

MIKE HAMMER – OUTCAST OR SUPERHERO?

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Abstract: This article focuses on Mickey Spillane's hard-boiled detective Mike Hammer. Spillane created a new 'sort' of a private detective. He is nothing like Marlowe, Spade or Archer, he is not solving crimes for money or to bring the criminal in front of the jury for a fair trial, he is the avenger who is 'cleansing' the society, or righting the wrong in his own way – 'eye for an eye'. He never doubts that his killing of the criminal represents the rightful punishment. Therefore he is for some only an unscrupulous killing machine, but others see him as an avenger in the name of the 1950's American everyman. He possesses astounding endurance that almost makes him invulnerable, invincible – he survives extreme situations that place him outside the normal humanity. Hammer was created to protect the fictional American society of the 1950's, he has to be tough, merciless and brutal – he is the 'evil for the good'.

Key words: Mickey Spillane, Mike Hammer, Hard-boiled Detective Fiction, Superhero, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald

"He's rough...he's tough...he's terrific! 190 pounds of bone and muscle...and afraid of nothing! He backs up the law with his two fists and a .45 slung under his left armpit, ready to slug or shoot it out anyplace, anytime! Yes, meet Mike...but be smiling when you do!"

(Crime Detector #3, 1954: in Smith K.)

The central focus of this article is Mickey Spillane's hard-boiled private detective Mike Hammer and his portrayal in numerous novels. I am going to ascertain why is the character of Mike Hammer either deplored or appreciated by the critics or readers when compared to the other hard-boiled detectives, like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade or Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer. Why is Mike Hammer regarded an outcast for some, and a superhero for others?

The detective story in America, and also in the world, started with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841, where Poe introduced Monsieur Dupin and an idea of solving crime by applying reason, by analyzing clues. Dupin was an inspiration for a creation of such detectives as Sherlock Homes, Hercule Poirot, and many

others. Therefore, “one literary strand of the hard-boiled genre extends to Poe, another reaches back to the western or frontier adventure tale” (Margolies, 1982: 5).

The tradition of hard-boiled fiction can be traced back to dime-novels, frequently western adventure stories – where the cowboy has been removed and placed into an urban setting full of crime and corruption and he became a private detective with typical tough American vernacular. Dime-novels

set up certain conventions which were to continue in American detective fiction. The non-intellectual, intensely moral, occasionally violent private eye who participates in a hunt and chase story reflecting local color and told in a simple language. The dime novel detective, in other words, continues in the hard-boiled story. (Panek, 1987: 148)

The descendants of dime-novels were pulp magazines. Due to a financially undemanding character, the collections of detective, romantic, cowboy, sea and many other stories, were printed on paper made of pulp wood, and this gave birth to the ‘pulp’. The most important publication in encouraging the new kind of detective story, the hard-boiled fiction, was the pulp magazine *Black Mask* that was founded in 1920. *Black Mask* promoted the hard-boiled style to the increasing audience and “had attracted a number of writers who refined and fashioned the violence of Prohibition into a style for the 1920’s and 1930’s” (Landrum, 1999: 10). The hard-boiled fiction gave birth to the most recognizable iconic figure of detective stories, the hard-boiled investigator who is tough, often solitary and cynical.

The first professional detective that came to the hard-boiled world is Carroll John Daly’s one-dimensional, simple-minded, tough and ever-violent Race Williams who “is clearly the prototype for many hard-boiled heroes, from Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe to Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer” (Scaggs, 2005: 55). However, by 1926, Dashiell Hammett’s stories had become models for the ‘Black Mask School’. Hammett’s stories are fast-moving, often brutal, told in terse prose and they do “not seem like the detective tales of Doyle. The detectives seem new, the criminals different, the plots fresh, and the writing original and vital” (Panek, 2005: 150). Hammett’s well-known detective, Sam Spade from *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) who has roots in Hammett’s own experience as a private detective, brought something new to the icon of the hard-boiled hero who was subsequently adopted by many other hard-

boiled writers who would yet to come (like Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, or Mickey Spillane).

