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Too Good to be True: The Role of Orchids in *The Big Sleep*

In the 1930s and 40s in which *The Big Sleep* was published, the city of Los Angeles emerged as a nexus of fame and wealth. In conjunction with Westward Expansion, the city's rise as the film capital of the world added to this impression of the city as a place of opportunity, causing many to travel and immigrate there in hopes of achieving their many dreams. However, this perception of the city as a gleaming and glowing metropolis overshadowed and concealed some of the crime and corruption within, misleading and trapping some within its grasp.

Oftentimes, the seed of this corruption was the animal desire of human beings, which opens up society to the seductions of wealth, sex, fame, and power. It is the duty of the noir detective to navigate this complex landscape and protect against it. The metaphor of a dying, wilting orchid is used in *The Big Sleep* to expose the deceptive nature of the shining city of the West, Los Angeles. The two literary elements work in tandem together: both are considered pleasant and idealistic, with the orchid being lively and colorful when in bloom and Los Angeles being full of glamor and opportunity. By subverting this perception of these two pleasant things, Chandler invites the reader to consider and reevaluate the true nature of things that appear pleasant on the surface.

Marlowe's first encounter with General Sternwood in the latter's home first introduces the metaphor of an orchid and its association with the disgusting and deceptive nature of Los

Angeles. The moment Marlowe enters Sternwood's greenhouse, he remarks that “[t]he air was

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thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom [...] The plants filled the space, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket”

(Chandler 7). Marlowe's description of the overflowing jungle environment serves as a distinct juxtaposition of the paradigm of orchids being pleasant and inviting. By describing the orchids as disgusting and putrid things, Marlowe separates his opinions from the conventional wisdom of the plant. This dense, humid forest of orchids serves as an allegory for Los Angeles, with its terrible smell “as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket” and foliage characteristic of the “fingers of dead men.” These descriptions of the plants additionally represent the crime and corruption around Marlowe. Furthermore, Marlowe's description of the plant establishes his pessimistic outlook on things like the orchid (and by extension, Los Angeles), which he believes to be misperceived as charming or profitable. The result is the characterization of Marlowe as a lonely noble figure among a vast jungle of putrid beings, heinous acts, death, and murder. The symbol of an orchid reappears later in the novel as well, when Marlowe is held captive and talks with Silver-Wig.

The dialogue between Marlowe and Mona Mars reinforces and develops Marlowe's cynicism and dissociation from the luxurious yet vulgar life of Angelinos. After he is taken hostage by Canino, Marlowe awakes to find Mona Mars looking at him. After sarcastically replying about how he feels following his altercation with Canino, Mars responds:

“What did you expect, Mr. Marlowe—orchids?”

“Just a plain pine box,” [Marlowe] said. “Don't bother with bronze or silver handles. And don't

scatter my ashes over the blue Pacific. I like the worms better. Did you know that worms are of both sexes and that any worm can love any other worm?" (191). Facing impending doom,

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Marlowe once again rejects the flourish of the extravagant life of LA by opting for a simple and plain death. This is shown through Mars' suggestion of orchids, once again introducing the flowers as beautiful and extravagant, only to be rejected by Marlowe along with any other ornate ceremony or celebration of his death. The added contrast between the plain pine box and gray ashes in comparison with the shiny metallic handles and blue ocean further establish Marlowe's rejection and mistrust of the colorful and luscious life of the city. The use of worms, sex-less, minuscule beings, further demonstrates this rejection of the appeal and sexuality of Los Angeles, and by extension, the corruption and depravity found in its underbelly. Once again, Marlowe is set apart from the deceptive and crude world around him, for he refuses to embrace the life that many of those around him have adopted.

Through the metaphor of a dying orchid, Raymond Chandler teaches the reader to evaluate and reconsider the true purpose of things which appear nice or pleasant at first but actually conceal the deceptive and corruptive truth. Chandler disturbs the image of Los Angeles as a shining city on a hill through this metaphor, exposing its rotten underbelly: the death, sex work, and silencing of the truth commonplace to many in the city. In all actuality, Chandler implores that the best course of action is to disregard and reject the notion of these fanciful dreams in their entirety. This cynicism towards Los Angeles serves to protect the reader from these corrupt and deceitful things. Chandler's cynicism shines through Marlowe, allowing the reader to observe how to navigate through these appealing yet very dangerous waters. Marlowe's separation from the duplicity around him is what keeps him alive and mostly out of trouble. His ability to resist the

seductions of Los Angeles, the sweet and appealing aroma and appearance of the metaphorical orchid, is the larger allegory that Chandler makes for readers to see: in order to survive and escape from these deceptive things, one must not get entangled in it or absorbed by

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them. Resist, he says, the temptations of the ornate, the intricate, the pretty. Ultimately, the best thing that people ought to do is to be cautious of things that are too good to be true, to see the underlying flesh and deceit that the pleasant scent and glamor conceal. Only then can one survive this suffocating jungle of nasty and meaty orchids.

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Works Cited

Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. Vintage Books, 2006.