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Falling Into Place: Setting and the Conventions of Noir

In many novels and films, the relationship between protagonist and setting is an intimate one. This relationship plays an important role in defining a given work as noir, and as such is unmistakably powerful. Los Angeles, California, is the central location in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is also an example of L.A. noir, though it is unique in its futuristic setting. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith is distinctive as well, in that it is set in Europe rather than America and the characters do not remain in the same location for extended portions of the novel. The purpose of setting is twofold in noir. The first, and most apparent, is the establishment of time and place for the reader. The second is more subtle: settings and their descriptions at times come to operate on a metaphorical level, speaking to the larger themes of the work and providing insight into action and characterization. Setting is both passive and active. It can reshape personalities and influence the morality of a character, or it can show the reader changes within the protagonists that have occurred due to the events of the plot. As Gary Hausladen and Paul Starrs note in their essay "L.A. Noir," "Settings transform character, and rarely is choice involved" (46). Place is important because it helps to categorize a work as distinctly noir: it alters and informs the way we perceive characterization and reveals the themes of the work in ways that exemplify the texts' adherence to generic conventions.

As a genre, noir is compellingly complex. On a surface level it is easy to classify traditionally noir narratives: they are marked by their darkness, both in subject matter and oftentimes the setting itself. However, it is possible for a text to be dark and not qualify as an example of noir. Philip Simpson asks whether or not noir is even a genre in its own right, suggesting that perhaps "it is more a matter of mood, of tone, of style, of loosely connected ideas," more a movement than an enduring category (189). The question is a valid one; the Oxford English Dictionary defines noir as "a genre of crime film or detective fiction characterized by cynicism, sleaziness, fatalism, and moral ambiguity" ("Noir"), an explanation that does not quite account for all aspects of works classified as noir. Despite, or perhaps in light of, his questioning, Simpson provides a more thorough description of what the genre/movement entails:

> . . .the element of violent crime does not in and of itself define noir; rather, noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual's disconnection from society, and cynicism. It addresses social issues . . . in an explicitly uncompromising fashion typically not found in mainstream fiction. Noir's universe is bleak, divested of meaning. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone. (189)

This is a nearly all-encompassing summarization of noir, although it is important to note that not all noir texts exemplify all of these aspects. Susan Doll and Greg Faller contribute to these characteristics by detailing the visual style of film noir, which can be applied to noir literature as well. They cite low-key lighting, shadows and/or reflection, urban landscapes, trench coats and spiked heels, and rain-soaked environments as “the iconography of the genre” (91). In this way it is apparent that the genre operates on two levels: content and aesthetics. It is both the larger themes of a given work, and the “appearance” of the world in which it is set, especially in film noir. Thus, the connection between theme and setting naturally arises.

The Big Sleep's setting is the iconic noir locale: rainy Los Angeles. It exemplifies the "disillusioned world in which duplicity, betrayal, decadence and murder are the order of the day” that defined the genre (McFarlane 4). Moving from the Sternwood's luxurious yet odd mansion out into the streets and shady dives of the city, the setting embodies the corruption of the upper class. Philip Marlowe operates within this world and simultaneously on its outskirts. He is a private detective who has been paid to stop Geiger from blackmailing General Sternwood, putting him in contact with a host of admittedly morally lacking characters. Like his setting, Marlowe is the definition of a conventional noir protagonist. Philip Simpson, writer of "Noir and the Psycho Thriller," outlines the characteristics that make up this definition: "Marlowe [exemplifies] modern urban alienation from the pathetic and/or sordid characters he encounters” (190). He moves through the setting, interacting with its inhabitants, but never forming very strong bonds or close relationships with any of them. He is neither on their level of immorality, nor is he above violence and law-breaking to achieve his goals. Simpson continues describing Marlowe and his contemporaries, portraying them as “knight-errants with other their

own codes of justice to guide them through a fallen world. They find no help from the recognized social institutions of justice, which have long since degenerated into corruption and thievery at the expense of the public" (Simpson 190). In order to traverse the world he lives in, Marlowe *must* have a looser set of morals than the average person; however, at his core Marlowe is seeking to do the right thing, hence the title of "knight." Unfortunately, as Marlowe progresses through the novel he finds that "Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights" (Chandler 156). The personal and moral costs of his actions are too great: Marlowe cannot do what he does and still seek to uphold the law or any sort of justice. Essentially, "his actions end up protecting the rich and powerful and legitimizing killers" (Pepper, "Hard-Boiled" 143). Marlowe experiences the meaninglessness of a world in which such corruption exists. Carmen Sternwood is a murderer, and yet she faces no legitimate, lawful sentence for her crime. The people he works for disregard the value of individual human lives in favor of bettering their own, and his compliance does nothing to work against this system. The novel ends with Marlowe acknowledging his part in the corruption, stating, "Me, I was part of the nastiness now" (Chandler 230). He seems to understand his fate as a tool to be used by those in power, but whether or not he fully accepts such a thing is dubious.

