PART II

THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION
Through The Glass Key Darkly:
Presupposition and Misunderstanding

We must analyze the language of contemporary criticism itself, recognizing especially that hermeneutic systems are not universal, colorblind, apolitical, or neutral.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,
"Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes"

Presuppositions and the Ambiguity of Interpretation

Even among critics not particularly concerned with detective fiction, Dashiell Hammett's fourth novel, The Glass Key (1931), is famous for carrying the so-called objective method to nearly obsessive lengths: we are never told what the characters are thinking, only what they do and look like. Anyone's decisions about anyone else's intentions (which have life-and-death consequences in this underworld of ward politics) are interpretive decisions, dependent on correct presuppositions—on having the right interpretive key.

The novel's title, in part, refers to this kind of key. Ned Beaumont, the protagonist, has to determine what kind of relationship to have—indeed, what kind of relationship he is already having—with Janet Henry. One of his major clues about what is going on in her mind is a dream that she tells him, a dream that climaxes in an attempt to lock a door against an onslaught of snakes. Dream interpretation is difficult enough to begin with, and Janet Henry compounds the difficulty by telling the dream twice. In the first version, her attempt to lock the door succeeds; in the second, the key turns out to be made of glass and shatters. Ned Beaumont, in deciding which dream to use as his key, chooses the second (as do most readers)—but it is an intuitive choice, not a logical one.
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If the model of the reading process I have advanced in the first five chapters of this book is correct, then Ned Beaumont’s situation can serve as an emblem of the situation faced by any reader. Interpreting a book, too, requires us to make a choice about what key to use to unlock it, and that choice must often rest on the same kind of intuitive leap. Specifically, an actual reader’s interpretation of a specific text is at least in part a product of the assumptions with which he or she approaches it, including assumptions about the rules appropriate for transforming it. In this chapter, I will show in more detail how presuppositions interact with interpretation by examining more closely how readers might go about making sense of two specific novels—one a fairly arcane avant-garde text (Witold Gombrowicz’ 1965 *Cosmos*) and one a novel aimed at a broader audience (*The Glass Key*). My aim is neither to propose new interpretations nor to guide readers to correct ones. Rather, my aim is to offer concrete examples of an analytical approach that clarifies the sources of certain ambiguities. This in turn allows us to see the misinterpretations produced by actual readers in particular cultural contexts as useful material for cultural analysis. Specifically, using *The Big Sleep* as my case in point, I will show how we can “read” misreadings in order to illuminate the political pressures implicit behind them.

Before getting to actual cases, however, it is necessary both to reiterate how I am using the term *misreading* in this book and to distinguish among several kinds of misreadings. As I suggested in Chapter 1, I am using the word in a specific and restricted way that refers not to interpretive practices that ignore authorial intention, but rather to interpretations in which the reader *aims* at joining the authorial audience, but fails. Whether a given interpretive transformation of a text is a misreading or not, in other words, is less a matter of how you transform the text than a matter of what activity you think you are performing at the time. Misreadings in

1. Gary Saul Morson makes a similar claim about what he calls “boundary works,” where “it is uncertain which of two mutually exclusive sets of conventions governs a work. . . . Doubly decodable, the same text becomes, in effect, two different works” (*Boundaries of Genre*, 48). Morson tends to see this as a quality inhering in special genres—whereas, as I shall argue, it is characteristic of a wider variety of texts.
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this sense, therefore, are failed attempts to join in one particular social practice, not successful attempts to engage in some different social practice. To give a concrete example: a Freudian analysis of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* is not a misreading (and in fact could be an extremely illuminating interpretive performance) if the interpreter is uninterested in reading the text as Nabokov wished; but a reader is misreading if he or she assumes that the application of the theories of the “Viennese witch-doctor” [as Nabokov called him] is part of the interpretive arsenal of the authorial audience.

Misreadings in this sense can come about in several ways. I will set aside two of them at the outset: those that stem from actual misperceptions of the physical marks on the page (I had a student who, in reading the descriptions of Paul Madvig in *The Glass Key*, consistently misread the word “blond” as “blind”) and those arising from fundamental ignorance of the meanings of words (my son, reading his first Hardy Boys book at the age of six, thought their father’s name, Fenton Hardy, was an alias, because the book said that he had “made a name for himself” in the New York Police Department). Beyond that, misreadings fall generally into two categories. First, the reader can misapply the rules. Thus, for instance, a reader may know that a text’s opening is noticeable, but may fail to recognize that the first words are introductory, and that the real opening comes later. Or a reader may understand that Dr. Eckleburg’s sign in *The Great Gatsby* is intended as a metaphor, but may interpret it incorrectly as an image of hope.

The second category is both more interesting and, as I shall show, more revealing. Certain acts of misreading result not from the misapplication of rules, but from the application of the wrong rules. As I have argued, not only are there a vast number of implicit conventions of reading to be learned before we can understand anything as complex as a novel; more significant, there are different rules for processing different books. Indeed, if there is any analogy between literary and linguistic systems, we must view *Life with Father* and *The Sound and the Fury* not only as different

utterances, but also as manifestations of the equivalent of different languages.

What makes a reader apply the wrong rules to a text? There are, of course, many reasons. Readers read within limits imposed by their cultural and economic environments; and as beings with subjective concerns, they have the power to apply rules in a personal or eccentric fashion. Furthermore, even readers trying to recover the author's intended meaning may find themselves facing alternatives that are difficult, if not impossible, to decide among. There is always a variety of sets of rules that one can apply to a text; and while some texts are more or less resistant to certain kinds of misreadings, it is the case—more often than those of us committed to the notion of "better" and "worse" readings would like to believe—that a work will leave considerable leeway, and that several different interpretive strategies will work equally well. How this takes place can be seen by looking more closely at one common cause of this last kind of misreading: ambiguity of genre. My purpose is not to suggest that this is the only or even the most important source of misreading, but simply to offer, in some textual detail, an example of the kind of analysis my proposed model permits, one that can be readily applied to other kinds of misreading as well.3

We often think of genre designation as one of the last acts a reader performs—and to some extent it is true that a work's precise generic placement is often unclear until we have finished reading it. But some preliminary generic judgment is always required even before we begin the process of reading. We can never interpret entirely outside generic structures: "reading"—even the reading of a first paragraph—is always "reading as."

The notion that we always "read as" is fairly widespread in critical discourse. No one is apt to think it eccentric when Fernando Ferrara says "just as one can study A Midsummer Night's

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Dream as document, one can also study *Das Kapital* as fiction⁴; everyone who has worked on *The Turn of the Screw* has had to confront the question of whether it should be "read as" a ghost story. And the terms used to describe various modes of reading are often genre terms: a "ghost story." But critics do not always follow through on the implications of this terminology. For if we take this usage seriously, it suggests that genres can be seen not only in the traditional way as patterns or models that writers follow in constructing texts, but also from the other direction, as different packages of rules that readers apply in construing them, as ready-made strategies for reading.⁵

This is not to deny the possibility that any text, examined in detail, calls into operation a specific and unique collection of rules; on a more general level of analysis, however, any work shares a large number of rules with other works of the same genre—there are, as the Chicago neo-Aristotelians insisted, kinds of works. Just as details can come in more or less familiar configurations, so rules come in generic packages: we often apply rule D because it is usual to do so in texts where we have already applied rules A, B, and C. And if we use the notion of genre as preformed bundles of operations performed by readers in order to recover the meanings of texts, rather than as sets of features found in the texts themselves, then we can see that correct reading requires, among other things, a correct initial assumption about the genre that a work belongs to—and that misreading follows in the wake of erroneous placement.

