"Mean and Shabby and Wrinkled": The Experience of Middle Age in American Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction

Alexander N. Howe
University of the District of Columbia

Abstract. This article examines the nuance of aging masculinity presented in hard-boiled detective fiction, something that is frequently lost amid sleek Hollywood portrayals of these characters. The detectives of this genre are inevitably middle-aged men and aging—along with vulnerability—is thus a fundamental, if often disavowed, element of the form. Among the early authors of this school, Raymond Chandler proves to be the most reflective on the topic of mortality. This article examines *The Long Goodbye* (1953) as a guiding illustration of hard-boiled insights into aging, along with supporting examples from the genre's history, particularly the works of Dashiell Hammett. The question of hard-boiled realism is of special note to this discussion, as these works ostensibly offer a platform for more "true" representations of male bodies as they age. However, Chandler's hard-boiled realism, typified in the 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder", bases authenticity on style and language rather than on verisimilitude. This conflicting realism undoubtedly explains the halting representations of aging in hard-boiled fiction. The detective's experience of age can be disavowed with a well-chosen quip or a well-placed right hook. This essay will read this inherent tension—that is, between articulation and renunciation—with respect to male aging within the hard-boiled ethos.

Keywords: Mid-century American fiction, detective fiction, hard-boiled, masculinity, aging

The masculinity of hard-boiled detective fiction is commonly reduced to flat images of the Hollywood "tough guy"; however, this form is far more nuanced in the original fiction drafted by John Carrol Daly, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler in the first half of the twentieth century. The detectives of this era are inevitably middle-aged men, a detail that is frequently lost in the sleek portrayals of their hyperbolic masculinity. Aging is thus a fundamental, if often

Alexander N. Howe, "Mean and Shabby and Wrinkled": The Experience of Middle Age in American Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, *Polish Journal of English Studies* 9.2 (2023): 93-107

disavowed, element of the form, and vulnerability is a key aspect of these characters. The detectives are not immortal, or even at the top of their game, and the trope of the hard-boiled operative being knocked unconscious is perhaps the greatest figure of this age-won susceptibility. Hard-boiled bodies do indeed bruise, bleed, and break down. Engaging genre- and gender criticism as well as age studies, this essay will examine the ways this fiction opens a popular space for thinking of the aging male body and the experience of middle age for men, reading a variety of works alongside one of the best distillations of hard-boiled aging, which is found in Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1953).

Aging in Literature

Western literature necessarily struggles with representations of aging, as the hero's journey is most often the tale of spatial traversal or appropriation. Indeed, aging as such appears only intermittently and as disruption, discontinuity, or faint warning from a distant future's ghost. Jacob Jewusiak, reading Dickens, suggests that the great irony of expansive realist novels of the nineteenth century is that these do a better job articulating the "social spaces of modernity" than "representing the temporal continuity of an individual life" (Jewusiak 2013, 209). Dickens calls attention to this limitation through the old men that populate his works. These wan figures reveal the ways in which the gendered values at the core of a man's identity, particularly as these are built upon a man's ability to produce and provide, are unsustainable across a lifetime. As Jewusiak concludes,

> What elderly men allow us to see is a fault line at the heart of Victorian culture, where the white, male, middle-class subject is forced to cede power and inhabit a position of lesser influence in old age. (Jewusiak 2013, 210)

Thus, aging, a universal experience, cannot be represented by the novel form of the time.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the leading scholars of age studies, examines how we are aged primarily by culture—and not biology—through lived narratives that determine the limits of our abilities and imagination. That we are the stories we tell about ourselves is a well-established insight, and these stories are always embedded, often quietly, with strict expectations regarding

age. Quoting a 1960 Randall Jarrell essay, Gullette emphases: "Our culture is essentially periodical: we believe that all that is deserves to perish and to have something else put in its place" (Gullette 2004, 29). Naturally, this speaks not to actual deaths, but rather to "the furtive power of decline to instill a masochistic belief in human obsolescence" (Gullette 2004, 29). In the era of unending screen time, Viagra, and democratically distributed cosmetic procedures to approximate something akin to youthful appearances, this culturally mediated obsolescence is undeniably happening at younger ages, for both men and women. As was the point of Jewusiak's reading of Dickens, capitalism cannot indefinitely support its promised largesse, neither in symbolic nor productive economies. Men—and likewise women—must be replaced. To these ends, social media today is especially instructive, and there can be no better support of Gullette's claim that our experience of aging is primarily cultural and not biological than twenty-somethings opting for aesthetic surgery to "look young" on camera. Our bodies change with each passing moment, but "getting old", regardless of when that threshold might be defined, is far too often taken as the end of the story.

