

Hardboiled Western Fiction

As with Detective Fiction the Western typically has a surly, mean and cool male hero who is often sarcastically unimpressed with the life he sees around him. The setting is usually a small desert town with limited facilities that is somehow isolated from the usual forces of law and order. Women are often relegated to the role of love interests or damsels in distress although the Western also features the hard and bitter woman (often a bar owner or something) who has taken on the surliness of men in order to survive in the harsh frontier world. She usually has a heart of gold underneath the gruff exterior though.

Boiling like a coffeepot before we were five miles out of Filmer, the automobile stage carried me south into the shimmering heat and bitter white dust of the Arizona desert.

I was the only passenger. The driver felt as little like talking as I. All morning we rode through cactus spiked sage-studded oven country, without conversation except when the driver cursed the necessity of stopping to feed his clattering machine more water. The car crept through soft sifting sand, wound between steep-walled red mesas, dipped into dry arroyos where clumps of dusty mesquite were like white lace in the glare, and skirted sharp-edged barrancas.

The sun climbed up in the brazen sky. The higher it got, the larger and hotter it got. I wondered how much hotter it would have to get to explode the cartridges in the gun under my arm. Not that it mattered — if it got any hotter, we would all blow up anyway: car, desert, chauffeur and I would all bang out of existence in one explosive flash. I didn't care if we did!

That was my frame of mind as we pushed up a long slope, topped a sharp ridge and slid down into Corkscrew.

Corkscrew wouldn't have been impressive at any time. It especially wasn't this white-hot Sunday afternoon. One sandy street following the crooked edge of the Tirabuzon Cañon, from which, by translation, the town took its name. A town, it was called, but village would have been flatter: fifteen or eighteen shabby buildings slumped along the irregular street, with tumble-down shacks leaning against them, squatting close to them and trying to sneak away from them.

In the street four dusty automobiles cooked. Between two buildings I could see a corral where half a dozen horses bunched their dejection under a shed. No person was in sight. Even the stage driver, carrying a limp and apparently empty mail sack, had vanished into a building labeled *Adderly's Emporium*.

Gathering up my two gray-powdered bags, I climbed out and crossed the road to where a weather washed sign, on which the words *Cañon House* were barely visible, hung over the door of a two-story, iron-roofed, adobe house.

I crossed the wide, unpainted and unpeopled porch and pushed a door open with my foot, going into a dining room where a dozen men and women sat eating at oil-cloth-covered tables. In one corner of the room was a cashier's desk; and, on the wall behind it, a key rack. Between rack and desk, a pudgy man whose few remaining hairs were the exact shade as his sallow skin sat on a stool and pretended he didn't see me.

"A room and a lot of water," I said, dropping my bags.

Comment [K1]: Heat, grit, dust—all help to create a tensely dry and masculine feel to the scene

Comment [K2]: Harsh, desert setting established straight away

Comment [K3]: The hardboiled male lead always talks very little. The short sentences here help reinforce his curt and brusque style

Comment [K4]: Simplistic metaphors and similes emphasise his no nonsense character

Comment [K5]: Derogatory descriptions create a sneering tone and suggests the unimpressed nature of the persona

Comment [K6]: Spanish words here are used to create a sense of the foreign and of an alien wilderness. Notice that it is only the setting that is described and not people further underlining the sense of isolation

Comment [K7]: Again – short sentences and straight forward descriptions

Comment [K8]: A typical macho, object

Comment [K9]: Gruff, surly. This man is a loner who obviously is so disaffected with life that he doesn't care when it ends

Comment [K10]: An unusual, slightly threatening name suggesting isolation and reminiscent of the wild west

Comment [K11]: A typically disheveled town – note the buildings are personified and are almost more alive than the people. An air of decay and neglect which mirrors the unimpressive forms of life that we will no doubt meet in the town. Also mirroring the characters own disillusionment with the world. Nothing is beautiful

Comment [K12]: Simple cooking metaphors reinforce the sense of heat

Comment [K13]: In a similar way to the short sentences the short paragraphs create a gruffness and a short staccato style that depict the characters stern-ness

Comment [K14]: The first person narrative style allows us to see the world through his cynical and hardened eyes

Comment [K15]: The atmosphere of desertion continues. The man is alone ... in more ways than one

Comment [K16]: When we do meet people they are still not picked out as individuals

Comment [K17]: Curt, short, demanding speech – this character is not someone to be messed with

Taken from 'Corkscrew' by Dashiell Hammet