

American **7** hard-boiled fiction

DOMINATION
INFLUENCE
OPPOSITION
REVOLTE





1. A mirror of American society

1. Before reading the text, describe the two photos briefly: period, place, people, activities...
2. Sum up what you know about the 1920s and early 1930s in the USA.

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The hard-boiled novel was one of the most popular forms of crime literature from the late 1920s to the 1950s in the USA.

- 5 This literary genre arose from the pulp fiction magazines* which were the main source of entertainment for the masses during the first half of the 20th century. Hard-boiled fiction was so named because the detective-hero developed a shell like a hard-boiled egg to protect his feelings from being
- 10 bruised by merciless criminals.
- 15

- 20 This kind of fiction was a response to rising crime and gangster activity caused by Prohibition (when Al Capone was the most wanted criminal in the United States) and then the Great Depression. This new literary genre can be seen as directly related to the socio-economic circumstances at that time.

* magazines imprimés sur du papier de mauvaise qualité (fabriqué avec la pulpe du bois)



3. Read the text and find the equivalents of the following words (in the right order): *distraction* – *coquille* – *meurtrir* – *impitoyable*.
4. Choose the best translation of *hard-boiled novel*: *roman noir* – *roman à l'eau de rose* – *roman d'aventures* – *roman de gare* – *roman d'épouvante* – *roman de mœurs*.
5. In the text, find the words corresponding to the following definitions:
 - a. the worldwide economic recession of the early 1930s, when there was mass unemployment
 - b. the period (1920-33) when the manufacture, sale and transportation of intoxicating liquors was banned by constitutional amendment in the USA
6. Say in your own words why detective novels are also referred to as hard-boiled stories.
7. How do you explain the success of this type of fiction from the late 1920s to the 1930s?
8. Have you ever read a detective story or seen a *film noir* adapted from it? If so, tell the class about it. If not, say why you haven't.

2. Key ingredients

1. Before reading the text, make sure you know how to pronounce these words: private [ˈpraɪvɪt] – hire [ˈhaɪə] – tough [tʌf] – betrayal [brɪˈtreɪəl] – devious [ˈdiːviəs] – alluring [əˈljʊərɪŋ].

A good hard-boiled story must contain most (or all) of the following:

A DARK, DEPRESSING, SINISTER ATMOSPHERE. It is a hostile and aggressive world, full of shadows, rainy deserted streets, seedy and smoky motels and bars.



A PRIVATE DETECTIVE, also referred to as “gumshoe” or “private eye”, hired to solve a crime. He has to be tough, hard-boiled, witty, cynical, solitary and perceptive. He is a maverick with a code of honour. He usually wears a trench coat and a hat.

A PLOT that mixes suspense, murders, organized crime, violence, investigation, police action, betrayal and corruption. There must be clues throughout the narrative and a surprise ending.

RED HERRINGS must deliberately mislead the reader.

A DEVIUS FEMME FATALE. She is an alluring woman who causes the downfall and / or death of a good man.



2. Find the equivalents of the following words (in the right order): *ombre* – *minable* – *engager* – *dur* – *endurci* – *spirituel* – *perspicace* – *franc-tireur* – *impermeable* – *intrigue* – *trahison* – *indice* – *fausse piste* – *induire en erreur* – *retors* – *séduisant* – *perte*.
3. Look at the list of ingredients. Then, cover it and try to remember as many as you can.
4. In your opinion, what are the three most important ingredients of a good hard-boiled story?
5. What image of women was generally conveyed in these stories? Would you say that this image has changed in today’s spy films or thrillers (*films policiers*)?

3. Detective work

1. What is the nature of the document?
2. Describe the place and characters briefly.
3. Imagine the situation and what the conversation may be about.
4. Act the scene in pairs.