Two implications of this definition of genre need to be spelled out here. First, genre categories can overlap. Depending on what rules we choose to focus on, a given work may appear to fall into

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⁴ Ferrara, "Theory and Model for the Structural Analysis of Fiction," *New Literary History* 5 (Winter 1974): 252. See also Barbara Herrnstein Smith's claim, "One's perception of and/or response to an event not only determine but are determined by how one classifies it: what we 'see,' and how we subsequently behave toward it, will depend on what we see something as" ([*On the Margins of Discourse*, 48]). Likewise Stanley Fish: "'Social satire,' 'comedy of manners,' and 'piece of realism' are not labels applied mechanically to perspicuous instances; rather, they are names for ways of reading" ("Working on the Chain Gang," 204).

⁵ Morson argues from a similar perspective; see *Boundaries of Genre*, viii–ix.
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several different generic classes. Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, for instance, asks to be read as a classical detective story. It calls on us to apply the genre's basic rule of notice that virtually any detail can turn out to be important; it also calls on us to use the genre's familiar rules of configuration to put together such elements as a murder, a false suspect, a detective, and a detective's sidekick in such a way that we are led to expect a certain kind of closure—one built on climactic surprise revelation—which the novel in fact provides. At the same time, *Intruder* is a personal-discovery novel—a didactic novel that jolts us into accepting a particular view of the world because it carries us toward a climax in which Chick suddenly acquires a key bit of knowledge that fundamentally alters his world view. As such, it calls for application of that genre's usual rules, including the rule of signification requiring us to generalize from the protagonist's discoveries to larger political and philosophical statements.

Second, genre categories can be broader or narrower. Depending on how many rules we choose to consider in our definitions, the categories that result can vary in their specificity from such broad classes as "epic" through such smaller groupings as Todorov's "fantastic" on to ever more precise categories. As a result, genres can even include one another: the class "escape fiction" includes the smaller grouping "classical detective fiction," which in turn includes the "classical locked-room mystery."

My analyses of ambiguities in *Cosmos*, which involves fairly narrow generic categories, and *The Glass Key*, which involves genre on the broadest possible level, may help clarify the range of problems involved in choosing interpretive strategies.

Getting to the Bottom of Things

As my first case study, let me delineate some of the interpretive processes a reader is likely to call upon while trying to make sense

6. For a fuller discussion of the way Faulkner combines these two generic structures, see my "Click of the Spring: The Detective Story as Parallel Structure in Dostoyevsky and Faulkner," *Modern Philology* 76 (May 1979): 355–69.

7. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Fantastic*, esp. chap. 1, with its incisive attack on Northrop Frye's genre categories.
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out of Witold Gombrowicz' avant-garde novel from 1965. *Cosmos'* plot revolves around two young men who seek a quiet refuge in the Polish countryside. Their peace, however, is repeatedly shattered by trivial, but slightly off kilter, incidents which they probe in search of deeper significance. A crack in the ceiling, for instance, is interpreted as an arrow, which they feel compelled to follow. This arrow eventually leads them to a hanging twig, which in turn reminds them of a bird they had seen hanging some time before. As a consequence of such "events," they become convinced of the presence of an underlying order, although its precise nature remains obscure. Their adventures grow more and more grotesque, and the novel climaxes when their landlord, a man who gets his erotic pleasures from what he calls "berging" (subtle masturbatory activities, such as rolling up tiny pieces of bread), takes his family on a picnic that secretly celebrates a love affair of nearly twenty-seven years ago—an outing that culminates, for undisclosed reasons, in the hanging (a suicide?) of his son-in-law.

At first, the novel appears to belong to a genre that has flourished especially since the 1950s: the ironic-grasping-at-straws-in-the-meaningless-abyss novel. Here, the protagonist, caught in a metaphysical void, manufactures a meaning for his or her experiences—a meaning that the reader can see is false. The genre has its antecedents at least as far back as *Don Quixote*, and it has developed by way of such texts as Turgenev's haunting *Knock, Knock, Knock*, the story of a nonentity who manages to reconstruct the world around him in such a way that he becomes a "fatal" romantic hero—a reconstruction that ultimately pushes him into suicide. In its most modern form, the genre is best exemplified by Butor's magisterial *Passing Time* (*L'Emploi du temps*). In this novel, Jacques Revel tries to get to the bottom of events in part by weaving them into the Theseus story—a myth that the authorial audience recognizes as inappropriate. This mythologizing leads to the unraveling of Revel's life, as he incorrectly interprets the motives of others and looks forward to consequences that we know are not forthcoming.

*Cosmos* seems to fit the same pattern: by the end of the book, the reader realizes that the events do not hold any deeper metaphysical meaning. As Patricia Merivale puts it, the narrator "con-
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spicuously fail[s] to make a satisfying pattern. . . . [The title is] an ironic comment on this failure.⁸ Despite its humor, then, this novel about a frustrated search for coherence offers a despairing vision of a decentered universe.

Or does it? Is this initial assumption about Cosmos' genre really correct? Perhaps Gombrowicz' novel belongs to a countergenre—the there-is-a-bottom-to-the-abyss-after-all genre in which apparent failures to find coherence in the world really do, in the end, succeed. In its simplest versions, the there-is-a-bottom countergenre distinguishes itself readily from the ironic-grasping genre, because the reader is explicitly shown the meaningful pattern beneath the apparent chaos. Thus, for instance, in O. Henry's "Furnished Room," the reader, privy to several points of view, accumulates a total store of information not available to any of the individual characters, and is thus able to see a meaning behind events that seem random to those experiencing them. But not all members of this countergenre are so straightforward. In the variant represented by Nabokov's "Vane Sisters" (and, in some critics' views, by The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Pale Fire as well),⁹ a further twist is added by hiding the pattern from the reader. In "The Vane Sisters," as I have pointed out, the true meaning is announced in an acrostic that inverts the apparent message of the story.

Knowing about the Vane-Sisters variant can easily produce interpretive vertigo. For once readers start reading with the suspicion

⁸. Merivale, "The Aesthetics of Perversion: Gothic Artifice in Henry James and Witold Gombrowicz," PMLA 93 (1978): 993. See also the claim by Edward Czerwiński and Bronisława Kast that "Gombrowicz in his last novel, constructed a 'cosmos of chaos' out of a world in which order, or at least a semblance of one, once existed" ("'Berging' Gombrowicz: A Reappraisal of 'Form-Fastening,'" Polish Review 23, no. 4 [1978]: 52). Czerwiński and Kast see their view as a minority position; it is, however, widely shared. George Gomori, for instance, claims that the hero "follows up the imaginary threads which lead nowhere" ("The Antinomies of Gombrowicz," Modern Language Review 73, no. 1 [1978]: 128); Ewa Thompson points out that the narrator's ideas are "grounded in incomplete evidence" and criticizes him for his naïveté ("The Reductive Method in Witold Gombrowicz's Novels," in The Structural Analysis of Narrative Texts: Conference Papers, New York University Slavic Papers, vol. 3, ed. Andrej Kojić, Michael J. Connolly, and Krystyna Pomorska [Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1980], 201).

⁹. See, for instance, Susan Fromberg [Schaeffer], "Folding the Patterned Carpet: Form and Theme in the Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1968.
that an author might be hiding coherence not only from the charac
ters, but from the audience as well, it becomes nearly impossible
to distinguish the ironic-grasping genre from the there-is-a-bottom
counter-genre in practice. As I have suggested, any trained academ-
ic reader, by the nature of his or her education, is skilled in apply-
ing rules of coherence, including rules of naming, and can thus find
a pattern in virtually anything. If such a reader begins with the
supposition that there might well be a hidden pattern, therefore,
the chances are that one will be found, whether intended or not.
And once it is found it is nearly impossible to determine whether it
is imposed on, rather than invited by, the text.

A reader looking for such a pattern, for instance, might well find,
beneath the surface of Gombrowicz’ novel, a concealed series of
references to the Viennese composer Alban Berg, and especially to
his 1926 composition for string quartet, the Lyric Suite. This al-
lusive web, when uncovered, is astonishingly powerful as an inter-
text for rules of naming, for it ties together many apparent surface
disjunctures, thus ironically undercutting the naive reader who
thinks that the apparent meaninglessness of the novel’s events
ironically undercuts the ever-hopeful protagonists.