Gullette cautions that reading aging in an opposite fashion, as a narrative of acquisition through which we "get better" over time, is as pernicious as narratives of decline. Such storylines of gain are prone to gender-, race-, and class privilege that impedes a majority from "gracefully" moving past middle age. Gullette makes the distinction between life storytelling and age autobiographies and offers the latter as a method for critically reimagining narratives of aging. Life storytelling follows the logic of loss and gain, and in literature, youth is typically the gold standard through which these are reckoned. In these stories, the former (past) self is regarded as a distinct object of reflection different from the current self, effectively erasing the experience of time, as the past self is read as discontinuous from the present. Therefore, for Gullette, continuity (of past and present selves) becomes the primary strategy of age autobiography, allowing one to read the enfolding of the "embodied psyche in culture over time" (Gullette 2004: 158). Only in this way might we reflect on our captivity in cultural narratives of aging and endeavor to draft a story that engages change across the lifespan.

Time and Aging in the Classical- to Hard-boiled Detective Fiction

The whodunit formula of early classical detective fiction (e.g., C. August Dupin and Sherlock Holmes) follows a strategy like the life storytelling spoken

of by Gullette, as the past is viewed as a discrete object of reflection—one that must be read and understood as different, or an exception, if a peaceful return to order is to occur. The murdered corpse is initially a bodily memory of a community's failure; however, the format promises to organize this chaos through the detective's brilliance. Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that the classical detectives are embodiments of reason itself, and certainly the reader learns very little about the actual body of Sherlock Holmes other than the fact that he has a "lean" stature and is "over six feet" tall, the obligatory threshold of vital masculinity (Doyle 2001, 16). *A Study in Scarlet* contains perhaps the most famous description of the detective. Holmes is said to have "sharp and piercing" eyes, a "hawk-like" nose suggesting "alertness and decision", and a chin that "marks the man of determination" (Doyle 2001, 16). The metaphor of the detective as reason is literally written on his face.

While aging is largely barred from the Holmes stories, one fascinating exception deserves mention and that is "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" (1923). This is the story of Professor Presbury, who at 61 years old is engaged to a significantly younger woman. Trevor Bennett, the professor's personal secretary, is engaged to Presbury's daughter. The two notice exceptionally odd behavior in the father, as they find him crawling down hallways and climbing the trellis outside his daughter's window late at night. Holmes discovers that Presbury had begun taking supplements given to him by an unscrupulous doctor from Prague, which were derived from Langur monkeys of the Himalayas. The injections were meant to unlock the "secret of rejuvenescence and the elixir of life"—presumably by boosting testosterone—but these comically result in the odd Langur-like behaviors of the professor (Doyle 2005, 1662). Sylvia Pamboukian has examined the linkages of this story with medical and popular interest in male menopause, along with hormone treatment, in the early 1900s. Victorian masculinity is middle class and pre-menopausal, a time in life that cannot be maintained indefinitely; however, hormone therapy offers a drastic revision to the story of aging, in this case resulting in vitality and sexuality beyond middle age (Pamboukain 2017, 20). In the end, Holmes condemns this experiment and defends traditional limits of manhood and the notion that "aging means that the individual must accept himself or herself as diminished" (Pamboukain 2017, 23). Nevertheless, the change in Presbury, though attributed to an abuse of science, is a literal modernization of ideas and attitudes about the aging male body. Undoubtedly, the more progressive-thinking Doyle is having fun at the

expense of his celebrated protagonist. This is certainly an expansion of the genre, even if it is a comic departure in the Holmes stories.