Portrayals of nature and domestic spaces in provide examples of what exactly makes a novel or film noir. With very little room in such sprawling urban landscapes for any inclusion of the natural world outside of rain, any instance of it becomes important. At the start of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe visits General Sternwood in his greenhouse. The description he provides makes it out to be an unpleasant place, as he says, "The air was thick, wet, steamy, and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. . . . The light had an unreal greenish color, like light

filtered through an aquarium tank. The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men" (Chandler 7). If cityscapes are representative of corruption, it would make sense for the natural world to symbolize the opposite; this is not the case with Sternwood's jungle at all. The place is filled with life that reminds Marlowe of death. Because the scene is narrated from his perspective, it is telling that Marlowe, as a noir protagonist, is disgusted by this plant life. However, it seems as though Marlowe's problem is with these plants in particular, despite there not being other significant moments featuring nature in the novel to compare to. They exist inside a greenhouse, a manmade construction, and belong to a wealthy man. The attempt on Sternwood's part to own a piece nature results in a disgusting, oppressive jungle, and symbolically foreshadows the corruption brought about by wealth and the wealthy. Nature, rather that providing a source of relief within the novel from the harsh concrete jungle of the city, is warped and tainted into something repulsive by Sternwood's touch.

Marlowe visits his home at various points throughout the novel, but the only time it is central to the action of the story is when he returns home to find Carmen naked in his bed. Even before he discovers her presence, he knows that "something is wrong." Once he finds her and rejects her advances, she calls him "a filthy name," to which he reacts by thinking, "I didn't mind what she called me, what anyone called me. But this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. . . . Such as they were they had all my memories. I couldn't stand her in that room any longer. What she called me only reminded me of that" (Chandler 158). Thus the reader can see that the home has become a place of constancy and

safety for Marlowe. It doesn't matter what the outside world throws at him—what names they call him— so long has he has his apartment, untouched by their corruption, to return to. It is also the place that contains all of his material possessions, which become substitutes for intangible aspects of life, the things money can't buy. His sense of self, his past, and stand-ins for a family are all represented by physical objects, and Carmen's presence reminds him of that fact. His apartment needs to be free from the moral degradation that Carmen represents for him to live in it, but by infiltrating this space she brings him a grim reminder that all the immaterial goods in his life are contained in material things. The thought that he has nothing in his life outside these objects contributes to his disconnection, pessimism, and sense of personal failure, exemplifying the features of noir.

Although the year 2019 is unlikely to see such technological advancements as hover cars and lifelike androids, its depiction in *Blade Runner* allows the viewer to imagine a time in which the corruption evident in the days of Chandler's Los Angeles has been allowed to run rampant. Left unchecked, the degeneration of society has spread to other aspects of life, bleeding into the natural world and even the very concept of humanity. This depiction of futuristic L.A. presents a setting heavily influenced by technology, being made up of imposing skyscrapers with flying cars dotting the skyline. Despite these technological advancements, the lower levels of the city are overrun by squalor. It is more of a slum than a future of chrome and brilliance. This L.A. is a city of remnants, leftovers from humanity's move to off-world colonies heavily advertised to those remaining on Earth. The impression is that these colonies contain the kind of futuristic society expected of the science fiction genre, complete with humanoid robots to attend to the needs of their residents. The machinery and technologically-infused cityscape are impersonal

structures, large, featureless, and anonymous. The replicants, as the most advanced technology available, are extensions of this idea; the impersonal taken to the extreme. Though they look like humans, they do not exist as real people with pasts or futures.

In addition to the austere technology, the city is constantly shrouded in darkness and drenched in rain, giving the viewer the idea that even during daytime the city is covered in darkness. In his essay on *Blade Runner* and detective fiction, Russel Gray points out that "Scott's damp, dark, disorderly megalopolis reflects the effects of decades of waste and pollution" (67). One price of technology, the film implies, is environmental degradation and even destruction. It is no wonder real animals are difficult to come by, and that there is no glimpse of greenery among the industrial structures: nothing natural could survive under such an impenetrable cloud of smog. The corruption of nature and the environment mirrors the societal degeneration occurring within the city's inhabitants. Gray draws attention to this idea as well when he addresses the state of the civilization, saying, "In such a society the creating of artificial life is a growth industry, a respectable big business of a future society that failed to ask the right questions—thus the polluted and diminished moral environment" (66). The most successful and wealthy character seen in the film is Eldon Tyrell; the fact that his fortune comes from the creation of artificial humans created for the purpose of providing each immigrant to the off-world colonies with their own personal slave demonstrates wasting away of morality. The line between human and replicant is blurred throughout the movie, with many of the humans, including Deckard himself, in a state of detachment and reservation. In contrast to the emotion expressed by the replicants, Rachel in particular, the humans are at times more emotionless than the androids, providing a critique on the society of the fictional time.