And what more appropriate vehicle for a secret message? For the
Lyric Suite itself is a work with a coherence hidden from all but
the initiated. Indeed, until recently, the piece was generally accept-
ed as absolute music with no programmatic content. It was only in
1977 that George Perle turned up a copy of the score that the
composer had annotated, revealing that the music was in fact an
elaborate but covert love letter to Hanna Fuchs-Robetten, with
whom Berg had had a brief affair and for whom he maintained a
lasting passion. Several elements in the score that had seemed
mere oddities until then—such as the quotations (from Tristan
and Zemlinsky) and the pervasive use of the numbers 10, 23, and
their multiples (for instance, in metronome markings and measure
numbers)—turned out to have precise programmatic meaning (the
quoted passages both deal with the burdens of passion; 10 refers to
Hanna, 23 to Berg himself). Similar programmatic intentions deter-
mined the structure of the basic row and its constituent motifs
(based in part on the initials of the lovers), and the last movement
was revealed to be an accompaniment to a setting of Baudelaire’s
"De Profundis Clamavi," although the vocal part is not in the published score.

As I have suggested, the Berg piece successfully binds together a large number of textual elements that otherwise seem simply random. Of course, the works are thematically related: both concern a brief affair that provides the secret center for a man's life. And the technical concerns of the novel and the quartet are related as well: the issues of permutation and combination that are constantly raised in *Cosmos* mirror, with uncanny accuracy, the problems of tone-row construction that so intrigued Berg. But more powerful still is the series of what appear to be explicit allusions to Berg, the *Lyric Suite*, and his life and works in general. The landlord's coining of the word "Berging" to refer to his secret, forbidden erotic activities is only the most evident of these allusions. Beyond that, many of the characters have names that tie them to Berg's circle of family and friends. These names are, for the most part, far from common, and do not therefore seem a likely result of mere coincidence. One of the protagonists is named Fuks (the match with the name of Berg's beloved is even closer in the English translation, where it is Fuchs),

10. Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, in Three Novels [New York: Grove, 1978]. Mosbacher has translated not from the original Polish, but from earlier French and German translations, which may explain some of the name changes—although the change from Lulus and Lulusia to Lolo and Lola makes little sense. Although I have glanced through the Polish version, *Kosmos* [Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1970], I cannot say that my Polish is fluent enough that I could claim to have "read" the original.

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ter-in-law) and architect Walter Gropius—and Louis happens to be an architect, too. In addition, the number of chapters (10) is the number that Berg used to represent Hanna in the score. The secret tryst turns out to have taken place just short of 27 years ago—just as the Lyric Suite was finished just short of 1927. Indeed, the picnic takes place one month and three days before the actual anniversary—an apparently pointless detail, except if it is seen as a veiled reference to Berg’s number 13.

My aim here is not to argue for one or another interpretation of the text. Rather, my point is that the experience of reading the novel depends radically on the reader’s starting point. It is not simply a matter of whether the reader has some arcane bit of information that adds a bit of resonance to the text: the whole meaning of the novel is reversed according to where the reader is before reading. Virtually any reader before 1977—and almost any non-musical reader thereafter—is apt to see the novel as confused and unsettled. But anyone who knows Berg’s history and is prepared, before reading the book, to entertain the possibility of a secret message, will easily be able to apply rules of coherence so that Cosmos resolves into a perverse puzzle in which the hidden solution completely inverts the surface meaning. Indeed, once you see this hidden solution, it is almost impossible to ignore it. True, the historical facts strongly suggest (although they can never fully prove) that Gombrowicz could not have intended it, since the affair between Alban and Hanna was a closely guarded secret at the time he wrote the book. Yet so powerful is the pull of patterning as we read that it is difficult to believe that the references are not really there, if you are predisposed to find them in the first place.

Popular Fiction as a Genre

One might argue, of course, that the interpretive problems I have pointed out in Cosmos stem from its postmodern sensibility, and from the ambiguous and closely intertwined nature of the two genres competing for the reader’s allegiance. And, to be sure, Gombrowicz’ chosen techniques serve to magnify the problems of reading. But they magnify them, they do not create them; similar
difficulties are likely to occur, to a greater or lesser extent, when reading many other literary texts, and when dealing with any genres, even the ones that seem least problematic on the surface. To demonstrate the range of the problem, let me take up a case at the opposite end of the literary spectrum, *The Glass Key*, which involves a genre distinction of the broadest type: the distinction between what are generally thought of as "popular" and "serious" (or "elite") texts.

At first, the popular/serious distinction may not appear to be a genre distinction at all. But if one accepts the description of reading and the definition of *genre* I have presented above, it follows that not all common genres have generic names. That is, by looking at genres in terms of shared reading conventions—rather than in terms of the preformed textual types that the academy has classified—we find ourselves with the possibility of categories that are not traditionally treated as genres, but that have all the attributes of genres and that can illuminate our cultural practices if they are so considered. This is certainly true of the popular/serious distinction. Granted, this distinction is about the broadest possible, so the rules that apply are both extremely general and subject to numerous exceptions. Still, we can say that, as a genre, popular literature—at least, if we restrict our discussion for the moment to American and British novels from the 1920s to the 1980s—seems to differ from so-called serious fiction in two ways. (Parallel differences would no doubt hold for other countries and other periods, but for the sake of my argument here—the problems faced by a reader of a particular American text from the 1920s—such concerns can be bracketed.)

First, popular fiction emphasizes a different category of reading rules. Roland Barthes has made a similar claim, although of course in different terms, when distinguishing popular tales from the psychological novel—one of the epitomes of serious fiction in the period I am discussing. "Some narratives," he writes, "are predominantly functional [such as popular tales], while some others are predominantly indicial [such as 'psychological' novels]."11 In Barthes' own vocabulary, popular tales tend to be more metony-
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mic, while psychological novels are more metaphoric; translated into more traditional terms, this means that popular tales are more plot oriented, psychological novels more character oriented. Recast in my terminology, his remarks suggest that when we read popular fiction, we tend to stress operations of configuration, while in reading psychological novels, we tend to emphasize operations of signification.\textsuperscript{12} If an element is brought to our attention by a rule of notice in a work of pop fiction, therefore, we tend to consider it in terms of what it may tell us about plot outcome, rather than in terms of what it may reveal about the inner states of the characters and the world of the book. Thus, for instance, in Anthony Olcott's thriller, \textit{Murder at the Red October}, the protagonist, Ivan—a security officer at a Moscow hotel—snatches a doll that he finds under the bed of a mysterious American who has been murdered, in order to give it to his girlfriend's daughter. It is a noticeable event, in part because it comes at the end of a chapter; but since this is a popular novel, we are expected to think of the theft in terms of what complications are likely to result, rather than in terms of what it reveals about Ivan's character. It is for this reason that Fredric Jameson is able to argue that certain chance perceptions of "the inessential" are possible in popular fiction, but not in "great literature," where the reader is "obliged" to treat them as "directly infused with symbolic meaning."\textsuperscript{13}

Pop and serious fiction differ not only according to which type of rule their readers put into effect more often, but also with respect to the particular rules that readers are asked to apply within each category. Take rules of notice. Although specific rules of notice vary considerably within subgenres, there are three general ways in which operations of notice differ radically between popular and serious texts. First, attention to textual nuances is greatly influenced by the speed with which we read, and our current cultural

\textsuperscript{12} The same claim, in only slightly different terms, is made by Billie Wahlstrom and Caren Deming, who argue that locations in works of popular fiction (like \textit{Spiderman}) are "a device to amuse us and to provide some obvious plot complications," whereas those in serious art (like \textit{Ulysses}) have "a further metaphoric dimension" ("Chasing the Popular Arts through the Critical Forest," \textit{Journal of Popular Culture} \textbf{13} [Spring 1980]: 421).