Unlike the retrospective presentation of time in classical detective works, hard-boiled fiction has always been celebrated for its immediacy, a feature found in the first-person narration that dominates the genre. The gritty portrayal of violence, urban decay, and suburban decadence is hard-boiled's celebrated realism. Chandler's 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder" grounds this realism on the speech of "common men", but he reminds that "when it develops to the point of becoming a literary medium it only looks like speech" (Chandler 1950b, 17). Hard-boiled realism is thus an art, and this was Chandler's lofty goal for this low literature. In subsequent revisions to his essay, the author distances himself from the term realism, focusing instead on the genre's striking style and language and its ability to evoke "scene", "fear", and "atmosphere", as Miranda Hickman has identified (Hickman 2003, 247). Permanence was the measure of this new literary value, a difficult task in what was largely the disposable medium of pulp fiction. Chandler's 1950 "Introduction" to the collection *Trouble is My Business* is often overlooked in comparison to the "The Simple Art" piece, but it insightfully expands the author's analysis of the difficulties of literary achievement in formula fiction. This essay includes the line "pulp paper never dreamed of posterity", but this is precisely what Hammett completed and what Chandler aspired to do (Chandler 1950a, vii). The point here is not to devolve into a biographical criticism by citing authors' ambitions; however, the question of male obsolescence is intimately linked to the form, content, and market context of these works, a fact that no doubt accounts for the insights on aging found throughout genre. Representations of time and aging must be counted among the many innovations of hard-boiled's literary art, as these works are in large part a meditation on the experience of (looming) obsolescence in middle age.

Aging Hard-Boiled Masculinity

The hard-boiled focus on aging begins with the middle-aged protagonists of these works. In Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), we are told that Philip Marlowe is 33 years old, and he is 42 in his final installment, *The Long Goodbye* (1953). Hammett's detectives are likewise older men. The Continental Operative is described as overweight and middle-aged, and Sam Spade from *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) is well-worn and in his thirties, as is Carrol John Daly's Race Williams and Mickey

Spillane's Mike Hammer. While life in one's 30s has a much different resonance today, in 1929 the average male life expectancy in America was 55 years (University of California). This number is undoubtedly skewed by healthcare inequities and infant mortality rates of the time, but the hard-boiled dick's world-weariness is clearly rooted in advancing years appropriate to the era. This is a key component of the genre and is maintained by most subsequent authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who feature male detectives. The hard-boiled sleuth has the remains of vitality and is not to be trifled with by any means, yet he is old enough to know his limits, even if he does not live within them.

The hard-boiled investigator is interestingly poised between lost youth and embittered representations of old age, a precariousness that is magnified by the hazard of his everyday experience. He is effectively the opposite of the more cerebral classical detective: He is a man of action, and words are "not much good unless the threat of death is behind them", as Sam Spade tells Caspar Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett 2000, 190). Tzvetan Todorov described the hardboiled protagonist as the "vulnerable detective" and emphasizes that this fiction's "chief feature is that the detective loses his immunity, gets beaten up, badly hurt, constantly risks his life, in short he is integrated into the universe of characters, instead of being an independent observer" (Todorov 1977, 51). This integration opens the door to experiencing time and aging for the hard-boiled detective precisely through this vulnerability. In Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, for example, the Continental Op- is beaten numerous times and is called "fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, [and] pig-headed", by the prostitute Dinah Brand (Hammett 2000, 517). This violence is often eroticized and projected onto the femme fatale character. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the detective Sam Spade memorably turns Brigid O'Shaunessy over to the police, even though "all of [him]" wants to run away with her, an act that he knows all too well would result in betrayal and his destruction (Hammett 2000, 223). Greg Forter suggests a fundamental male masochism in Hammett, exemplified by the femme fatale character who serves as an externalization of "the disguised return of an inadmissible pleasure: a pleasure in psychic self-dissolution… that's deeply at odds with our culture's commitment to masculine singularity and power" (Forter 2000, 17). The pleasure taken in this loss of power presents a unique representation of masculinity that stands quite apart from conventional expectations of manhood.

In *The Glass Key* (1931), time is referenced through a conflict of generations represented by the interplay among political henchman-turned-detective, Ned

Beaumont; Paul Madvig, the criminal political boss; and the patriarch, Senator Henry. Paul Madvig represents old-school masculinity of brute force that falters as he tries to gain legitimacy within the Senator's enduring—albeit increasingly threatened—paternalistic realm. As Madvig explains his way of fighting to Ned, "when you got somebody cornered you go in and finish them" (Hammett 1989, 61), but this strategy fails throughout the novel, particularly as Madvig attempts to legitimize his enterprise through his affiliation with the senator. Beaumont chooses to maintain his freedom by refusing such ties, but the result is a curiously eroticized suffering. In a beating that lasts several chapters and includes a suicide attempt by Beaumont to stop the pain, thug Jeff Gardner delights in thrashing Beaumont in and out of unconsciousness. At one point, he says that he wants to try something on Beaumont who is nearly unconscious on the bed: "He leaned over Ned Beaumont, his hands busy on Ned Beaumont's body. Ned Beaumont's body and arms and legs jerked convulsively and three times he groaned. After that he lay still" (Hammett 1989, 77). This orgasmic experience of pain is repeated in various forms throughout the novel. Each time Beaumont comes back for more, prompting Garnder to call him a "God-damned massacrist" (Hammett 1989, 157). In Forter's reading, Beaumont becomes a figure of "masochistic femininity", thus thwarting, in these jarring instances, the reader's expectation of standard hard-boiled characterization, at least in part (Forter 2000, 45). This offers a more progressive presentation of the femme fatale, Janet, in the novel. Indeed, rather than renunciation, Beaumont will run away, in a fashion, with her at the conclusion. The detective takes ownership of his desire, and likewise vulnerability, rather than externalizing and vilifying the woman as its bearer.

