Kevin O’Leary

Professor Ramón

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Hardboiled Narration: More Than a Man’s Voice

The physical allure of a calm, grimly-humorous man is no doubt prominent throughout noir; however, narration from this hardboiled figure serves as a canvas with which society uses to illustrate their views. Inability to cope with opposing opinions following The Great Depression and World War II generated extreme anxiety, ultimately leading to the general conclusion that the world was a dark place. Jack Boozer states that the war era reminded people of “life’s fundamental insecurities” and “economic vulnerability” (1). Classic noir uses several techniques to display this philosophy, but a hardboiled figure typically narrates, so much of the world can be seen through his cynical eyes. Brian Snee explains that “the most identifiable element of hard-boiled fiction is this tendency toward first-person prose, usually delivered by a tough-talking no-nonsense detective whose desire to solve the mystery is exceeded only by his need to describe it to us with what are now regarded as tired clichés and tortured metaphors” (3). The hardboiled narrator promotes anxiety within the audience while using worn-out clichés and dry humor such as in “Red Wind” by Raymond Chandler (1938). Throughout this story, detective Marlowe continually observes crime in a monotonous manner, as if it always occurs in every direction, therefore suggesting to the audience that crime is everywhere. This can also be observed in *Double Indemnity* through the character of Walter Neff, who’s narration of his own crime implies the growing ability for someone to be engulfed in corruption. Though readers of noir may be inclined to focus on specific, individual characteristics of hardboiled detectives, the use of hardboiled narration reveals the anxieties contained within the post-war society, which subsequently displays noir’s underlying philosophy that the world is engulfed in corruption.

Through his narration, detective Marlowe from “Red Wind” (1998) reveals the underlying philosophy of noir, establishing that the world is a sinful, corrupt place. As with many hardboiled narrators, Marlowe observes the world with intricate detail and narrates the corruption he sees to the audience and, at times, uses the wind as an example, such as when the story is opened:

There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen. (Chandler 1)

Marlowe says that on these nights, “every booze party ends in a fight”. In a way, he blames the wind for the occurrence of crime, as if to justify the reasons for why someone’s wife would “feel the edge of the carving knife”. Marlowe also describes the wind as unpredictable by suggesting that anything could happen. Naturally, wind is gaseous and can therefore engulf anything it encounters. The effects of the wind in this story parallels the engulfing power of corruption and its ability to invisibly trap those within its path. Noticing the almost mystical powers crime has and its ability to influence people stirred distrust and was worrying to many. As explained by Winfried Fluck, “The appeal of film noir is attributed to a post-war atmosphere of disillusion, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair” (382). Containing this distrust caused the hardboiled narrator to become very appealing due to his suggestion of the encapsulating effects of crime. Marlowe’s narration no doubt informs the reader of inherent evilness within the world, and fuels the anxieties and general cynicism within those who feel incapable of escaping the fluid, yet overwhelmingly powerful influence of corruption.

Although Walter Neff from *Double Indemnity* is a representation of neo-noir, his hardboiled narration illustrates the corruptness within the world through his explanation of events that unfolded, eventually leading to a crime. Rather than revealing the crimes, Neff takes part in them, eventually reflecting on his actions and revealing the ease with which someone can be consumed in corruption: in his case, this corruption is murder. Because this is a movie, it is hard to distinguish narration; however, the movie opens with Neff explaining the entire crime to Keyes (the insurance investigator), which shows how Neff is ultimately narrating the story to Keyes. He says to Keyes (while the audience listens): “Hold tight to that cheap cigar of yours, Keyes. I killed Dietrichson. Me, Walter Neff, insurance agent, 35 years old, unmarried, no visible scars.” (*Double Indemnity, 1944)*. Neff tells Keyes to “hold tight” to his cigar, suggesting that what he is about to hear will come as a surprise. He proceeds to tell Keyes that he committed the murder, and follows this by describing himself, saying he is an “insurance agent” and that he is thirty-five years old. To most, he may seem like a very normal person, yet he committed arguably the worst crime possible; murder. In this situation, Neff exemplifies how anyone, despite their background or apparent normalness, can be engulfed in corruption. Paul Schrader extends on this by stating that “The post-war realistic trend succeeded in breaking film noir away from the domain of the high-class melodrama, placing it where it more properly belonged, in the streets with everyday people” (10). Seeing that normal people could take part in such evilness fueled the anxieties within this post-war society. Neff’s overall intentions may have been skewed by the fact that he killed someone, but his willingness to comply with acts of crime reveals the dark complexities of the world. Without his narration, the reader would not be able to understand the ability for someone to easily contort into a dangerous figure.