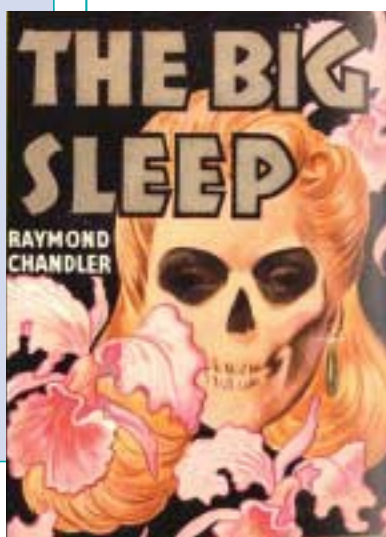
4. The missing woman

1. Before reading the text, describe the cover of *The Big Sleep* and give your impressions. (Notes: skull *crâne* – orchid [*ˈɔːkɪd*] – earring *boucle d'oreille*)
2. Read the text, then draw a portrait of each character and sum up the situation.
3. Imagine a continuation of the story.



Raymond CHANDLER (1888-1959) is one of the

most famous American thriller writers. During the 30s and 40s he was one of the creators of the *roman noir* genre, along with James Cain and Dashiell Hammett. Chandler's Philip Marlowe is one of the first detective heroes in fiction. He is the good guy in a world of violence and corruption. Marlowe likes liquor, women, reading, chess (*échecs*) and working alone. Many of Chandler's books were adapted for the screen. His novels include: *The Big Sleep* (1939), *The Lady in the Lake* (1943), *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950).



"I'm a business man. I don't fool around¹. You're a licensed detective, your card says. Show me something to prove it."

I got my wallet² out and handed him things to prove it. He looked at them and threw them back across the desk. The celluloid holder with the license in it fell to the floor. He didn't bother to apologize. 5

He said sharply: "What do you charge?"

"Twenty-five a day and expenses³. Eight cents a mile for my car."

"Absurd," he said. "Far too much. Fifteen a day flat. That's plenty. I'll pay the mileage, within reason, the way things are now. But no joyriding⁴."

I blew a little gray cloud of cigarette smoke and fanned⁵ it with my hand. I 10 said nothing. He seemed a little surprised that I said nothing.

He leaned over the desk and pointed with his cigar. "I haven't hired you yet," he said, "but if I do, the job is absolutely confidential. No talking it over with your cop friends. Is that understood?"

"Just what do you want done, Mr. Kingsley?" 15

"What do you care? You do all kinds of detective work, don't you?"

"Not all kinds. Only the fairly honest kinds."

He stared at me level-eyed, his jaws tight⁶. His gray eyes had an opaque look. 20

"Have a cigar," he said.

I took a cigar and put it in my pocket.

"I want you to find my wife," he said. "She's been missing for a month."

"Okay," I said. "I'll find your wife."

He ran a hand through his thick dark hair. "She's been gone a whole month," he said. "From a cabin we have in the mountains. Near Puma Point. 25 Do you know Puma Point?"

I said I knew Puma Point.

"Our place is three miles from the village," he said, "My wife went up the middle of May, came down twice for weekends, was due down the 12th of June for a party and never showed up. I haven't seen her since." 30

"What have you done about it?" I asked.

"Nothing. Not a thing. I haven't even been up there." He waited, wanting me to ask why.

I said: "Why?"

He pushed his chair back to get a locked drawer 35 open. He took out a folded⁷ paper and passed it over. I unfolded it and saw it was a Postal Telegraph form. The wire⁸ had been filed⁹ at El Paso on June 14th at 9:19 a.m. It was addressed to Derace Kingsley, 965 Carson Drive, Beverly Hills, 40 and read:

"AM CROSSING TO GET MEXICAN DIVORCE STOP WILL MARRY CHRIS STOP GOOD LUCK AND GOODBYE CRYSTAL."

"All right, what's the catch¹⁰?" I asked him. 45

Raymond CHANDLER, *The Lady in the Lake* (1943)

1. *perdre son temps* – 2. *portefeuille* – 3. *frais* – 4. *virée* – 5. *éventer* – 6. *les mâchoires serrées* – 7. *plié* – 8. *télégramme* – 9. *enregistrer* – 10. *entourloupe*