# The Maltese Falcon

Dashiell Hammett

## About the author

Dashiell Hammett was born in Maryland, in the United States, in 1894. He left school early and took a variety of temporary jobs before joining a detective agency in 1915. While working for the agency, it was rumoured that he was offered money to kill a union leader. This offer disgusted Hammett and he enlisted in the army. He became ill and was hospitalized. In hospital he met a nurse, Josephine Dolan, who he later married and the couple had two daughters.

Hammett used his experience in the detective agency as material for his gritty, realistic novels such as *The Red Harvest* (1929), *The Dain Curse* (1929), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), which was made into a movie starring Humphrey Bogart in 1941. During the thirties Hammett became involved in left-wing politics and was fiercely opposed to the rise of the Nazis in Europe. In 1951, as president of the Civil Rights Congress, he was asked in court to reveal the names of fellow communists. He refused and was sent to jail for six months. Hammett died in New York in 1961.

## Summary

**Chapters 1–2:** Samuel Spade is a private detective who works in San Francisco with his partner Miles Archer, and his secretary Effie Perine. One day, a beautiful woman, who calls herself Miss Wonderly, pays him a visit. She tells him that her younger sister is in the hands of a dangerous man called Floyd Thursby, and that she has arranged to meet Thursby at her hotel that night. Spade decides to send Miles to shadow the man in the hope that he leads them to Miss Wonderly's sister. At two o'clock in the morning Spade receives a phone call telling him his partner has been shot dead. He arrives at the murder scene and talks to a detective called Tom Polhaus. Later, Polhaus and Lieutenant Dundy go to Spade's house to question him. They tell him that Thursby had also been shot and imply Spade might have murdered him. The following morning, Miss Wonderly, now calling herself Miss Leblanc, asks to see Spade in her apartment. She admits she hasn't told the truth, and that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy. She tells him about Thursby's past and that she is convinced he killed Archer. When Spade returns to his office, his secretary shows in a strange man called Joel Cairo. Cairo says he is looking for a statue of a black falcon, and is willing to pay $5,000 to anyone who can help return it to its owner.

Then, he pulls out a gun and points it at Spade.

**Chapters 3–4:** A fight breaks out and Cairo is knocked unconscious. When he wakes up, Spade agrees to help him find the falcon and Cairo leaves. Spade, realizing he is being followed by a young man (who we later learn is called Wilmer), goes to Brigid's apartment. She knows Cairo and is afraid of him, but agrees to meet him in Spade's apartment. Cairo and Brigid know of a mysterious man referred to as G, who they imply could possibly kill all of them if things went wrong. The door bell rings and Spade greets Polhaus and Dundy on the door step but he refuses to let them in.

Suddenly, Cairo screams for help and the police rush into the apartment. He tells them he had been attacked by both Spade and the girl but realizes that to say anything more would not be advisable. Spade invents a story about Cairo's presence and infuriates Dundy by saying they had been playing a joke on the police. Cairo and the police leave.

**Chapters 5–6:** Brigid tells Spade what she knows about the falcon. Thursby, Cairo and she had taken the falcon from a Russian man and then Floyd and her brought the bird to America. She couldn't trust Floyd not to betray her, so she hired Spade to follow him in the hope he would lead her to the falcon. Spade begins to worry for Brigid's safety and decides to send her to stay at Effie's house. He then goes to see the man known as G, whose real name is Gutman.

Gutman knows exactly what the bird is and probably its value and desperately wants to get his hands on it. He is reluctant to part with anymore details. Spade refuses to tell Gutman where the bird is and leaves. When he arrives back at his office, Effie tells him that Brigid had failed to arrive at her house. Spade talks to the taxi driver that picked her up and he says that Brigid bought a newspaper, the Call, and had got out of his taxi near a pier. He is then taken by Wilmer to see Gutman again.

**Chapters 7–8:** Gutman recounts the four centuries old

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history of the falcon, and says his quest to become the new owner of the falcon had begun seventeen years ago. He tells Spade that Brigid had been working for him and wants to know where she is. Spade lies that she is in a safe place. Suddenly he feels faint and falls to the floor. Gutman had drugged his drink. When he wakes up he goes to the Belvedere hotel to check on Cairo. In Cairo's room he finds the *Call* newspaper with a part of it relating to ship arrivals cut out of it. He buys a copy of the previous day's paper and notices a ship, *La Paloma*, had arrived from Hong Kong. He remembers that Cairo had been in Hong Kong. Back in his office he discovers that *La Paloma* had been set on fire and that prior to the fire, Gutman, Cairo, Brigid and the captain of the ship had had a meeting. Suddenly, a wounded man carrying a package comes into the office and falls dead at Spade and Effie's feet. Inside the package is the falcon. Effie receives a call from a distressed Brigid asking for help, and Spade, carrying the falcon, leaves to go to Gutman's room at the Alexandria.

**Chapters 9–10:** Before going to the hotel, he leaves the bird in the Post Office Package Room. After a failed attempt to find Gutman and Brigid, Spade goes home to find Brigid waiting for him in a doorway. They go inside and see Gutman, Wilmer, and Cairo waiting for them. Gutman hands over some money to Spade as part payment for the falcon, but Spade argues the deal isn't as simple as that. He says the police are going to want to arrest someone for the murders of Thursby and Jacobi, and suggests they give them Wilmer. Gutman then explains his version of events. He knew the falcon had left Hong Kong but he hadn't known until recently that it was in the hands of Captain Jacobi of *La Paloma*, the dead man in Spade's office. He thought Brigid had it. He says Thursby killed Archer and then Wilmer killed Thursby to make it easier for the gang to influence Brigid. Cairo had seen Brigid and the captain together in Hong Kong, so when the captain was seen in San Francisco, Wilmer shot him to get the falcon. However he survived long enough to give it to Spade. Spade phones his office and tells Effie to bring the falcon to his house. Gutman checks the bird and discovers it is a fake. Then, the group leaves to return to their hotel. Spade informs the police and they later discover that Wilmer had shot Gutman.

