She was thinking. I could see, even on that short acquaintance, that thinking was always going to be a bother to her.

'Handsome too,' she said. 'And I bet you know it.'

I grunted.

'What's your name?'

'Reilly,' I said. 'Doghouse Reilly.'

Comment [K1]: Short, highly punctuated sentences and clauses make him seem gruff and no-nonsense

Comment [K2]: Obvious use of pathetic fallacy to create a miserable surly atmosphere – hard particularly could easily be transferred to the detective here – Philip Marlowe

Comment [K3]: The short, factual list gives the impression of someone who is precise, not given to fancy descriptions

Comment [K4]: Sober, interestingly suggests that this is not his usual state – hinting at a darker side to his character. This man is not a clear cut hero! Indeed his heroism is almost reluctant. He's in it for the money

Comment [K5]: The repetition of 'I was' reinforces the short, factual, no-nonsense style

Comment [K6]: This under-stated aside, piques our curiosity and the fact that he does not advertise his job suggests his confidence and certainty

Comment [K7]: The off-hand way in which he mentions such a large sum of money lets us know he is a cool character and makes us wonder what he is going to do to earn it

Comment [K8]: Dry, witty, ironic comments – he's not impressed by anything

Comment [K9]: Again – lazy, dry, witty comments – suggest his superiority to all this artistic nonsense

Comment [K10]: Lists again of details – he is observant and meticulous, but concise – again the adjectives are short and to the point

Comment [K11]: Durable is odd – suggesting that what he looks for in a woman is hardness, strength, things perhaps that we are meant to presume about him

Comment [K12]: Even comments about beauty are made in an understated way. There is no emotion – just the factual admission that she 'looked well'

Comment [K13]: Three sentences in this paragraph start with 'Her'. Four more start with 'She'. There is a deliberate attempt to avoid varying sentence style to again create a sense of factuality and seriousness

Comment [K14]: An under-current of the vicious, something is not quite right. Again we get the impression that this is a man who notices things others do not. He is not misled by appearances

Comment [K15]: Short, punchy sentences reflect his gruff character.

Comment [K16]: Witty, one line comments show that he is capable of dealing with any situation.

Comment [K17]: A ridiculous name – almost as if he is playing up to the stereotype of a tough private eye. The character's real name is Philip Marlowe and his joke here on the unsuspecting girl again shows how he has control and power in the situation

Taken from 'The Big Sleep' by Ramond Chandler