This conclusion is undoubtedly correct; however, there are two significant moments that reference time—and likewise aging—amidst the pain experienced by Beaumont. Before his days-long beating begins, Beaumont asks Shad O'Rory how old his dog is, to which the gangster replies, "Just about the limit, seven" (Hammett 1989, 69). Later, when O'Rory has the dog attack Beaumont, the animal moves "sluggishly" and with "cumbersome haste", and just before striking he "star[es] morosely" at Beaumont, in affinity with the defeated man (Hammett 1989, 72-73). The dog's tired hesitation and exhaustion mirror Beaumont's own—both are at their limits and move increasingly toward decrepitude. This is emphasized again later when Garnder says to Beaumont, "Come on, Rip Van Winkle, come to life", trying to revive the latter for further beating (Hammett

1989, 76). While the Rip Van Winkle reference is meant as a thug's bad joke, Beaumont is much like Washington Irving's protagonist who finds himself unsuited for the new America after his slumber and curiously old before his time. This is the experience of the vulnerable middle-aged hard-boiled detective who finds himself suddenly out-of-step and left behind by the passage of time.

Chandler's Simple Art of Aging

Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1953) offers an especially interesting representation of hard-boiled aging. This was the final completed novel in the series—*Playback*, the final novel published in 1958, was adapted from an earlier screenplay. The story is framed by Marlowe's friendship with Terry Lennox, the kept husband of Sylvia Lennox, daughter to the millionaire Harlan Potter. Though exceptionally meaningful to Marlowe, this friendship is not a lengthy connection and is ultimately betrayed. The two meet regularly for drinks over a brief span of months, until one night Lennox appears at Marlowe's home and asks to be driven to Tijuanna. Marlowe returns from the trip only to discover that Lennox's wife Silvia has been brutally killed, and that he (Marlowe) is now a suspected accessory to the murder. Lennox is later found dead in Mexico of an apparent suicide, and he leaves a written confession to his wife's murder. The plot of the novel is as complicated as any Marlowe story. Lennox staged his own death with the help of gangster friends from the war, and Eileen Wade is the murderer of both Sylvia Lennox and Roger Wade who were having an affair. In her suicide note, she writes: "Time makes everything mean and shabby and wrinkled. The tragedy of life… is not that the beautiful things die young, but that they grow old and mean" (Chandler 2002, 771). She describes Terry, her former husband whom she knew as Paul Marston before the war, as an "empty shell of the man I loved and married" and suggests that he should have died rather than come back. This jilted perspective and its idealization of the bloom of youth is a violent and jaded disavowal of aging, although these murders mark a vicious return of time and frailty.

The question of aging is emphasized further in numerous aspects of the story. Terry Lennox has white hair that is out of place with his slightly more youthful appearance. Due to an injury during the war, his face bears the scars of plastic surgery, making his age indeterminate. Similarly, the character Roger Wade is an aging writer who has run out of ideas and spends his days

in drunken self-loathing. Fittingly, his exhaustion is figured through tired language and deteriorating style. In a manuscript recovered after Wade’s murder, Marlowe finds the lines: “Goddam silly simile. Writers. Everything has to be like something else…. I could just vomit thinking about the lousy racket. I probably will” (Chandler 2002, 652). His alcoholism is spoken of as a disease repeatedly, and he is a frequent client at “liquor cure” centers around the city. The bodily effects of this illness are spoken of in detail, and Wade is said to have “bad nerves” (Chandler 2002, 584). Alcoholism in the novel serves as a bodily and psychic translation of past trauma and Wade’s current failure as a man.

