

Identity, Contradictions and Transgressions in Literature

By Nicole Stephens for CMN238: Paperback Hero

On *Bridget Jones's Diary*:

Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* presents its protagonist as a single woman in her early thirties, preoccupied with two main concerns: her appearance, particularly her weight, and her desire to find a boyfriend. Through the gendered narrative device of first-person diary entries, the reader is made aware that Bridget sees herself at odds with society's construct of the 'ideal woman', perpetuated by women's magazines and the media at large. She makes repeated allusions to her dissatisfaction with her appearance, and rhetorically asks herself why she is so unattractive (pp. 16, 27). She feels '...ashamed and repulsive' because of her weight (p. 18), despite the fact that according to the figures recorded in her diary entries, she is not in reality overweight, indicating her distorted perception of self.

In a moment of insight into the antecedents of her poor self-image, Bridget characterises herself as a '...child of *Cosmopolitan* culture ... traumatized [sic] by supermodels and [the knowledge that] neither my personality nor my body is [sic] up to [their standards] ...' (p. 59). This reflection indicates that Bridget has at least some awareness of the pernicious influence of magazine consumption on her self-esteem, and on society's expectations of modern women as a whole.

Considering the above, it appears that much of Bridget's angst is due to her cognitive dissonance in relation to her pursuit of traditional feminine goals (physical beauty and romance), and her perception of herself as an independent, modern woman. This tension is illustrated in an exchange between Bridget and her friend Sharon, wherein Sharon is extolling the virtues of being single, and Bridget is enthusiastic in her agreement (p. 42). The next diary entry however, features Bridget in a state of distress over the lack of contact from her boss with whom she is infatuated. Though posited largely as a joke, this contradiction is further encapsulated by one of Bridget's New Year's resolutions, that she will not sulk about not having a boyfriend, but will instead develop poise and substance, '... *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend' (p. 3).

In order to examine the impact of women's magazines on Bridget's character, it is important to consider the socio-political influence of second-wave feminism. Hollows (2012) references Betty Friedan's seminal 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* and its argument that women are victims of the power of women's magazines and consumer culture, in that they are defined as being concerned only with their husbands and their homes and the '... fulfilment of their own femininity' (p. 271). *Bridget Jones's Diary*, however, takes place in the 1990s and it is useful to consider Naomi Wolf's 1990 book *The Beauty Myth*, with its evocative subtitle *How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, for a contemporary perspective. In a passage to which Bridget would surely relate, Wolf discussed *Cosmopolitan's* '... aspirational, individualist can-do tone that says you should be your best and nothing should get in your way' (p. 69). This

sentiment is echoed in Bridget's extensive and largely unrealistic list of New Year's Resolutions. Wolf further identified women's magazines' focus on sexual relationships as a disingenuous attempt to convey 'female sexual liberation', which belied their truest motive: to contradict and undermine the feminist pro-woman stance, through a focus on diet and largely unattainable beauty ideals. This contradiction is inherent to the tension at the heart of *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

On *The Big Sleep*:

The period between the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and the aftermath following the end of World War II in 1945 was a time of significant 'social, political, and cultural change' in the United States (Jaber 2016, p.12). The hard-boiled American detective genre rose to prominence during this period, influenced in part by an increase in 'urban crime, gangsterism, and corruption' (Jaber 2016, p.12).

Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) is a well-known example of this genre, which traditionally features a '...hard-boiled, wisecracking detective with a big streak of integrity ... [and] a moral code of his own.' (Dexter, p. v, as cited in Chandler, 2009). He is presented as a flawed hero: tough-spoken and no-nonsense, such as Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (Jaber 2016, p. 53). In the case of *The Big Sleep*'s Phillip Marlowe however, he is portrayed in a light which subtly transgresses genre conventions. He is a '... sensitive, nuanced, romanticized [sic] hero ... an urban knight' (Swirski 2016, p. 96). This is evidenced by Marlowe's affection and concern for the relatively minor character of Mona 'Silver Wig' Mars. On the book's closing page, the reader finds Marlowe alone in a bar, drinking double Scotches, which fail to alleviate his emotional distress. 'They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again' (p. 220).

One of the most important conventions of the detective genre other than the hero, is that of the femme fatale. These 'deadly women' are represented in *The Big Sleep* in the guises of Carmen Sternwood and her sister Vivian Regan. Carmen looks 'durable', with a blank stare and 'little sharp predatory teeth' (p. 3). She is further established as a potential object of mistrust, as she intentionally falls into Marlowe's arms. As the book progresses, Carmen swings between an archetypal 'damsel-in-distress' and a dangerous murderer, making the juxtaposition of the femme fatale villain and victim more explicit. Throughout the book, both women make sexual advances towards Marlowe, and are portrayed as doing so in order to gain advantage over him (pp. 147, 152). This is in keeping with the traditional view of femmes fatales, in that they manipulate events in order to achieve their goals (Campbell 2008).

Another genre convention of the American detective novel found within *The Big Sleep* is that of the 'mean streets'. The genre is described as '...metropolitan ... The big city is its beat...' (Beekman, 1973, p.151). Swirski (p. 117), talks about the '... great big whore of Los Angeles, Chandler's top villain is the American urban sprawl rendered by means of his unvaryingly melancholy cityscapes Tawdry, littered' In the novel itself, this convention is illustrated by Marlowe's travails throughout Los Angeles during his investigation. In one scene, Marlowe

is conducting surveillance from his car. The scene is described in a manner befitting a 'mean street': 'Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the pavement. Big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling girls across the bad places' (p.35).

Given the above discussion regarding the detective hero, femmes fatales, and urban settings as conventions of the genre, it appears that Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* both adheres to and at times, subtly transgresses the traditional characteristics of the American detective novel.

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