\textsuperscript{13} Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler," 626.
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context encourages us to zip through popular texts carelessly. In part, we see this in marketing strategies. The sales of certain popular titles in airports, train stations, and supermarkets, for instance, reflects a context in which speedy reading is assumed; so does the rapid turnover of the stock of romances.\(^{14}\) And these sales practices confirm more widely held assumptions about reading speed. The tendency of college students to divide literature into classroom reading and summer reading is one manifestation of these assumptions. So is George P. Elliott’s claim that the pace of the thriller “forbids that contemplation which is essential to reading great fiction.”\(^{15}\)

Second, notice is also affected by the number of times we read a text—indeed, by the number of times we think it capable of being read. For if a reader accepts Wayne Booth’s dictum that “we quite properly ask that the books we call great be able to stand up under repeated reading,”\(^{16}\) it will seriously affect the expectations, and hence the attentiveness, with which he or she approaches a given work, even the first time through. The printing of popular texts in cheap, nondurable editions, the stress on their newness—which, by implying that last month’s novelties are no longer worth considering, also implies that this text will not be worth reading next month—all encourage a lack of attentiveness as we read.

Third, as I have argued, what we attend to in a text is also influenced by the other works in our minds against which we read it. Particular details stand out as surprising, significant, climactic, or strange in part because they are seen in the context of a particular intertextual grid—a particular set of other works of art. And we tend to hold popular and elite fiction up against different backgrounds. Thus, for instance, when Leon Howard asserts that “few detective novels invite comparison with specific works of ‘serious’ fiction,”\(^{17}\) he is not so much stating a “fact” about the properties

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14. For an excellent discussion of the marketing strategies of popular romances, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, esp. chap. 1.
16. Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 256. See also Kenneth Burke’s discussion of the kinds of texts that are rereadable in “Psychology and Form.”
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of detective stories as making a claim about the "proper" intertextual grid on which to map them. As a consequence of such differences in background, the same detail will be read differently, depending on the type of text in which it is found. When Turgenev gives the name Tatyana to the mother of his heroine in "Assya," we are expected to pay attention to his choice because the novel continues the literary tradition that includes Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, whose heroine Tatyana serves as a major model for women in nineteenth-century Russian fiction. But when Olcott gives the same name to the heroine of Murder at the Red October, we are not expected to register that fact as particularly important (even though Olcott himself is a brilliant scholar of Russian literature), because we are supposed to read it against a different background. 18 Similarly, while readers are apt to look out for ciphers and anagrams in serious post-Joycean fiction (without such predisposition, the anagrams in Fuentes' Death of Artemio Cruz would be invisible), 19 we are not apt to do so in a popular spy novel—even one that, like Robert Littell's Amateur, concerns a code breaker who has discovered, encoded in The Tempest, proof that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays.

Even when what is noticed is the same in popular and elite art (for instance, a title), there is often a difference in the rules of signification applied to it. As a general rule, titles in serious novels during the period under discussion are to be treated metaphorically or symbolically. More specifically, we are expected to treat them as one guide to the specific directions outward in which the novelist intends us to read; as Wayne Booth points out, "It is interesting to note how much more importance titles and epigraphs take on in modern works, where they are often the only explicit commentary the reader is given." 20 The title Absalom, Absalom!, for instance, serves, among other things, to remove the novel from a specifically

18. Of all the claims about authorial meanings in this book, this is the only one that comes from personal communication with the actual author involved.

19. See Santiago Tejerina-Canal, La Muerte de Artemio Cruz: Secreto Generativo (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming). Since I do not read Spanish, I have not read this monograph; I have, however, discussed the issue of anagrams with its author.

Southern context and place it in a larger frame. It is for this reason that a teacher, at a loss for an exam question about a serious novel, can usually ask, "Why is the book called *For Whom the Bell Tolls*?" Or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? Or *Gravity's Rainbow*? But in reading popular novels, we are normally expected to treat their titles, on the whole, as broadly descriptive (they give clues about genre and general content) and discriminatory (they help distinguish one book from another so that we will know whether we have read it already). Indeed, mass-market books often depend as much on numbering as on title for identification—as I well remember from my years as a collector of Hardy Boys books. One could not reasonably ask students to write for an hour on the question, "Why is this book called *The Drums of Fu Manchu*?" because Sax Rohmer chose his title with the expectation that its function for the reader would be more circumscribed. He expected his reader to be able to recognize from the jacket that his novel was an adventure story in a particular series and that it was a different book from *The Mask of Fu Manchu*; he did not intend it to provide a springboard for generalization or metaphoric association, or to provide an authorial norm otherwise missing from the text.

Rules of configuration differ for the two types of literature as well. As I have already suggested, popular novels tend on the whole to encourage activities of configuration rather than activities of signification. Furthermore, we read popular literature, in general, expecting less complex and ironic plot patterns. In addition—as I will demonstrate in detail later in this section—the particular configurations you impose on or expect in a book depend, in part, on the books you are reading it against.

Finally, in elite art, we demand—and seek out—greater and more elaborate forms of coherence. We are, for instance, more apt to look at apparent inconsistencies as examples of irony or undercutting, whereas in popular novels, we are apt to ignore them or treat them as flaws. This, too, has something to do with the speed of reading—as well as with the reader's tendency, in fiction presumed to be serious, to reread, to refine interpretations, and to exercise ingenuity.

But as I have argued, correct determination of genre—and of the appropriate interpretive rules—is not automatic. It is not even
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logical. That is, there is no way to determine by reason alone what rules apply in a particular case. When, in Dr. No, the villain captures James Bond and assures him that he will die, we should expect that the prediction will turn out false. That is not because there is any logical imperative to do so, but rather because we live in a community where it is conventional to apply the rule of chutzpah at such a moment in the plot in novels that present themselves as Fleming's does. But not all novels are so unambiguous in their self-presentation.

I am not here taking the fashionable position that all books are, by their very nature, inherently undecipherable. Quite often, a text will give fairly precise signals as to how the author intended it to be taken. For instance, Erle Stanley Gardner's title The Case of the Sleepwalker's Niece nudges us into a pop strategy of reading by blocking a metaphorical interpretation, just as the title The Sound and the Fury, by forcing us both into metaphor and into Shakespeare, steers us into the serious mode. The recurring religious imagery of Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts—which begins with Shrike's poem in the very first paragraph—makes it nearly impossible for an experienced reader to infer that the author wanted it treated as a nonsymbolic popular tale; the flat, unresonant prose of most paperback romances discourages the kind of attentiveness that is central to elite-novel reading strategies.21

But other works are more confusing—even a work as apparently straightforward as Spillane's Vengeance Is Mine. Its title can be treated as a pop title, a marker to distinguish it from, yet relate it to, I, the Jury. But it can also be interpreted as a serious title, as a call to read the novel in the context of Tolstoy [whose Anna Karenina starts with the same biblical citation]—and hence to notice its ironic religious implications and to adopt a critical attitude toward the arrogant hero who takes God's work on himself.

Now the attempt to read as authorial audience is ideally a process of matching presuppositions against unfolding text, and revising strategies if the text moves in unanticipated directions. And it would be comforting to believe that the reader who assumed at

21. For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Radway, Reading the Romance, chap. 6.
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first that *Vengeance Is Mine* was the title of a serious ironic novel would soon find that reading corrected by other elements in the text. But as we have seen argued theoretically by such critics as Stanley Fish, and as we have seen demonstrated practically in the variety of readings put forward by our academic journals, it is not always easy for a text to win over a reader who is predisposed to finding in it meanings and values that the author did not intend— even (perhaps especially) when the reader is sincerely trying to join the authorial audience. Given the frequent references to hell and damnation, to playing God, to “making” people; given the antagonist’s name, Juno, and the frequent references to Olympus; given what can be interpreted as its references to Balzac’s “Sar­rasine” (references especially noticeable in an intellectual climate greatly influenced by Barthes’ *S/Z*)—it would not be hard to read the novel ironically.

