

Big Sleep Discussion Questions

by Raymond Chandler

Author Bio: <http://www.penguinreaders.com/pdf/downloads/par/teachers-notes/TN-TheBigSleep.pdf>

Chandler (1888 – 1959) was born in Chicago but grew up in London and moved to California in 1912. After school, he studied international law and then had a number of jobs, including teaching and bookkeeping. Chandler produced his first novel *The Big Sleep* in 1939. It introduced the now well-known character of Philip Marlowe, a tough but honest private detective. He then went on to write another six novels, three of which are considered to be very important literary works (*Farewell, My Lovely*, 1940; *The Little Sister*, 1949; *The Long Goodbye*, 1953).

Chandler's work greatly interested those within the movie industry and he collaborated with them on several projects including the screenplay for *Double Indemnity* (1944). Six of his novels were successfully made into films including *The Big Sleep* (1946), which starred Humphrey Bogart as Marlowe. Chandler received the Edgar Allan Poe Award for screenplay in 1946 and for novel in 1954. Chandler died in California in 1959.

Characters:

- **Philip Marlowe** – A private detective.
- **General Sternwood** – A rich, older, and infirm gentleman with two daughters. Hires Philip.
- **Carmen Sternwood** – The General's youngest daughter. Mentally unstable. Lives with the General.
- **Vivian Reagan** – The General's oldest daughter. Married 3 times. Current husband is missing. Lives with the General.
- **Rusty Reagan** – Vivian's missing, bootlegging husband.
- **Geiger** – Man attempting to collect Carmen's gambling debts from the General. Runs a pornography bookstore. Shot in his home. Body disappears.
- **Bernie Ohls** – part of the D.A.'s office.
- **Owen Taylor** – The Sternwood's driver. Carmen's former boyfriend. Found dead in Ocean.
- **Joseph Brody** – Conman trying to take over Geiger's business. Informer. Agnes' boyfriend.
- **Eddie Mars** – Owner of a gambling joint Vivian frequents. Mob boss.
- **Mona Mars** – Eddie Mars wife. Supposedly ran away with Rusty Reagan.
- **Agnes** – Joseph Brody's girlfriend. Geiger's front woman at the bookstore.
- **Carol Lundgren** – Geiger's driver and friend. Shoots Brody.
- **Lash Canino** – A general cleanup and hit man used by Eddie Mars.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. What did you think of the 20s/30s slang? Did it make the book easier/harder to read? Did you like it?
3. How did all of Chandler's setting details set the mood of the novel?
4. *The Big Sleep* is considered to be a classic "hardboiled crime" novel. What makes it hardboiled?
5. Do you think General Sternwood had given up on being a parent? What would you have done differently?
6. Marlow comes in contact with thugs, lowlifes, cops, and the rich. Does he speak to everybody the same?
7. What (if anything) makes Marlowe a charming character?
8. What did you think of Carmen? Is Carmen just not very smart or does she have health issues that can account for her behavior?
9. Rusty Regan, the missing, bootlegging husband, always carried 15 grand on his person. What does that say about him?
10. Why do you think Chandler never lets us see Rusty Regan, alive or dead?
11. If you could go back to 1939, would you want Marlowe's job? What job would you want?
12. What does it say about Marlowe that he is a private investigator instead of a police officer?
13. There were a large number of characters and many of them ended up dead. Did you ever have trouble following along?
14. Why does Vivian keep the truth about Carmen and Rusty from her father?
15. Does Marlowe do the right thing by keeping the secret about Carmen and Rusty?
16. In thinking of the characters and their socioeconomic status levels in the book, what types of social critique is Chandler trying to make within *The Big Sleep*?
17. How does Marlowe see women?
18. Do women have power in this story? If so, what kind?
19. What kind of a man is Marlowe? Does Marlowe have a code of honor? Do you find him admirable?
20. What motivates Marlowe in his interactions with General Sternwood? With the Sternwood sisters? With the police? How do his motivations and actions underscore the theme of moral ambiguity recurrent throughout the book?
21. If this book were written today, how would it be different?
22. What influence do you think Chandler has had on crime novels?

23. This story is set during the Great Depression (1930s), when most Americans were struggling financially. What do you think the author was trying to say when he wrote of the Sternwood family who, despite their money, are terribly unhappy?
24. "The theme of the book isn't between good and evil, but between evil and less evil. For in the end, the hero of the story becomes part of the corrupt society 'the great nastiness' himself." What do you think of this statement?
25. Do you count *The Big Sleep* as a classic of American literature? Why or why not?
26. The Big Sleep was made into a movie in 1946. What qualities in the book lend themselves to filmmaking?
27. Will you read more Raymond Chandler/Philip Marlow books?

References:

- Art Institute of Chicago - http://www.artic.edu/sites/default/files/Hopper_guide.pdf
- Mobile Read - <http://www.mobileread.com/forums/showthread.php?t=213636>
- Mount Prospect Public Library - <http://mppl.org/check-it-out/book-discussion-questions-the-big-sleep/>
- Penguin - <http://www.penguinreaders.com/pdf/downloads/par/teachers-notes/TN-TheBigSleep.pdf>
- Raymond Chandler website - <http://home.comcast.net/~mossrobert/index.htm>
- Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Sleep

If you liked *The Big Sleep*, try...

- *Long Goodbye* by Raymond Chandler
- *L.A. Confidential* by James Ellroy
- *The Thin Man*, *The Glass Key*, and *The Continental Op* by Dashiell Hammett
- *I, the Jury* by Mickey Spillane

Hardboiled Crime novels (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardboiled>)

Hardboiled fiction is a literary genre that shares to some degree its characters and settings with crime fiction (especially detective stories). The hardboiled fiction deviates from the tradition in the detective's cynical attitude towards those emotions. The genre's typical protagonist is a detective, who daily witnesses the violence of organized crime that flourished during Prohibition, while dealing with a legal system that had become as corrupt as the organized crime itself. Rendered cynical by this cycle of violence, the detectives of hardboiled fiction are classic antiheroes.

The hardboiled detective - originated by Carroll John Daly's Terry Mack and Race Williams and epitomized by Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe - not only solves mysteries, like his "softer" counterparts, the protagonist confronts violence on a regular basis leading to the burnout and the cynical "tough" attitude towards one's own emotions.