The main hero of the American hard-boiled detective fiction is the private detective – a typical American tough, solitary, cynical man who lives in the jungle of venal politics, corrupt police, deception and illegal business. He lives on the borderline between the world of criminals and the world of law, the only thing he abides is his own set of rules, the hard-boiled moral code. This independent man, a lonely knight, is “the rough man of action who would never harm a fly but would stamp out injustice with a vigorous passion” (Durham, 1963: 5), a rescuer of dames in distress and reminder of moral values. His rough appearance and mysteriousness makes him very attractive for women and they are his only curse – his sexual desire can be fatal for him. He is a man who:

is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid...He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man... a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world... he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin...He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness...He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. (Chandler, 1950)

This description of crucial characteristic features of the hard-boiled detective apply to Hammett's Spade, Chandler's Marlowe, Macdonald's Archer and also Spillane's Hammer – but Hammer somehow stands aside from all these detectives. Mike Hammer was not born on the pages of the pulp magazines and therefore he is 'special'.

Mickey Spillane started his career as a comic book writer and found himself working on characters like *Human Torch*, *Batman*, or *Captain America*. However, he soon realized that he wanted more (and he also needed money), he “wanted to get away from the flying heroes and [he] had the prototype cop” (Smith, 2006). He created a comic strip featuring private detective

Mike Danger in the 1940's but the World War II hindered its publication. Therefore, he changed the character's last name to Hammer and decided to turn it into a novel. Within three weeks *I, the Jury* (1947) was written and Mike Hammer entered the hard-boiled world.

In spite of being tamed by current standards in America (the late 1940's and early 1950's), Spillane created a new 'sort' of a private detective – Mike Hammer was a shock for the critics as well as for the reading public; "he has been attacked by such pundits as Max Lerner as a menace to American civilization. He also gets blasted continually in the book columns for the quality of his writing, for the violence of his plots, and for what is taken to be his outlook" (Murphy, 1952: 83). Hammer's main flaw in the eyes of the critics of the 1950's (and still in some of the contemporaries) was that he is nothing like Hammett's Spade, Chandler's Marlowe or Macdonald's Archer – many, like Sweney (2005: 198-200), see him only as brutal (in terms of violence and sexual instinct), culturally illiterate, self-confessed slob and a sadist.

Hammer is a man's man, a war veteran that became a private eye. He is not a chivalric knight in a shining armor like Philip Marlowe – "an idealized figure, a questing knight of romance transplanted into the mean streets of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles" (Scaggs, 2005: 62), cold and passionless like Sam Spade, or overly intellectual as Lew Archer is. Hammer takes the roughness and toughness of the hard-boiled detectives a considerable step further. He is a tough, thirty-ish man whose physique is never described by Spillane, because "...a hero should be a figment of your imagination" (Brunsdale, 2010: 331), Spillane says. Therefore, you would never find his face on any of the book covers (the original paperbacks). What the readers can deduce from the novels' pages is a picture of a well-built, tall, very strong man in a trench coat and a fedora, who can take a beating like a man. He is direct and he never cracks wise. He possesses astounding endurance that almost makes him invulnerable, invincible – he survives extreme situations that place him outside the normal humanity. He has almost supernatural ability to survive injuries and escape death. These features may be attributed to his 'origin' – he is like a superhero, a crime-fighter without a mask.

Hammer has looks of something dark and evil and yet he is on the side of the justice. He is a symbol that scares criminals, criminals who "are able to scare the hell out of decent citizens, but they'll drop a load when I come around" (Spillane, *My Gun Is Quick*, 2006: 212). Hammer resembles a comic book character that possesses great detective skills, is seeking and living for revenge, who vowed to clean up the world, a man with self-developed physique, but without

any superpowers – Batman. Hammer, as well as Batman, is a character that is condemned by the society, chased and hated by the authorities, even though he is fighting for justice. They both live among criminals yet they are devoted to righting the wrong. They are solitary fighters against crime who are in alliance with moral and honorable members of the police force who are among the very few who know the heroes' real motives and character – they are their personal friends. Even though Hammer sees law as an impediment to justice he has respect for the majority of police, he knows that they have to act within the boundaries set by the law, “people are always running down the police, but they are all right guys that are tied down by a mess of red tape and they have to go through channels” (Spillane, *My Gun Is Quick*, 2006: 231), they “have to follow the book” (Spillane, *I, the Jury*, 2006: 8). Hammer admires Pat Chambers, a capable and ethical Captain of Homicide, for his skills. They are very good friends when they are on or off the job, they stand by each other. This fact is in contrast with Marlowe, Spade or Archer's relationship to police. Police is in these novels depicted as completely corrupt and incompetent, and therefore frequently mocked. These detectives are superior to any member of police department.