Rick Deckard, *Blade Runner*'s protagonist, is a man defined almost entirely by role within the setting. As a blade runner, Deckard's job is to track and retire rogue replicants. Although retired at the start of the film, he is quickly forced back into the business, assigned to hunt down four renegade Nexus-6 model replicants, the most advanced of their kind. In addition to mirroring the morality of the times, the setting reflects Deckard's characterization as well. Unlike with the first person and close third person narratives of *The Big Sleep* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the final cut of the film does not convey Deckard's internal monologue. Instead, viewers are required to rely on other cues, and come to the understanding that "[*Blade Runner*'s] disorganized cityscape is a backdrop for the detective's divided, unfocused sense of self" (Gray 72). Deckard, like most noir heroes, is mired in conflict between his private self and his working persona, and the inextricability of those two lives. He becomes "sandwiched between his emotional and moral stance, and job-related fears. . . . Gradually, he unearths his long-buried emotions and evolves from the callous, officious cop to an understanding and empathizing human" (Bosnak 87). By the end of the film, Deckard is able to become more than the distant militant his job and setting required him to be.

Deckard's apartment is featured more heavily than Marlowe's. A cramped, cluttered place shrouded in darkness, Deckard's home is an extension of the city he lives in. Light comes in from the outside, but it is unclear whether or not the light is natural or artificial. It is equally filled with personal material possessions but offers none of the safety and distance from the outside world Marlowe's apartment does. Another key difference between the two is that rather than having his space infiltrated, Deckard willingly invites Rachel inside, most likely out of a need for connection in his disconnected life. The fact that Deckard is almost always illuminated

by lights from outside the apartment shows the way in which the city's moral ambiguity follows him into his domestic space. In their second scene together inside the apartment, Deckard prevents Rachel from leaving in a somewhat violent manner, and they then engage in an unsettling exchange involving Deckard telling Rachel to say "kiss me" and then "I want you" (*Blade Runner*). Her ambiguous consent and his borderline abusive behavior create an uncomfortable scene, illustrating the effects of Deckard's setting on his character. The ever-present city lights and the unscrupulousness that accompanies them are not left behind at his doorstep as is the case with Marlowe. Rather, the case he has been assigned to is constantly hanging over him, and the morality of the city slowly creeps from his working life into his personal one, contributing to the overall sense of corruption and fatalism.

The Talented Mr. Ripley presents a significant departure from the Los Angeles settings of *The Big Sleep* and *Blade Runner*. No longer is the narrative set in only one city for the duration of the novel. Instead, Ripley travels from New York city to Mongibello, Italy, then on to Rome and Venice, among other minor locales. These cities are not mired in darkness and precipitation, but rather notable for their sunshine. As essayists Hatmaker and Breu write, "Gone are the malevolence and pathos that typically characterize the noir universe. . . . What emerges instead is a logic in which the law is simultaneously more bureaucratic, more disinterested, and less precise, and the subject exchanges the pathos of deep subjectivity for a conception of identity as flexible, and, at points, entirely exchangeable" (37). Without the traditionally bleak setting and first person narrative associated with noir, the novel must affirm its genre in other ways. This is largely done through a heightening of tension and concern, both for Tom and for what he is capable of.

Similar to his constantly changing landscape, Tom is a character whose identity continually fluctuates over the course of the novel. He plays a different person depending on the person he is interacting with, moving from city to city and shifting fluidly from Tom to Dickie. This insecure sense of self contributes to *Ripley*'s classification as noir, however it is a different kind than the questions of identity Marlowe and Deckard experience. All three protagonists share their solitude in common; each of them are alone, mostly because their aloof attitudes prevent meaningful connections with those around them. Tom, however, hardly seems interested at all in being a "lone wolf" type character. Rather, his need to fit in pushes him to assume the identity of someone else. In becoming something other than himself, Ripley feels a sense of satisfaction and happiness. This puts him in sharp contrast with Deckard and Marlowe, whose morals and actions slowly push them to become other than what they would like to be, creating a sense of sorrow and regret. Still, Tom experiences, almost in excess, the “prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, and disconnection from society” central to Simpson’s elements of noir.