Brigid tries to explain her role in the whole affair but Spade knows the truth. She employed Miles to shadow Thursby in the hope that Miles would kill him and she would be free. He didn't, so she shot Miles, hoping Thursby would be arrested for the murder. Finally, Spade hands her over to the police.

## Background and themes

**Gangland:** The novel is one of many of its time that is set in the murky world of gangsters.

Much of the action takes place at night, adding to the mysterious and foreboding atmosphere.

**Greed:** Gutman and his accomplices are obsessed with getting hold of the falcon and the money it will make them. Also, throughout centuries, the falcon has brought about the death of many people seeking to possess it, leading one to think it may possibly be cursed.

**Sense of duty:** Spade appears to have very slack morals. He is involved with his partner's wife, takes money from clients with opposing interests, and generally has a cynical outlook on life. However, he reveals the good side of his nature when he avenges the death of his partner and turns Brigid in to the police.

## Discussion activities

### Before reading

1 **Discuss:** Write the titles of the following movies on the board: *Seven, The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Usual Suspects*. Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Have you seen any of these classic detective stories and if so did you like them? What other detective movies have you seen? Do you generally like these types of movies? What qualities do you think somebody needs to be a good detective?*

### Chapters 1–2

**While reading** (page 9, after "Oh, Sam," she cried, "did you kill him?")

2 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to act out a conversation between Spade and Iva. Remind them that Spade and Iva are having a romantic relationship, and that Iva is more enthusiastic about the situation than Spade. See discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

(At the end of Chapter 1.)

3 **Game:** Put the students in pairs and tell them there are twenty one words in chapter 1 that describe how someone is feeling. Tell them they have to write down the words as quickly as possible and that some of the words may have to be changed slightly. The fastest pair wins. See discussion activities key for words.

### After reading

4 **Write and guess:** Write "Spade had a round face" on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (*sharp* not *round*). Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 1–2 and rewrite it changing one word. Students move around the classroom reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

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5 **Write:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are journalists and that they are going to write a newspaper story about the killing of Archer and Thursby. They can include interviews with the police and Spade, and encourage then to give their ideas as to why the men were killed. Use the headline: *Double murder shock. Private detective and mystery man gunned down*

## Chapters 3–4

**While reading** (page 27, after "That's a lie!" Cairo cried.)

6 **Game:** Put the students in groups of three and tell them they are going to play the truth and lies game. Choose a word for each group that the students are unlikely to know. The words could be very colloquial, and avoid choosing scientific words which are often similar in their language. Put the words on the board and ask the students if they know what they mean. If they don't, give a word to each group and tell each group what their word means without letting the other groups hear. Then ask them to write one true definition and two false ones for their word. Encourage them to write imaginative descriptions and to make the false definitions realistic. Each person in the group then reads out their definition. The rest of the groups can ask questions and then must decide on who is telling the truth.

7 **Write:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to write a summary of chapters 3–4. Tell them the summary must be exactly fifty words, not one more or one less. The students then read out their summaries to each other.

## Chapters 5–6

**While reading** (page 40, after "Are you going to marry the lady, Sam?")

8 **Discuss:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to discuss the following questions about marriage: What do you think the secret to a happy marriage is? Do you think it is better to marry someone of the same economic and social background as yourself? Is it better to marry someone your own age? Do you think it is a good idea to live with someone before you marry them? Why do you think more and more people are ending their marriages in Europe? Do you think religion is an important part of marriage?

**After reading**

9 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from chapters 5–6. Tell then to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

## Chapters 7–8

**While reading** (At the end of page 47.)

10 **Quiz:** Put the students in groups of three and tell them they are going to do a quiz about the history of the Maltese Falcon. Then ask the following questions: 1 *Where did Emperor Suleiman chase the knights out of?* 2 *Emperor Charles V gave the knights Malta, Tripoli, and which other place? Who had the knights fought for years? What color was the falcon the knights gave to the Emperor?* 5 *How tall was the falcon?* 6 *What was the name of the famous criminal who stole the bird?* 7 *When did a Greek man buy the bird from a shop?* 8 *What was the name of the Russian man who refused to sell the bird to Gutman?* See discussion activities key for answers.

**After reading**

11 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *gray, desk, doctor, front page, dinner, bullet hole, chest, danger.* Ask the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in chapters 7–8.

## Chapters 9–10

**While reading** (page 66, after "This is real money.")

12 **Discuss:** Remind the students that the characters in the book talk a lot about money. Then put them in small groups and ask them to consider the following questions about money. *How important is money to you? How much money did you spend yesterday? What would you do if you had half a million dollars? Have you ever found any money, in the street perhaps or somewhere else? Have you ever lent or borrowed money? Do you think money can buy happiness? Do you think some people, for example footballers and rock stars, earn too much money?*

13 **Research:** Ask the students to look for reviews and other information on the Internet about the movie *The Maltese Falcon*, starring Humphrey Bogart. Then each student makes an oral presentation of the information they have found.

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