This linkage of alcoholism and the trauma of aging, or at least growing older, is made more direct as Marlowe attempts to find the missing Wade at a treatment facility run by an unknown “Dr. V”. This leads the detective to a private hospital for the elderly run by Dr. Amos Varley. As Marlowe enters the facility, he notices bars on the upper windows. The doctor defensively explains that his business caters to “[l]onely old people, depressed and unhappy old people” and the bars are there to protect against suicide attempts (Chandler 2002, 587). Marlowe has an exceptionally strong reaction to this, telling Varley that his business “smells like death” and accusing him of warehousing wealthy elderly patients as their heirs await their inheritance. As he leaves, the detective quips: “So long, Dr. Varley. When my job makes me feel dirty I’ll think of you. It will cheer me up no end” (Chandler 2002, 589). Marlowe’s response seems excessive, but the nameless elderly patients are an uncanny reminder of the unsustainability of the upper-class California lifestyle, and the repugnant smell of death is a problem for which the novel offers no solution.

The physical mark of Marlowe’s own mortality is referenced later after he is beaten by the character Mendy Menendez. Near the conclusion of the novel, his bruised and throbbing face is traced and touched several times by Linda Loring, as the couple trade spars and seduction. Interestingly, Marlowe speaks of the ephemeral nature of love and the cycle of failed relationships throughout this chapter. This is in response to Loring’s proposal of marriage that Marlowe refuses with the excuse that it would not last six months (Chandler 2002, 801). The conversation begins with the two discussing their ages, 42 and 36, with the assumption that it is already too late for them—at least according to Marlowe—and they discuss how each will remember, or forget, the other when their time is done. The pain of Marlowe’s hammering bruises that remain “burning hot” (Chandler 2002, 801) punctuate this scene with a somatic debility, just as the

detective is making himself open to a woman like never before in the series.

The scar is a token of Marlowe's vulnerability for the remainder of the narrative. Later in the office of Sewell Endicott, Harlan Potter's attorney, Marlowe reflects: "I touched the side of my face gently with my fingertips. It was all healed up and the swelling was gone, but one of the blows must have damaged a nerve. Part of the cheek was still numb. I couldn't let it alone. It would get all right in time" (Chandler 2002, 805). This "nerve" issue links Marlowe with Roger Wade and, in the conclusion to the novel, with Terry Lennox. As the latter discusses his plastic surgery in Mexico after his disappearance and staged suicide, he describes a "nerve graft" on the formerly bad side of his face (Chandler 2002, 813). Lennox presumably no longer suffers from the sensitivity that afflicts Marlowe, but the detective still feels its sting. In Marlowe's final rejection of his former friend, he comments on Lennox's "nice nature" but says that he lacks "ethics and scruples" and is ultimately a "moral defeatist" who believes in nothing (Chandler 2002, 815). In other words, Lennox's kindness is only skin deep. In his defense, Lennox recalls that his British commando unit was captured during the war, resulting in his torture by Nazi doctors. In his reading, this trauma should excuse him from blame and weakness, at least in part, but for Marlowe, this is not the case. Terry's bruised body speaks to bruised ideals, as well as lost youth and vitality. This linkage to the body's somatic pastness is integrated into an ethical dimension in hard-boiled fiction, especially in Chandler. Terry Lennox and Roger Wade are weak precisely because they are defeated and undisciplined, which leaves them incapable of producing a meaningful narrative for the next stage of their lives.

In this confrontation scene between Marlowe and Lennox, these scars largely concern lost ideals; however, when read alongside the detective's rendezvous with Linda Loring, the novel becomes unmistakably focused on the aging process. This is cemented as Linda Loring is dropped off at Marlowe's house by Harlan Potter's African American chauffeur Amos, an unmistakable linkage to Dr. Amos Valery from the exclusive nursing home earlier in the novel. Amos asks Marlowe a question about "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", a poem by T.S. Eliot. "'I grow old... I grow old... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.' What does that mean, Mr. Marlowe?", to which Marlowe answers, "Not a bloody thing. It just sounds good" (Chandler 2002, 796). Amos follows with a query regarding a second line from the poem, "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michael Angelo" (Chandler 2002, 796). Here again,

Marlowe tries to deflect the question by saying that Eliot did not know anything about women.

