

The story of the investigation

Hawks engages with the dual narrative of the traditional crime fiction story and uses the story of the detective-dominated investigation but subverts it by transforming Marlowe.

Detective paradigm

Hawks took the tough-talking cynical detective figure from Chandler's novel and turned him into a playful pragmatist and a romantic. Marlowe is irreverent and fiercely independent – qualities valued by Hawks. Hawks adapted the pragmatic pioneering Western hero and placed him into an urban context in his noir thriller.

The story of the investigation is told by Marlowe and his perspective dominates every scene in the film. He approaches the clues and the men and women he encounters in a playful and confident manner, and at all times he remains in control of the situation. This conveyed a message of confidence and security to an American audience facing the daunting atmosphere of war and recovery. It encouraged a spirit of optimism based on the belief that the pragmatic American individual can cope with any challenge.

Marlowe is the existential hero of America in the 1940s searching for the pragmatic or practical solution in every situation. He relies on his wit, perseverance and determination, and remains very much his own man who must be in control of every situation. He is shown protecting the innocent and naïve, and punishing the villainous and disreputable. He is not afraid to use violence to find out the truth or to implement his own system of justice.

The police force had fallen into disrepute during Prohibition with its ineffective attempts to deal with crime. In Hawks' film the professional

private investigator or low-paid private detective is shown providing a more effective justice system.

Phillip Marlowe begins his investigation as a client of the wealthy but physically disabled General Sternwood. Marlowe is hired to investigate a case of blackmail involving the General's youngest daughter's gambling debts. His instinct tells Marlowe that Sternwood wants him to keep an eye on his two wild daughters. Sternwood is lonely and he tells Marlowe about the disappearance of his former companion, Shaun Regan. Marlowe becomes interested in why Regan disappeared.

Hawks follows the convention of hardboiled crime fiction and presents hostility to the wealthy class and women but subverts these through his positive representation of pragmatism, loyalty and personal happiness.

Upper-class characters

The opening shot places Marlowe at the front door of the Sternwood mansion with a close-up of the plaque identifying the address. This shot and the panning shots of the hallway and the interior place both Marlowe and the audience in the wealthy end of town.

Marlowe's brief glance at the St George coat-of-arms in the hallway playfully links Marlowe with the legendary knight renowned for his courage and rescuing damsels in distress. In Marlowe's case this is ironic, as he is about to meet two very challenging women.

General Sternwood is an aged man in a wheelchair who cannot drink alcohol and needs to spend many hours in a hothouse filled with orchids to keep him alive. The viewer learns that Sternwood made his money in the oil industry but it does not reveal why he is in a wheelchair. He seems jovial and friendly. He loves company and drinks brandy by proxy. General Sternwood and Marlowe share a disrespect for authority and we learn that Marlowe was once employed in the District Attorney's office and fired for insubordination.

The hothouse scene sets the claustrophobic tone of the film with a vivid description of orchids having a sickly odour like the sweet corruption of men's flesh. The simile creates an impression that the Sternwood family is sullied