Another feature that distinguishes Hammer from Spade, Marlowe or Archer is that he never takes the case for money, Cawelti (1976: 188) states that he “usually becomes involved in a case through a simple desire for revenge.” But I do not agree with Cawelti's view – he gets involved because of his personal motivation – something happens to somebody he loves, likes or is somehow attached to the person. He dives into it on his own all the way, but he is not blindly seeking blood, he pursues what he thinks is a deserved punishment for the crime committed on people he is emotionally attached to.

Despite being the ‘half-brother of the law’, Hammer does not believe in the legal system, therefore he almost never manages to bring the criminal in front of the jury for a fair trial. He is angry about the slow working of the law, and in his eyes it seems that the law protects the criminals. Therefore, he also hates politics and politicians. Hammer's thinking reflects the postwar America when good many people also suffered from the same frantic feelings of insecurity.

Hammer is the avenger who is ‘cleansing’ the society, or righting the wrong in his own way – ‘eye for an eye’. He never doubts that his killing of the criminal represents the rightful punishment, but he kills only when he is sure it is deserved. Therefore, he is for some critics

only an unscrupulous killing machine led by rage and blind to the law, they call him “dangerous, paranoiac, a sadist and a masochist” (Johnson, 1953: 82). But Hammer is never the aggressor; he is always fighting for his honor or being true, but in his own fashion. Any beating up that Hammer does is to keep him safe. Hammer does not go around just killing anybody, he kills only the killers:

I didn't shoot anything but killers. I loved to shoot killers. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than shoot a killer and watch his blood trace a slimy path across the floor. It was fun to kill those bastards who tried to get away with murder and did sometimes (Spillane, *Vengeance Is Mine!*, 2006: 493).

Unlike Spade who does not want to kill anyone, barely lifts his fists and does not even carry a gun, or Marlowe who killed once in seven novels and in self-defense, Hammer is not afraid to use his fist or his beloved 'Betsy' a colt .45 without reservations – he would never walk away from a fight. While the confrontation between Hammer and the criminal is more physical and violent – described in great detail and intensity, in case of Spade, Marlowe or Archer “the confrontation is more psychological” (Cawelti, 1976: 143) and if physical conflict appears it is described rather neutrally.

Hammer knows that it is his duty, his mission to clean the world from the crooks, and he is conscious about the damage that it causes him. He doubts himself several times, but at the end he knows that he had done the right thing, that there was not another way:

I lived only to kill the scum and the lice that wanted to kill themselves. I lived to kill so that others could live. I lived to kill because my soul was a hardened thing that revelled in the thought of taking the blood of the bastards who made murder their business. I lived because I could laugh it off and others couldn't. I was the evil that opposed other evil, leaving the good and the meek in the middle to live and inherit the earth! (Spillane, *One Lonely Night*, 2006: 164)

But there are also those who see him as an avenger in the name of the 1950's American everyman. The primarily male readership of the 1950's could identify with Hammer and they wished to be like him – to be tough, loyal, determined, frank and very popular among beautiful women.

Spillane's works have been condemned by critics mostly because of the blunt sex and eroticism that has been shocking the public ever since the first Hammer novel. They called his novels pornographic. What is interesting is that critics always seem to refer to the open depiction of sex scenes, but "there are almost no descriptions of sexual act itself" (Cawelti, 1976: 185) in the novels. The eroticism is definitely there, and it is portrayed with great detail and passion – Spillane vividly describes sexy women who thirst for Hammer's physical attention, there are numerous women undressing and licking their lips just to have Hammer for themselves. In Hammett's, Chandler's or Macdonald's novels one must look very carefully to find only instances, hints of any sexual relationships of the detectives and if some appear they are described with irony and detachment. Marlowe is even considered a latent homosexual among many critics.