When Marlowe first meets Amos earlier in the novel, he offers the chauffeur a tip, which the latter refuses. Marlowe then offers him the collected poems of T.S. Eliot, but Amos affirms that he already owns them. In his comments to Marlowe, Amos is playfully suggesting that he knows more precisely what is going on that evening. Marlowe and Linda Loring are likely about to have a tryst, which is out of keeping for Marlowe, much like Eliot's isolated and hesitant narrator. Growing old in the poem refers to time's merciless passage that ensures inaction and endless deliberation can lead only to regret and emptiness in old age. The second line refers to the emptiness of high art and seems to be a direct response to Marlowe's snide offer to buy Amos the poet's collected works. As Jonathan Eburne has indicated, Marlowe frequently makes comments about high art to thugs to assert his dominance through obscure cultural references that could not possibly be understood (Eburne 2003, 368). Yet Marlowe himself has no deeper reading of the poem's meaning when pressed by Amos. The detective has been bested at his own game by the chauffeur, and Amos seems to have a deeper insight into Marlowe than the reverse—Linda Loring explains that Amos is a graduate of Howard University, and he is clearly a better and more avid reader of Eliot.

This criticism of Marlowe by Chandler is telling here in the final novel. The detective is significantly marked as aging, something that is written upon his face in bruises and stretches farther within his body through nerve damage. Marlowe refuses Loring's proposal in this novel but will later accept at the conclusion of *Playback* (1958). This narrative arc might at first be read as a banal version of marriage as a form of "growing up"; however, Marlowe's coupling with Loring is linked with traumatic bodily pain, along with Amos and Eliot's points that high art cannot outrun age and time. In this, Marlowe is given the opportunity to create his own unique narrative of the experience and, finally, to no longer be alone. The point to be taken is that when hard-boiled bodies break, we are confronted with the trauma of aging apart from cultural narrative. Rather than the disavowal of time's passing found in the strategy of "endurance" that promises that we can go on, Marlowe is called upon to script his path forward with the inventiveness of linguistic play, something that is, fortunately, the detective's forte.

The Maturing Hard-Boiled Genre

Early hard-boiled fiction reflected a key moment of change in traditional gender relations, and here it should be remembered that Carroll John Daly's "The False Burton Combs", what is often taken as the first hard-boiled short story, is published in 1922, just two years after the certification of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote. Gender roles were beginning to transform significantly, and hard-boiled fiction is, in many ways, a conservative response to that change. That masculinity of this earlier era should be presented in terms of loss—of power, authority, and vitality—is not surprising, as this is still one of the dominant narratives throughout which age is understood. In Hammett and Chandler, reflections on age are admittedly fleeting, but these disruptions should not be underestimated, particularly given the continued paucity of texts that allow men a space to think about aging apart from a narrative of acquisition and subsequent loss. That these reflections are a crucial component of the hard-boiled narrative is borne out by the fact that subsequent series authors will give fuller development of their detectives across middle age, which often includes the milestones of marriage and parenthood. Growing older results in developing connections with others and a dwindling need for self-reliance. This variety of aging is indebted to changes in masculinity in the 1960s and 70s, as gender roles were further transformed with the increased presence of women in the workforce, which in turn heralded shifts in the division of labor at home. The tradition of featuring middle-aged detectives raises the issue of aging and provides hard-boiled fiction with unending opportunities for exploring experiences across a lifetime.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect briefly on Lawrence Osborne's *Only to Sleep: A Philip Marlowe* (2018), a work that follows 72-year-old Philip Marlowe on an investigation. Set in 1988, the mystery itself is a largely straightforward case of insurance fraud that tempts the detective out of retirement, but it is Marlowe's reflections on aging that are the most interesting aspects of this work. With a fantastic ear for Chandlerisms, Osborne presents the ever-contemplative Marlowe carefully recounting the experience of living alone as an old man with a lifetime of memories that still dazzle and distract in their freshness. On the one hand, the representation of aging in the novel is problematic, as Osborne is at times too tempted by the sentimental aspect of Marlowe's character that lends itself to nostalgia—something that was roundly criticized by Chandler

in *The Long Goodbye*. At the beginning of the investigation, Marlowe feels "young for the first time in years" as the newly widowed Delores Zinn flirts with him, although elsewhere he claims to be "out of the combat zone" and done with women (Osborne 2018, 17, 19, 41). Numerous times Marlowe laments that his quips and sharp turns of phrase fail, skills that before marked his power as much as his potential for violence, yet he accepts that his time has come and gone, and he embraces his turn as a cynically witty revenant.