I am not claiming that such an ironic reading, if it were presented as the interpretation of the authorial audience, would be a good one. Rather I am saying something quite different: Bad as it is as an authorial reading, it would not necessarily run against stumbling blocks in the text. In other words, the success of any genre placement—that is, the degree to which any particular reading strategy makes sense of a text—is no guarantee that one has successfully joined the authorial audience. *Vengeance Is Mine* is a popular novel, and thus requires us to approach it with the proper presuppositions. And there is a basic rule of coherence in popular literature: While subtle references or allusions to elite culture (for instance, the discussions of opera in Mary Burchell’s Harlequin romance, *Masquerade with Music*) may be read as enhancements for the pleasure of elite readers, those allusions cannot be read as a basic undermining of the apparent overall meaning of the text. The ironic reading of Spillane, whatever its textual grounding, would be wrong as an interpretation of the author’s intentions, just as Samuel Rosenberg’s ingenious reading of Sherlock Holmes, however successful, is probably wrong: Doyle most likely did not have Nietzsche in mind when he invented Moriarty. In neither case,  

22. See, in particular, the later essays in Fish, *Is There a Text?*  
though, does the text itself dictate conclusively what rules ought to be applied. Whether you hit upon the right reading will often depend on what you think it likely to be before you begin. Thus, as I have suggested before, whether we pay particular attention to the name Marlow that Eric Ambler gives his hero in *Cause for Alarm* (1939) or the name Marlowe that Chandler gave to his hero in *The Big Sleep* that same year will depend on whether we read their texts as popular thrillers (and hence against other popular thrillers) or as serious novels (and hence, perhaps, against the tradition that includes the works of Conrad). And to a large extent, the very act of connecting *The Big Sleep* to one or another of these literary traditions makes it into a particular kind of text for the reader processing it.

This brings me back, at last, to *The Glass Key*. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the novel itself raises the issue of how presuppositions influence interpretation. In analyzing the discussions of Janet Henry’s dream as a metaphor for reading, though, I had already made a decision to treat the novel as serious rather than as popular. But the book is nowhere near so transparent as I pretended it was; in fact, it holds itself open for placement in either broad genre.

Take the opening sentence: “Green dice rolled across the green table, struck the rim together, and bounced back.” Whether the novel is popular or serious, this is a privileged position, and in either genre it raises questions for the reader. But what questions it raises—that is, what expectations it nourishes, how it is experienced—differ radically for each. If we assume that it is a popular detective story, we will tend to emphasize configurational questions: Who is throwing the dice? Will he or she win or lose? How will the outcome trigger future actions? If we approach it as if it were a serious novel, we will stress questions of signification: What is the role of chance in this novel? What are the symbolic implications of the phrase “bouncing back”? Yet the book that follows does not serve as a strong corrective for either of these readings. Whichever path we choose, the novel follows through; the game does generate much of the early action, but the images of chance and resilience are central to the novel’s metaphoric structure.
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As I noted above, genres can overlap. One might therefore argue that these two reading strategies are not mutually exclusive, and that the good reader can ask all of these questions at once, reading the novel as a member of both classes simultaneously. Perhaps that is true of these initial questions (although I suspect only academics would actually read this novel in that way). But there are other consequences of genre placement that demand an either/or decision about reading strategy. This is clearest with regard to configuration. If we construe the book as a popular novel, subgenre "detective story," we will be on the lookout for a particular configuration—a problem, a false solution (often stemming from a false confession) about three-quarters of the way through, a correct solution about ten pages from the end, and a postclimax wrap-up of secondary importance. And if we look for that pattern, we will find it. Reading with these expectations, we will not for a moment believe Paul's "confession," and we will concentrate more on the solution than on the wrap-up. The book will not, even in this reading, be particularly jolly, but its despair will be muted by the reader's privileging of the positive results of Ned Beaumont's investigation.

But if we read it as a serious novel, subgenre "personal-discovery novel" (under the spell of Proust, Conrad, and Faulkner), we will be alerted to another potential configuration, one in which the correct solution will come earlier than it would in a detective story, but will be followed by something even more important—an examination of its psychological and philosophical ramifications. If we are on the lookout for this configuration, we will find it, too, with a bit of a twist. Using this reading strategy, we are more likely to believe Paul's confession and be surprised by the arrival of a second solution; in any case, we will be more interested in the consequences of the truth than in the facts of the murder itself. In this reading, therefore, we will give less attention to the solution and will stress the novel's final image more strongly: Ned Beaumont staring at an empty doorway, a doorway we will tie metaphorically to the door in the dream and all the other doors and entryways into psycholog-

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 fatal blanks that give this book much of its troubling character when it is construed as a serious novel.

Intellectually, perhaps, we can have it both ways and call the novel some kind of hybrid. But for any actual act of reading, we must choose one genre or the other (or some discrete third): we cannot be both surprised and not surprised, and we cannot both emphasize and de-emphasize the emptiness and lack of resolution of the final paragraph. In precisely the same way that initial genre choice substantially colors our experience of the avant-garde Cosmos, so it radically influences our reading of The Glass Key.

Scapegoating Carmen: Reading Misreadings

So far, my argument in this chapter has centered on one of the reasons—generic ambiguity—that texts are so often open to misreadings. As I have suggested before, though, my primary concern is not with exploring generic ambiguity itself, but with offering an exemplary kind of analysis that can be turned to other problems as well. Rather than pursue this direction further, therefore, either by hunting down additional specimens of generically ambiguous texts, or even by trying to build up a typology of misreadings (a project that threatens to be both endless and drab), I would like now to see how the examination of the presuppositions behind the reading process can help us answer a parallel, and I think more important, question, one that has hovered throughout. Given the potential ambiguity of texts, what makes a reader aiming at an authorial reading choose to apply one strategy rather than another?

There are, of course, many possible reasons, often depending on the specific individual doing the reading. But sometimes particular misreadings are widespread rather than idiosyncratic—and I would argue that such persistent misreading usually has its origins, not in the readers as individuals, but in the culture that has taught them to read. We can therefore often uncover forces at work in a society by reading its misreadings, by studying the ways that readers have misappropriated the texts they live with. Specifically, to the extent that we can determine what rules readers actually do apply when they try unsuccessfully to recover an author's intentions, we can
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illuminate the categories informing their thoughts, and consequently the ideological pressures working on them.

Why turn to misreadings? Can't the works themselves—or the authorial interpretations of them—give us cultural insights? Yes, but of a different kind—or, to be more accurate, of two different kinds. First of all, to the extent that a work provides messages, espouses values, criticizes or supports its culture, we can determine—within limits, of course—the author's vision of things. We can, for instance, determine Dostoyevsky's attitudes toward Roman Catholicism by reading The Idiot, just as we can learn Proust's attitudes toward Wagner or (by a vastly more circuitous route) toward homosexuality by reading Remembrance of Things Past. A great deal of useful criticism is aimed at precisely such determinations.

Second, and more subtly, determining the nature of the authorial audience—specifying the presuppositions on which a text is built—can inform us about what authors assumed about their readers. The gratuitous violence toward blacks in I, the Jury—a violence that the text apparently sees no need to justify—spotlights more than Mickey Spillane's racism; it also betrays the racist attitudes he routinely expected in his readers. And to the extent that authors are shrewd observers of their times, such assumptions can be even more revealing than an author's own more or less explicit moralizing. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to tell when an author has been shrewd in this regard. I used to believe that the popular success of a novel could serve as at least partial evidence, but I have been forced to modify that point of view for two reasons. First, even if readers do read as an author intended, we cannot be sure of their own predilections. For whatever we feel about the status of authorial intention, it appears that until fairly recently, most people read texts at least as if they were trying to extract the author's meaning. To the extent that a particular past reading matches the author's intention (regardless of how it matches up with our own responses to the text), we can therefore never be sure how much it actually incorporates the ideology of the actual reader, and how much it merely represents that reader's attempt to join the authorial audience—to follow the instructions of the text, to "accept" (provisionally, perhaps) the ideology it calls
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for. Thus, for instance, it would be hard to draw any conclusions about an actual reader's views on monarchy as a system of social organization from his or her acceptance of the rightfulness of Richard the Lionhearted's claim to the throne in Ivanhoe. Second, as I have argued above, texts can be popular without being understood. Thus, the commercial success of a work has no necessary bearing on the degree to which the author made the right guesses about his or her readers. Chandler's Big Sleep, for instance, was intended as a critique of a conservative political position, but his point was consistently missed, even by his admirers. Thus, reading the novel tells us little about what his readers actually thought.