But even if attracted to these sexually provocative women, Hammer keeps his distance. He is not romantic or chivalrous as would Marlowe be but when he has feelings for a particular woman (as he has for his secretary Velda) he wants to marry them before they get engaged in something physical. He refuses to have sex with Charlotte in *I, the Jury* (1947) until they get married, but at the end he figures out that she is the killer and shoots her in her stomach. This final scene is considered a proof of Hammett's bitter hostility towards women, which I find quite simplistic. If he would not stay true to his promise (to avenge his friend's death) and be loyal, he would be dead himself, she would have killed him.

On the other hand, in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) by Hammett, Spade – the blond Satan with blue eyes – is not very fond of his partner and secretly sleeps with his wife and seems to be very indifferent when it comes to the relationships with women. He knows that his secretary has a thing for him and he plays with her feelings. If that was not enough his partner is killed and he has to find the killer, because that is what he should do – he is not an avenger, he does it because his moral code dictates it. When Spade discovers that the killer is Brigid, with whom he has an affair and maybe he fell in love with, he simply, without any emotions sends her to jail.

Hammer is not good looking as Spade or charming like Marlowe so why he is more popular among women than they are? It is because he has "a brutish quality about [him] that makes men hate [him], but maybe a woman wants a brute. Perhaps she wants a man she knows can hate and kill yet still retain a sense of kindness" (Spillane, *My Gun Is Quick*, 2006:

311). Hammer is haunted by his decision to kill Charlotte for a long time, he was in love: “I shot her right in the gut and when she died I died too” (Spillane, *Vengeance Is Mine!*, 2006: 416). This shows that he is not a merciless, cold-blooded killer as some may assume. Hammer despite being a tough brute has feelings, emotions. Spade, Marlowe and Archer seem emotionless.

Mike Hammer should not be considered a hard-boiled outcast he is just a different kind of a hard-boiled detective – he is not Spade, Marlowe or Archer, he is controversial, shocking, and new. He was born on the pages of comic books therefore he has some ‘special features’ added when compared to the archetype of the ‘classic’ hard-boiled detective. He entered the hard-boiled fiction to be condemned by critics for decades for his overt individuality. No major book reviewer, anywhere, has ever said a kind word for a Spillane’s novel. Only in last twenty years critics have been looking at Mickey Spillane and thus at Mike Hammer with a speck of recognition. Despite the indifference from the side of critics, Spillane and his Mike Hammer were very well accepted and admired by the reading public ever since his first novel appeared – he is one of the most popular and best selling mystery writers of the 20th century. Spillane claimed: “I’m not an author, I’m a writer, that’s all I am” (in Carlson, 2010) and “if a guy wants to sit down and read a book, I want to entertain him – not educate him” (in Murphy, 1952: 83). He definitely managed to entertain and captivate readers with his novels and I dare to say that the character of Mike Hammer plays a great part in this success.

I believe that Mike Hammer is one of the first popular antiheroes – he is a good guy who uses methods of the bad guys in pursuit of justice. He is definitely a tough hard-boiled detective with his own moral code, a lonely protector of justice, surrounded by beautiful sexy dames. But he also possesses traits of comic book superhero – he is willing to risk his own safety for a greater good without expecting any reward, he is strongly motivated because he is personally tied to the case/injustice and he is drawn forward by his personal vendetta. He works alone but he is not lonely – he has a confidant, Pat Chambers. But at the same time his personal relationships are very complicated, especially with women. But I do not agree with Sweney (2005: 200) who claims that he “fears long-term female relationships”, he is afraid to develop a relationship with a woman because he has bad experience – every woman he had

feelings for dies in violent death. Therefore, he is not eager to start a relationship with his beloved secretary Velda. He chooses solitude and misery because he wants to protect people he cares about.

Even his name carries an underlying motif specific for superheroes – Mike Hammer; he will hammer down every crook in the New York City. He is a terrifying symbol of justice that strikes fear into the hearts of criminals. He is the superhero of the 1950's and 1960's America – committed to do the right thing, even if the price is high. Every time he has to kill he loses part of his humanity. He was designed to fight the ugliness of the times in the name of greater good and safety of the innocent.

So who would you choose to be your hard-boiled defender? Would it be intelligent, capable but cold and impersonal – Sam Spade, knightly pursuer of the ideal of justice – Philip Marlowe, talkative, intuitive but endlessly waiting – Archer, or vulgar, deadly but loyal and passionate – Mike Hammer?

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