***Red Harvest* (1929) by Dashiell Hammett**

Red Harvest (1929) features the nameless detective employed by the Continental Detective Agency, and hence called the “Continental Op.” Developed in *Black Mask*, he became an archetype in the genre. The novel’s plot combines four short stories from that magazine, but they are not tightly linked. As the Op says, “Plans are all right sometimes. And sometimes just stirring things up is all right.” 1 The “stir-it-up” approach prevails in Hammett’s first novel, which emphasizes brilliant scenes, a traditional first-person narrator, dialogue that is funny, and action that is highly stylized, rather than plausible plotting or characterization.

The Op goes to “Poisonville,” a mining town in Montana modeled on Anaconda or Butte, which is famously described as “an ugly city of forty thousand, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains” (4). Newspaper editor Donald Willsson has been killed, and the Op is hired by his father, Old Elihu Willsson, the mining and newspaper czar, to find the murderer and to clean up the town. Suspicion falls on young Willsson’s foreign-born wife and then on Bill Quint, an affable, decayed, I. W. W. member. The Op soon learns that Old Elihu imported thugs to fight the union and that police chief Noonan is corrupt. To set crook against crook, he establishes a relationship with sultry, greedy Dinah Brand, who has scandalous information on everyone. Dinah is “a soiled dove … a de luxe hustler, a big league gold-digger” and one of Hammett’s best characters. A shop-worn femme fatale, she cannot seduce the Op because he is too tight-fisted. But her allure caused Robert Albury, a jealous bank clerk, to kill young Willsson, another of her lovers, in the Op’s solution to the initial crime.

The Op decides to stay and open “Poisonville up from Adam’s apple to ankles” (60). First he unfixes a rigged boxing match, costing hoodlum Max “Whisper” Thaler his money and dividing him from Dinah, whom the Op tips off. In return she reveals that “Max” killed the police chief’s brother years ago; her error -– it is “MacSwain,” not “Max” – leads to the revealed plot of the novel’s mid-section: that MacSwain’s old girlfriend Myrtle Jennision covered up the murder for him.

In the novel’s third section, Continental agents Foley and Linehan arrive to help the Op and to provide contrasting styles. Foley is large, loquacious, and lazy, while Linehan is small, terse, and on-the-spot. The pace of the action becomes comically fast. While the Op goes with the police chief on a raid, destroying Pete the Finn’s liquor, a new crook, Reno Starkey, overthrows crook Lew Yard. Finally the police chief asks for a peace conference.

“If I don’t get away soon I’ll be going blood simple like the natives,” says the Op. “I’ve arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I’ve ever got the fever” (142-3). He takes a drugged drink from Dinah and has two important dreams while unconscious. Hammett liked to insert such sequences two-thirds of the way through his novels; usually these “embedded plots” reveal the protagonist’s psyche. The Op wakes to find Dinah dead beside him with an ice-pick in her breast. He getsan alibi from Reno Starkey, then feverishly plays off the criminals against each other. The police chief is killed by Max, who is wounded by consumptive “lunger” Dan Rolff (modeled on Hammett). The Op and Reno bomb Pete the Finn’s warehouse, then kill the bootlegger as he surrenders. Dinah’s murderer turns out to have been Reno, who nonetheless elicits the Op’s admiration: “He meant to die as he had lived, inside the same tough shell” (197). The revealed plot of this section shows Dinah Brand to have been the mistress of several men, including Old Elihu Willsson.

*Red Harvest* is not notable for plotting or plausibility, but for the character of the Op, the cartoon-like carnage, and the brilliant style. Passages such as “We bumped over dead Hank O’Meara’s legs and headed for home. We covered one block of the distance with safety if not comfort. After that we had neither” (182) compress action and black humor, often retrospectively. The dialogue contributes to the effect seamlessly: “Be still while I get up or I’ll make an opening in your head for brains to leak in” (90). When the Op tells Dinah that she gets runs in her stockings because “Your legs are too big. They put too much strain on the material,” the characters of both are revealed in succinct, humorous fashion (79). Like the joyous mayhem of a Road-runner cartoon, *Red Harvest* is an ironic consideration of the possibilities in repetitious violence. In hard-boiled fiction, such pervasive irony and Keystone comedy, delivered in muscular, action-packed prose, was genuinely new.

Critics originally discussed *Red Harvest* in terms of allegory. The Op is a quester and in several short monologues he expresses a code. (59-60, 62, 79, 109-11, 145, 198).

Like the heroes of grail romances, the Op visits an underworld (while drugged) in order to set affairs right in this world. His deity is his boss, “The Old Man,” who will give him “merry hell” (199). French existentialists also liked the novel, perhaps taking it too seriously. Andre Gide said it was “the last word in atrocity, cynicism and horror… a remarkable achievement.” 2 Later critical attention focussed on the “waste land” motifs. Some took the novel to be an allegory about organized labor, even arguing that it was a Marxist critique of capitalism. 3 Later the Op’s epistemology was laid bare, and Old Elihu was seen as a version of George Hearst, the Montana mine-owner whose son William controlled California newspapers and politics in Hammett’s day.4

1 Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 79.2 Andre Gide, “American Writing Today: An Imaginary Interview,” *New Republic,* February 7, 1944, 186. 3 Carl Freedman and Christopher Kendrick, “Forms of Labor in Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, *PMLA* 106.2 (1991): 209-21. 4 Emphasis on epistemology in Sinda Gregory, *Private Investigations: The Novels of Dashiell Hammett* (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Prodigal son and New Historical readings in William Marling, *The American Roman Noir* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).