But if we cannot learn about Chandler's readers from reading Chandler, we surely can learn about them by looking at how they misread Chandler. For a reader's attempt and failure to join the authorial audience implies that something is keeping him or her from applying interpretive strategies that the author, at least, believed to be more or less readily available. The source of that failure may lie in the reader (lack of experience, personal eccentricity) or in the author (poor technique, unrealistic expectations about how readers would respond). But in any case, the mismatch itself provides a starting point for further investigation: it offers a possible instance of ideological interference by indicating a point in the culture where two individuals have different understandings about what presuppositions should underlie a reading of the text.25

Let me illustrate this claim in more detail, showing how the strategies employed by critics when they read The Big Sleep (and critics are, after all, merely people who get paid to read under public scrutiny) can teach us something about the structure of misogyny, not the misogyny of the novel itself, but the misogyny of the world outside it.

As I suggested in Chapter 5, The Big Sleep is a subversive book

25. Some of these ideas were originally developed in collaboration with Janice Radway for a paper entitled "The Hidden Mind: Authorial Intention and Literary Texts as Historical Documents," which was delivered at the American Studies Association meeting on November 4, 1983. I am grateful for her permission to use them here. For Radway's own analysis of the problems involved in trying to learn about actual readers by looking at the texts they consume, see Reading the Romance.
that seeks to encourage a socially critical attitude by forcefully overturning the basic rules of the detective story genre (at least, its classical variant represented by such writers as Christie), thus forcing its readers to apply rules of coherence that look beyond the conventions to their ideological implications. Those conventions, of course, have been widely discussed by critics from W. H. Auden to S. S. Van Dine, and different critics have listed them in different ways. Nonetheless, there are three rules that show up implicitly or explicitly on nearly every list. First, in S. S. Van Dine's words, "There must be but one culprit." Second, the detective must always win and restore order, as Van Dine puts it, "The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects." And third, the crime must originate in some personal quirk, succeeding temporarily only because it operates behind a veil of deception; the criminal, therefore, can always be unmasked through rational procedures—what Van Dine calls "logical deductions." In other words, the classical detective story centers on a single villain whose transgressions stem from "a little kink in the brain somewhere," a villain who can be (and is) brought to justice by a single detective through logic rather than force.

Stated in this way, of course, these are rules for the proper construction of texts; but they have analogues in rules for reading, as well. Most obviously, they parallel rules of configuration, governing our expectations about what is likely to occur in a classical detective story (it is appropriate to expect that there will be a single villain, etc.). But they also serve as rules of signification. In a classi-

28. There are, of course, exceptions—but they make a point of their unusualness. Thus, Josephine Tey ends The Man in the Queue as follows:

"Well," I said to him, "it has been a queer case, but the queerest thing about it is that there isn't a villain in it."
"Isn't there!" Grant said, with that twist to his mouth.
Well, is there? [The Man in the Queue (New York: Pocket, 1977), 222 (chap. 18)].

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cal detective story, we are normally asked to see the villain—that is, the cause of crime—as an individual; it runs against the grain of the genre to treat him or her as a metaphor for larger social problems. Likewise, the practitioners of the genre expect us to see the detective as a positive representation of the power of an individual to overcome evil, not as a symbol of the weakness of the solitary human being.

This aesthetic formula is not innocent; it serves a political function, supporting what John Cawelti calls "the moral fantasy that human actions have a simple and rational explanation and that guilt is specific and not ambiguous."29 Addressing the anxieties of a bourgeois audience troubled by the possibility of social revolution, Christie, for instance, puts fear to rest by insisting that evil is individual in nature and can therefore be uprooted without social change by a single competent person. As Stephen Knight puts it, the "meaning implicit in the organic structure" of writers like Doyle and Christie—where "criminal events [are] resolvable by a skilful, persevering agent"—"responds to bourgeois ideas of personal effort through diachronic time towards the improvement of one's moral and physical position."30

Chandler's novel is quite different. Here, evil is multiple and social in origin, and the detective is unable to contain it. As E. M. Beekman puts it, "the artificial jungle of the hothouse grows into that of a perverse society of sex, money, murder, immorality and betrayal. . . . A corrupt universe can house no justice."31 A rough outline of the story may make this break with convention clearer. Philip Marlowe is hired by General Sternwood to take care of Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a bisexual porn merchant who is blackmail-

29. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 132. But see Jameson's claim that the detective story is "a form without ideological content, without any overt political or social function" ["On Raymond Chandler," 625].

30. Knight, *Form and Ideology*, 151. Knight, however, sees the role of the hero as less important in Christie than I do, see esp. his chap. 4. See also Geoffrey H. Hartman: Mystery stories "are exorcisms, stories with happy endings that could be classified with comedy because they settle the unsettling" ["Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story," in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 212].

ing Carmen, the general's younger daughter. Marlowe intuits, however, that Sternwood really wants him to trace the missing husband of his older daughter Vivian, a former bootlegger named Rusty Regan. Regan has mysteriously vanished, and there are rumors that he has run off with Mona Grant, the wife of racketeer Eddie Mars. After three or four murders (depending on how you count the ambiguous death of the chauffeur) and some strong-arming by the local authorities who want him to lay off the case, Marlowe finds Mona, but is himself caught by Mars' hit man, Lash Canino. Mona—whom he dubs "Silver-Wig"—helps him get away; he kills Canino and then goes back to the Sternwood mansion where it appears that the traditional denouement is to take place.

But *The Big Sleep* has worked up to a traditional resolution only to retreat from it. Yes, we do discover something. Carmen, angry at Marlowe for repelling her attempts at seduction, tries to shoot him. We learn that she had murdered Regan for the same reason, and that Mars and Canino, who had helped get rid of the corpse in a sump, have been using their knowledge to put the screws on Vivian. But by this point in the novel, so much has happened that Philip Marlowe's discovery of what had happened to Regan seems anticlimactic; it surely does not constitute a real answer to the questions that the novel has raised. Nor, for that matter, does Vivian's agreement, at Marlowe's insistence, to put her sister in an institution, really seem an adequate restoration of order. In Chandler, as Beekman notes, "the purported solution does not tidy things up since there is no end to a waking nightmare." But lest we miss the hollowness of the denouement, Chandler purposefully exaggerates the irritation by preparing a configuration that never takes place; throughout the novel, he has built up a growing antagonism between Marlowe and Eddie Mars, only to leave it hanging at the end.

We are made to expect this confrontation in a number of ways. First, as is evident even from the plot summary, the events of the novel are both complex and episodic, and are quite hard to tie together. But there is one link, other than Marlowe, holding it all

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32. Ibid.
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together: Mars is involved, although often behind the scenes, in all of the action of the book. Indeed, The Big Sleep was put together by Chandler out of material scavenged from “Killer in the Rain” and “The Curtain,” and Mars is the only character (other than Marlowe, of course) in the novel with an equivalent in both of those early stories. (True, General Sternwood and Carmen are involved in incidents that originated in both of the stories; but as characters, they only have analogues in one or the other. Thus, the general takes on some of the plot function of Tony Dravec in “Killer,” but they have no character resemblance.) Rules of balance therefore lead us to expect that these primary antagonists will in fact have it out. Second, Chandler uses a verbal trick to reinforce their position as antagonists: Mars’ name is an echo of Marlowe’s. Chandler was especially fond of this device; in the later novels, Marlowe is mirrored, in different ways, by such characters as Mrs. Murdock, Lindsay Marriott, Moose Malloy, and especially Paul Marston. In this case, the phonetic parallel is a signal for us to apply rules of signification and coherence to read Mars as Marlowe’s primary opponent. Third, Marlowe’s most bitter and most extended—hence his most noticeable—verbal assault in the novel is directed at Mars.