Even in the brighter world of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the characters' homes are still representative of some of noir's complications and concerns. At the start of the novel Tom lives in a New York apartment described as a "dingy brownstone," and is elated by Mr. Greenleaf's offer to pay for his trip to Europe. (Highsmith 16). This location gives the reader exactly what one would expect, and then takes it away. Hatmaker and Breu address this switch in their piece “The Flexible Mr. Ripley,” writing, “While Tom’s narrative may begin in the cramped apartments and shadowy watering-holes of the post-war New York City depicted in many a film noir and noir novel, he quickly abandons this national, urban locale for a transnational existence

as a tours in post-war Europe" (47). The reader is taken out of the realm of the familiar, as far as noir is concerned, which causes one to question why exactly the novel is classified as such while at once making for a sense of displacement and some foreboding; something has to happen to bring in traditional elements of noir, but when and how are complete unknowns. The ease with which Tom abandons his life in New York also foreshadows his future abandonment of the Tom Ripley identity, which can be tracked through the houses he inhabits within Italy.

The first, Tom's home in Mongibello, is described as large but "sparsely furnished, as far as Tom could see, in a pleasant mixture of Italian antique and American bohemian. He had seen two original Picasso drawings in the hall" and later, "The upstairs was disappointing: Dickie's bedroom in the corner of the house above the terrace was stark and empty. . . The other three rooms of the second floor were not even furnished, or at least not completely" (Highsmith 49, 61). Although the house is not expensively furnished in every room, it is a big place that nonetheless contains hints at Dickie's wealth, notably the Picasso paintings. From this space the reader can see Dickie's true character: someone who knows his own worth and does not rely on appearances or extravagant expressions of wealth for assurance.

The next home in the novel is Tom's Roman apartment, which his inhabits as Dickie Greenleaf. Tom says he does not intend to spend much time there, and the narration explains: "He only wanted a home, a base somewhere, after years of not having any. And Rome was chic. Rome was part of his new life" (Highsmith 128). This apartment reveals Tom's search for security and stability, which he feels as though he will only be able to find through living as Dickie. The place itself is described as being "furnished somewhat ornately, but it suited the respectable neighborhood and the respectable life he intended to lead" (Highsmith 128). Tom's

choices in furnishing are a subtle yet important factor that distinguishes him from the real Dickie; he feels compelled to prove what kind of person he (masquerading as Dickie) is by investing money into being "chic" and having an ornate apartment.

When the novel arrives at Tom's final apartment in Venice, this compulsion has reached its pinnacle. The reader is told that, "The inside of the house was Tom's ideal of what a civilized bachelor's home should look like, in Venice, at least. . . . He had given his undivided attention to decorating his house for more than a week. There was a sureness in his taste now that he had not felt in Romse, and that his Rome apartment had not hinted at. He felt surer of himself now in every way" (Highsmith 203). While it is a step forward for Tom to feel sure of himself in his own identity, he has become wholly concerned with objects and items that assure others of his status, and has been proven willing to go to any lengths in order to keep his newfound wealth. Tom is the corruption Marlowe and Deckard see in the world. Writer Philip Simpson points out that "Highsmith's novels pay homage to the moods and themes of noir by presenting an existential universe in which moral codes are fashioned by the individual, with little regard for whatever larger social codes there may be" (194). Tom makes up the rules of his morality as he goes along, vindicating each murder and crime with some explanation for why it was the right thing to do. Deckard and Marlowe have their own set of rules and boundaries as well. They justify murder and law-breaking in the name of their larger goals just like Tom, but the difference between them and Tom is that disregard for "larger social codes." Deckard and Marlowe *do* regard them, but are forced to work outside of them—a fact that brings them constant internal turmoil and their unhappy endings. In many ways, Tom is the type of person who embodies the breakdown of society that causes Marlowe and Deckard so much strife.

In his essay on the relation Roman noir and film noir, William Marling writes, "Landscape had played a part in such themes as the raw material, the stuff out of which protagonists created (or, tragically, did not create) themselves. Whether he mechanically subdued it or spiritually revered it, the hero traditionally had a significant relation to his setting" (180). Essentially, noir protagonists either rise above or are taken over by their settings. Marlowe finds himself in the position of having perhaps gone to far or compromised his moral code in the name of protecting the elderly General Sternwood from the truth. The atmosphere of pessimism and the corruption that spreads to his personal haven catches up with him, ending the novel on a somber note with Marlowe going to a bar, where he has "a couple of double Scotches [that didn't do him] any good" (Chandler 230-1). At the end of his story, Deckard makes an attempt at breaking away from the negative influences of his world by running away with Rachel for whatever time she has left. He chooses to rebel against the system that forced him into becoming a someone he was not, rising above the morality that demands the killing of replicants, when he has seen for himself their humanity. As for Tom Ripley, he is doomed to be constantly looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life, paranoid and fearful yet otherwise successful despite the way in which his surroundings have become an obsession—evidence of his broken morality. In their clashes with the upper-class and its influence on their environments, all three protagonists are irrevocably changed. The ambiguity of their morals, the cynical sense of defeat at the hands of fate and larger social constructs, the ceaseless paranoia, and the personal failings that result from interaction with setting all prove their texts to be deserving of the designation "noir."

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