

January, 2024: The Maltese Falcon Discussion Questions

Choose 1 or 4 questions to discuss at our meeting

1. **Sam Spade as a detective**

How is Spade different than other famous literary detectives such as Sherlock Holmes – both as a person and as a detective? If he does not use a magnifying glass and hunt for clues, how does he work? Is Spade any good at being a detective? If so, what skills does he have? Or does he simply leave things to chance? How does the context in which he works differ from that in which we find Holmes and other “genteel” detectives?

2. **Loyalty**

What has happened to loyalty and fidelity in this novel? Are any of the characters loyal or faithful to each other? Can Sam Spade be distinguished from the other characters by his loyalties? What are his motives? Does he have a personal code of values? If so, upon what is it based? Does Spade have a sense of honor?

3. **Truth and Deception**

Does anyone tell the truth in this novel? How do the characters use deception and for what purposes? Does Hammett suggest that in the modern world, there are no “truths”? Or does he imply that by peeling back layers of deception, one can ultimately reach the truth? In Sam Spade’s world, must one resort to deception in order to survive? By trusting that someone is telling the truth does one insure betrayal? Of all the characters, why is Sam the most difficult to deceive?

4. **Femininity**

How are feminine sexuality and sexual relations treated in the novel? How would you describe the relationship between Sam and Brigid? Between Sam and Iva? What kind of a woman is Brigid? How does she compare to Iva and Effie? In what ways do these three female characters both transgress and adhere to traditional notions of femininity? Is there any romance in this novel or only lies and deception? Does Brigid love Sam at the end of the novel? Does Sam love Brigid?

5. **Masculinity**

How is manliness treated in the novel? How would you compare Spade to the other male characters in the book? How is he different than others around him – his partner Miles; Gutman; Cairo; the policemen? Which of Spade’s character traits signal and reinforce his masculinity? What is the role of homosexuality? Is Sam a “modern” man or a throwback to traditional notions of masculinity – a Wild West hero transplanted into the modern city? What does Sam mean when he tells Brigid at the end of the novel, “I won’t play the sap for you.”

6. **Authority**

What does this novel have to say about the legitimacy of authority and authority figures? What does Spade think of authority and “rules”? Are there any rules or is it best to make them up as one goes along? Is everyone corrupt, even Spade?

7. The City

How does the urban setting contribute to the novel's mood and tone? Does the city itself become one of the "characters"? Does city life erode society's moral fibre or simply strip away the hypocrisies? Does the novel suggest that urban life is inherently disorderly and in constant disarray? Does the setting reinforce any broader themes about the general state of modern society? At the end of the novel is everything "back in order"?

8. The Flitcraft Story

What is the significance of the timing of Spade's recitation of this story? Why does Sam go out of his way to tell it to Brigid? Is he trying to telegraph to her some kind of message or warning? Is it a commentary on the fickleness of fate? Is Hammett suggesting anything about the nature of the human character?

9. The Falcon

Is the falcon a symbol? If so, what does it symbolize? Does the falcon have a different meaning for different characters? Is there a *real* Maltese falcon?

Source: CSUN.edu: Devine History 365 Maltese Falcon Study Guide