“You think he’s just a gambler. I think he’s a pornographer, a blackmailer, a hot car broker, a killer by remote control, and a suborned of crooked cops. He’s whatever looks good to him, whatever has the cabbage pinned to it. . . . [Jones is] a dead little bird now, with his feathers ruffled and his neck limp and a pearl of blood on his beak. Canino killed him. But Eddie Mars wouldn’t do that, would he, Silver-Wig? He never killed anybody. He just hires it done.” 33

Marlowe unleashes this diatribe to Silver-Wig, and its vehemence grows partly from his growing involvement with her. This competition for her affections, of course, further arouses our expectation of a showdown: there is a rule of balance that rivals have to meet. Finally, near the end of the novel, Chandler explicitly and


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ostentatiously drops the first shoe. After telling Vivian to seek professional care for Carmen, he tells her of his plans.

"Forget Eddie. I'll go see him after I get some rest. I'll handle Eddie."
"He'll try to kill you."
"Yeah," I said. "His best boy couldn't. I'll take a chance on the others." [213, chap. 32]

Yet while the Howard Hawks film version ends dramatically as Mars is machine-gunned by his own thugs, the novel promises this confrontation only to fail to fulfill it. In fact, Marlowe never does "handle" Mars; instead, Chandler closes the novel with a despairing meditation, in a privileged position.

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just sleep the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. . . .

On the way downtown I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again. [213–14, chap. 32]

Yet from the first reviews that greeted the novel, most critics have missed its irresolution. Thus, instead of interpreting it as a critique of the politics upheld by the traditions of the genre, they have instead read it as a heroic text, seeing not Marlowe's final despair, but rather his knightly—albeit muted—triumph. In other words, the text has been misread in such a way that it appears to provide a resolution. Even John Cawelti touts Marlowe in The Big Sleep as an example of a hero who "confronts, exposes, and destroys this web of conspiracy and perversion."34 Philip Durham similarly decides that he was "the traditional American hero bringing fair play and justice where it could not be or had not been administered."35 Why have they done so? And how?

34. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance, 149.
35. Philip Durham, Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go: Raymond Chandler's Knight (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 33. See
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In part, the phenomenon can be explained by a tendency of readers to find what they expect and want in a text. As I. A. Richards puts it, "When any person misreads . . . it is because, as he is at that moment, he wants to. . . . Every interpretation is motivated by some interest." Readers are likely to expect and want this kind of resolution for a number of reasons. On one level, of course, experiences with previous detective stories have had their toll. In addition, as I have argued (and post-structuralist critiques of traditional reading practices would support this claim), there is a general tendency in most reading to apply rules of coherence in such a way that disjunctures are smoothed over so that texts are turned into unified wholes—that is, in a way that allows us to read so that we get the satisfaction of closure. This interpretative technique is taught explicitly in school; and it may be connected to an innate psychological drive for closure.

But there are political reasons as well. Even if the desire for closure is cross-cultural, its particular manifestations are always social. We cannot explain why children's stories so often end with characters going to sleep simply by trotting out a generalized desire for closure. This particular closure is common under these circumstances—but less so in adult fiction—because in our culture children's stories often serve the social function of preparing children to go to sleep. Similarly, Janice Radway has eloquently demonstrated how the particular forms of closure found in popular romances respond to tensions within the structure of contemporary patriarchy.

I suspect that readers in our culture tend to seek out (or impose) this particular kind of resolution—explanation with punishment—in The Big Sleep for much the same reason that they read detective stories in the first place: they want to be soothed, not irritated, and they do not want to confront Chandler's abyss and its demand for radical social change. As George P. Elliott puts it, we all have a malaise about the order of the world, and we like "to read a story which produces in the reader a safe version of the same

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thing and which purges this induced tension”,38 and while this may be less true with so-called elite art, it is widely felt to be true of popular texts.39 It is thus not coincidental that the earliest reviews not only passed over the novel’s irresolution, but also ignored Chandler’s social analysis of evil. Almost uniformly, they stressed the theme of personal degeneracy rather than social corruption. The New Yorker, for instance, called it a “pretty terrifying story of degeneracy”; Ralph Partridge referred to the “full strength blend... of sadism, eroticism, and alcoholism”; the Times Literary Supplement described the novel’s plot as Marlowe’s trying “to conceal from an aged general the misadventures of his two degenerate daughters.”40 Even the more astute critics tended to see The Big Sleep as a collection of characters—mostly vicious, but at least individuals—rather than as a portrayal of a social situation.

Most readers, in other words, seem to misread Chandler for the same reasons they misread most disturbing books—they want to defend themselves against unwelcome points of view. But the question of the readers’ motives for reading the novel as they do is only half the question. Even if I am right about why they do so, we still have to confront the even more vexing question of how they do so. For while readers tend to find what they want to find in books, there are, for most readers, limits to the process. Behind any persistent interpretation must lie not only some persistent desire to read in that fashion; at the same time, there must also be some coherent interpretive strategy, some approach to the text that makes that reading seem a plausible, even inevitable, consequence of the words on the page. For any interpretation, in other words, it

38. Elliott, “Country Full of Blondes,” 356. For a different perspective on this problem, see Stephen Knight’s claim that Chandler holds a “conservative and elitist position” [Form and Ideology, 136–38].
ought ideally to be possible to trace the steps that allow readers to transform the text in that particular way.

In this case, the process of interpretation involves treating the novel primarily as a popular novel (stressing the solution) rather than as a serious one (stressing the indecisive conclusion). In addition, it has to involve an act of scapegoating: in order to create a sense of resolution in a morally chaotic situation, someone must be seen as the wrongdoer and appropriately punished. And even for those critics who did not explicitly name anyone as the guilty party, it is clear who they must have had in mind. For given the novel's structure, there is only one possibility: if anyone's punishment redeems the world, serves as an emblem of the triumph of justice, it has to be Carmen Sternwood's, since the discovery that she killed Rusty Regan is the closest thing to a standard, formulaic detective story conclusion that we find in this novel. Thus, for instance, John Cawelti, claiming that there is a single criminal (although one usually tied to a larger organization) in the hard-boiled formula, goes on to name Carmen as the criminal in *The Big Sleep*.41 Stephen Knight obviously believes the same when he claims that "Chandler's ultimate villains are always women."42 Dennis Porter, more explicitly, calls Carmen the "archcriminal" of the novel: "That the archcriminal turns out in the end to be the perverted baby doll who falls into Marlowe's arms on the fourth page of the novel has about it the swift and unanswerable finality of the best punch lines and, in the context, warrants the sustained darkness of mood with which the novel ends."43 At first, that may

42. Knight, *Form and Ideology*, 157. See also Gavin Lambert's claim that *Farewell, My Lovely*, *The Lady in the Lake*, and *The High Window* are "dominated by portraits of a deadly female of the American species, combing [sic: combining!] the power-drive of one Sternwood sister and the psychosis of the other... His novels are a notable addition to the popular mythology that represents death as a woman" (*The Dangerous Edge* [New York: Grossman, 1976], 220, 233).
43. Dennis Porter, *Pursuit of Crime*, 143. Elsewhere, he claims that Marlowe's journey is "unnecessary as part of the effort to catch the criminal—Carmen even pretends to faint into Marlowe's arms in that first scene—but it is made indispensable for the moral education of the investigator and, even more importantly, for the appropriate aesthetic experience of the reader" (39, emphasis added). Porter does mention, however, that Chandler "points to the psychological and even socioeconomic causes of crime" (41). One of the few critics to see Carmen as a victim is Hartman; see "Literature High and Low," 220-21.
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seem a fairly reasonable interpretive move, but the more I think about it, the odder it seems. It is not simply that the text itself does not make this move inevitable; it does not even make it easy. Not only, as I have pointed out, does Chandler go out of his way to underscore Mars' villainy; in addition, he tries to block this potential reading by minimizing Carmen's role in the evil around her.