Marlowe participates in very unconventional, and sometimes illegal tactics throughout the story, which are undermined by the larger, more apparent crimes. Though his corruption may be overlooked, it is no doubt represented through his narration, ultimately leading the reader to recognizing the extent and prominence of larger corruption. While investigating the crime on his own, the untraditional, overly persistent detective decides to break into the apartment of a dead man and describes the whole process with detail by saying:

I took the piece of thick hard celluloid that pretended to be a window over the driver's license in my wallet, and eased it between the lock and the jamb, leaning hard on the knob, pushing it toward the hinges. The edge of the celluloid caught the slope of the spring lock and snapped it back with a small brittle sound, like an icicle breaking. The door yielded and I went into near darkness. (Chandler 20)

From the details of his description, one can conclude that Marlowe has done this before, most likely without a search warrant. He uses the celluloid that “pretended to be a window” over his driver’s license. Marlowe purposely hides this knowing that the tool, upon being discovered, would be deemed unconventional and suspicious for obvious reasons. Yet the idea of him breaking into the apartment of a man who committed several larger, more corrupt crimes causes the act to become obsolete. This idea of simple corruption becoming obsolete in terms of the bigger picture is something most people within this society understand, which is why the narration of such low-level crime appeals to an audience. Watching an appealing, morally virtuous character perform small acts of crime without hesitation is alarming for some, causing the rupture of a trustworthy society to become apparent. Narrating his own act of crime, much like Neff, reveals how easy it is to participate in corruption, and further displays the anxieties of post-war society.

Walter Neff narrates the way he was influenced into committing a crime, which reveals the underlying philosophy of a crime ridden world, but also raises awareness of another fundamental anxiety of the time: male inferiority to women. As he speaks to the audience (technically to Keyes through his recorder), Walter discloses that he was played, and reveals this when he says: “Only what I didn't know then was that I wasn't playing her. She was playing me -- with a deck of marked cards -- and the stakes weren't any blue and yellow chips.” (*Double Indemnity, 1944).* Rather than being the “player”, which is typical of men, Neff is the one who gets played. He states that the cards were marked, indicating that the trick she played was blatant and easy to keep track of, yet he still fell for it. This feeling of inferiority for men drove society to fear female empowerment, and was used as an excuse for the ability of women to use alluring attributes to convince men into committing crimes. Describing the femme fatale, who typically influences the hardboiled narrator, Ima-Izumi Yoko states, “With her potent sexuality and destructive power she triumphs over her male prey and works his doom” (1). Today, most people understand how far-fetched the idea of women climbing the social ladder purely based on “potent sexuality” is. Regardless, the freedom women were given was a genuine concern for men during this era, and partially represents the philosophy of noir due to its overwhelming influence within hardboiled narration, such as how both Neff and Marlowe are driven to participate in crime because of a powerful female figure. Considering that the readers of noir were predominately male, their interpretation of the philosophy may be more about the anxieties they feel when thinking of the empowerment of women, which Neff ultimately represents through his narration and confession of being played.

By exemplifying the noir philosophy and representing the anxieties of a post-war/depression society, the hardboiled narrator proves to be a fundamental component during the era of noir. Marlowe from “Red Wind” and Neff from *Double Indemnity* show how the world is engulfed in corruption and represent society’s anxieties through their participation in crime. Observing hardboiled narration knowing that it reveals certain aspects and concerns possessed within a given society allows one to properly understand the philosophy behind a piece of literature or film. Hardboiled narration serves as a bridge connecting those who understand corruption and those who experience it first-hand, generating an interdependent relationship between different classes. Such narration, due to similar concerns and raising distrust, persists today and is very appealing for audiences who can relate. Given that today’s society has recently emerged from a recession, it would be interesting to compare the anxieties of the post-war/depression era to modern anxiety, and to examine how these are portrayed within the narration of hardboiled characters.

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