Age is elsewhere presented as a matter of "getting on with the ghosts of the past", as well as making peace with physical impairments that cannot be healed (Osborne 2018, 172). Marlowe speaks of the "rage that comes with impotence" as he jealously views Delores and a new suitor (Osborne 2018, 232). Nearer the conclusion of the novel, after being called handsome by an attractive hotel clerk, he remarks, "For a moment old quicksilver dashed through the veins, but almost as soon as it did it came to a halt again. A sudden wind whipping through a ruin, ruffling the dust" (Osborne 2018, 238). In similar deflation at the novel's end, this dust is recalled as Marlowe sits with Paul Linder, the father of the man whose murder facilitated the insurance fraud. The detective drinks with Linder, and they watch a dust storm come and go near the Salton Sea—out where the father has scattered his son's ashes. Though the son was a nameless casualty, Marlowe had taken it upon himself to try to return him home, but he admits that he was "in the wrong place all along" (Osborne 2018, 253). As they drink, the two men watch a dust twister rise and fall, and Marlowe likens it to something that might have been seen in the heavens by Ezekiel. "Then the dust settled and we sat there for a long time, declining to disturb the moment or to add a single word to what had already been left unsaid" (Osborne 2018, 253). This linkage of infirmity with failed investigations—and the limits of the genre—is admittedly a clever Chandlerian version of the banal notion of "dust in the wind", so long as the detective's silence is taken as rest and reflection rather than resignation. Regardless, a 72-year-old Marlowe working again and making his way through a case while contemplating his past and present offers a unique perspective to the hard-boiled project and the possibilities for writing new stories of aging.

One of the fundamental lessons of hard-boiled fiction is that our bodies are the site of the traumatic excesses of our experience, which remains incongruous with our memory and the world. Narratives of aging are culturally mediated ways of interpreting this incongruity. These are necessary for living, of course, but so too must these narratives be constantly renewed. This renewal has always

been the literary art of detective fiction, and the hard-boiled genre links the beauty and urgency of this circumstance with the vulnerability of the detective who must develop a new narrative in the face of time's unforgiving movement. Broken and bruised hard-boiled bodies do figure aging and the loss that inevitably comes with years. Even today, there are few discourses that open this space for men, making this accomplishment all the more exceptional. But decline is not the final story of aging in the genre. As Hammett, Chandler, and the authors who followed have shown, the hard-boiled genre opens any number of avenues for scripting new narratives of aging men, and more and more frequently these include marriage and parenting. Through innovations such as these, the genre remains a critical popular space for thinking the experience of male aging.

Works Cited

Chandler, Raymond. 1950a. "*Introduction*." In *Trouble is My Business*, vii-xi. New York: Curtis Publishing.

Chandler, Raymond. 1950b. "The Simple Art of Murder." In *The Simple Art of Murder*, 1-22. New York: Curtis Publishing.

Chandler, Raymond. 2002. *Raymond Chandler: The Lady in the Lake; The Little Sister; The Long Goodbye; Playback*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. 2005. "The Adventure of the Creeping Man." In *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes: Volume II*, edited by Leslie S. Klinger, 1636-1665. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. 2001. *A Study in Scarlet*. New York and London: Penguin.

Eburne, Jonathan P. 2003. "Chandler's Waste Land." *Studies in the Novel* 35, no. 3: 366-382.

Forter, Greg. 2000. *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. 2004. *Aged by Culture*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

Hammett, Dashiell. 2000. *Dashiell Hammett: The Maltese Falcon; The Thin Man; Red Harvest*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Hammett, Dashiell. 1989. *The Glass Key*. New York: Vintage.

Hickman, Miranda. 2003. "Introduction: The Complex History of the 'Simple Art'." *Studies in the Novel* 35, no. 3: 287-304.

Jewusiak, Jacob. 2013. "No Plots for Old Men." *Novel: A Forum for Fiction* 46, no. 2: 193-213.

Osborne, Lawrence. 2018. *Only to Sleep*. London and New York: Hogarth.

Pamboukian, Sylvia. 2017. "Old Holmes: Sherlock, Testosterone, and 'The Creeping Man.'" *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 35, no. 1: 19-28.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1977. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." In *The Poetics of Prose*. Translated by Richard Howard. Oxford: Blackwell.

University of California, Berkeley. "Life expectancy in the USA, 1900-98." May 4, 2023. https://u.demog.berkeley.edu/~andrew/1918/figure2.html