Carmen is a fairly complicated character. On the one hand, to be sure, she has the characteristics that allowed the anonymous blurb writer for my printing to give her top billing: on the front cover as "a luscious mantrap," on the back as a "female . . . as crooked as a snake—and twice as deadly." Through the novel, she is described in terms that recall serpents and rodents. We are told that "her breath hissed" (79, chap. 15), that "her small sharp teeth glinted" (142, chap. 24), and that her laughter reminds Marlowe twice of "rats behind the wainscoting" (60, chap. 12; 143, chap. 24). And her name, taken from Merimée's novel (a Chandler favorite), hardly conjures up notions of purity and fidelity.

If that were all there were to her, of course, her transformation into a scapegoat would be unproblematic. But surely that is an incomplete description. After all, Merimée's Carmen, whatever her faults, is not a villain. As a smuggler, her crime is simply an attack on an irrational economic structure; as a woman, her crime is simply an attack on bourgeois, patriarchal respectability. In the end, she is a victim whose sacrifice solves nothing, although it salves male pride. This inherited role of victim, rather than villain, is emphasized by Chandler's imagery, too. His description of Carmen as an animal is clouded by his constant references to her as an incapable child: Marlowe's first crack to the butler Norris is "you ought to wean her" (4, chap. 1), a remark that fits well with a recurring strand of babylike imagery: she sucks her thumb, "turning it around in her mouth like a baby with a comforter" (3, chap. 1); her handwriting is "sprawling" and "moronic" (10, chap. 2); she is described at one point as looking "like a bad girl in the principal's office" (59, chap. 12). She can, in fact, barely take care of herself: she is easy prey for blackmailers; she is incompetent with a pistol; after the climactic scene where she tries to shoot Mar-

44. Pocket Books, September 1967 printing.
Presupposition and Misunderstanding

Indeed, although she is the person who actually shoots Regan, Chandler consistently suggests that she is just a pawn in the hands of people far more powerful than she is. And he further suggests, at least metaphorically, that her act (the result of a kind of psychotic epilepsy) is but the blossoming of a rottenness that comes to her from her family heritage, a sickness inherited from the oil fields that represent the source of "legitimate" wealth. Carmen, if anything, is but the end of the line for her class, and her institutionalization—far from threatening that class—only serves to bolster it. Carmen, in sum, is neither as intelligent as Spillane's Charlotte Manning (I, the Jury) nor as alluring as Pandora, neither as calculating as Temple Drake (Faulkner's Sanctuary) nor as self-controlled as Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Hammett's Maltese Falcon). She is as pitiable as she is repulsive.

I am not suggesting that Chandler's depiction of her is not misogynistic. It clearly is. But the nature of his misogyny is dismissal and ridicule. His Carmen is infantile; she is too weak to serve as a worthy foil if Marlowe is to be seen as a heroic figure. Yet as we have seen, readers have read her quite differently. Luke Parsons, for instance, suggests a total lack of sympathy on Chandler's part: "In Mr. Chandler's books this association of nymphomania with homicidal tendencies is especially marked... And it is remarkable that Marlowe withholds from them [the nymphomaniacs, including Carmen] the compassion he would allow even a gangster or a millionaire. No doubt this is partly a convention. The plot must have its villainess."45

It seems, then, that something happens to Carmen in the act of reading; many readers of the book apparently have, in their interpretive arsenal, some strategy that allows them to increase her monstrosity so that they can put enough blame on her to make her punishment cathartic. The principle clearly has something to do with our culture's denigration of women, but it cannot be quite so simple as a rule of snap moral judgment that, wherever possible,
we should consider a woman the guilty party. Indeed, there seems to be a rule precisely to the contrary, one sufficiently strong to enable Agatha Christie to base an entire novel (I will not spoil it by telling you which one) on the assumption that, unless specifically directed otherwise, readers will assume that all references to a “murderer” are references to a male. Yet there is obviously some convention that allows readers to turn against Carmen with special vehemence.

Let me propose here, rather briefly, a candidate for this convention: a rule of enchainment that I call the rule of the dominant negative. When a female character is described as a complex combination of contradictory traits, the reader should give priority to the most negative qualities and should in fact interpret her very complexity as a negative factor on its own. Like all interpretive rules, of course, this one has its exceptions. Not all writers depend on it, not all readers apply it (particularly with rising consciousness about women’s positions in our society), and not even the standard, male-centered readings of male texts depend on it regularly. There are certainly cases where women of ambiguous character are viewed in a positive light even in traditional academic readings of canonical texts. But there is no doubt that complexity in a woman is viewed with more suspicion than complexity in a man is. We still live in a literary culture whose norms encourage us to admire King Lear for his involved character, but to demand that our women be as pure as Cordelia. Hamlet, avenging his father’s murder, is a sympathetic hero, even though he waffles and even though his sword runs through a couple or more or less innocent victims along the way; Clytemnestra, avenging her daughter’s murder, is a snake, even though her resolve is stronger and her aim truer. Thus, as Leland S. Person, Jr., points out, critics have tended to malign Daisy Buchanan for failing Gatsby, even though “no woman, no human being, could ever approximate the platonic ideal he has invented.”

The rule of the dominant negative is an indirect consequence of

our polarized view of woman. In our culture, we have a number of categories in which to place women, but they tend to fall into pairs of binary oppositions: madonna/whore, good girl/bad girl, victim/villain. This tendency to dichotomize leads to a particular horror of those who refuse to stay put, for such border straddlers seem to threaten the very order of the universe. Thus, innocent traits in a “guilty” woman serve not to redeem her but to confirm her guilt, doubling the charge against her. Males do not face the same difficulty, however. Since they are viewed as free subjects rather than as objects, they are not fundamentally ordered in clear dichotomies; thus, a combination of attributes is not automatically seen as a crossing of boundaries and a threatening of order. Men, in other words, can be rich as characters, women, on the whole, have the choice of being pure or being monstrous.

The rule of the dominant negative helps explain many things about our culture. In particular, it explains our tendency to blame the victim when she is a woman. We are used to sympathizing with male murderers (Raskolnikov, Pozdnyshev in The Kreutzer Sonata) who have redeeming character traits; but when a woman (say, Emma Bovary) is victimized, we often find ourselves looking at her character to find out why she brought it on herself. Only the purest female victims (Drusilla in Southworth’s Changed Brides and The Bride’s Fate) can have the sympathy they deserve; this tendency in our society helps prevent us from, among other things, effectively coping with rape.

I do not want to put too much weight on the particulars of this explanation of the misreadings of The Big Sleep. For in setting out this hypothesis, my interest is less in The Big Sleep and its specific readers than in a general methodological procedure. My primary point is that whatever the specific interpretive strategy that permits it to happen, the scapegoating of Carmen does not take place in the novel; rather, it is an act that readers perform, not idiosyncratically or individualistically, but according to reading strategies.

47. For a good discussion of Clytemnestra in these terms, see Nancy S. Rabino-witz, “From Force to Persuasion: Aeschylus’ Oresteia as Cosmogonic Myth,” Ramus 10, no. 2 (1981): 159–91.
that their society has taught them and reaffirmed in them before they begin the book. Reading readers, then—whether they be professional critics or friends—is not simply a way of getting a better understanding of a text; it can also help reveal the structures of thought that control us.