

Source 1b

Hutchison, Don. The Great Pulp Heroes (revised). 1996. Book Republic, 2007.

They were called the pulps. By definition they were magazines of popular fiction handling such staples as adventure, action, and romance. Between their birth in the first years of the last century and their demise in the middle fifties, they represented the greatest explosion of mass entertainment via the printed word that a thrill-seeking public ever experienced.

Variety was infinite. There were detective pulps, western pulps, science-fiction pulps, sports pulps, romance pulps, gang-war pulps, horror pulps, spicy mystery pulps, jungle and desert adventure pulps, and *The Shadow*. There were straight aviation pulps with names like *Dare-Devil Aces* and *Sky Fighters*, as well as macabre variants such as *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, which routinely ladled out titles like “Squadron of Corpses,” “The Headless Staffel,” and “Scourge of the Sky Beast.” From railroad yarns to pirate stories, from the center of the earth to the farthest reaches of the universe, the gaudy, gory, glorious pulp magazines delivered on their promise: something for everyone [...]

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As the Roaring Twenties marched to a cataclysmic market crash, many North Americans had learned to accept organized crime (created by Prohibition) as “big business” and gangsters as a form of barbaric royalty. But the glorification of gang rule took an abrupt turn in the Great Depression when Americans awoke from their paralysis of fascination and began looking for new heroes who did not reflect the rule of force over ideals. As usual, the pulps were there to supply what the public desired.

Pulp avengers-- individuals of strength, speed, brains, and stamina—arose to do battle with working-class America’s perceived enemies: gangsters, bankers, punks, fiends, lawyers, politicians, and threatening foreign hordes [...]

Much has been made of the pulp magazines as training grounds for serious literary authors ranging from MacKinlay Kantor to Tennessee Williams. The fact is that most of the pulps treasured by collectors today represent an unpretentious, calculatedly disposable literature that was too exciting to be respectable and too much fun to be taken seriously.

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Source 2b

McCann, Sean. “Constructing Race Williams: The Klan and the Making of Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction.” American Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 4, 1997, pp. 677-716.

From its first appearances in the pulp magazines of the 1920s, hard-boiled crime fiction emphasized its populist credentials. These were stories, the genre’s writers and fans claimed, with a privileged purchase on “real life” and a fundamental antipathy to genteel fantasy. Against the “bunk” of oversophistication, they promised to deliver the stark truths of contemporary society-- “ugly, vicious, sordid, and cruel.” And, at their most grandiose, they linked this antiliterary sensibility to a complaint

against social corruption. Revealing unpleasant reality was not just pulp sensationalism, the fiction's writers and editors implied; it was part of a moral struggle against dishonesty. The fiction thus railed against social decline-indicting "graft," denouncing "parasites," and complaining against "unjust... wealth" and "tainted power." As one influential editor implied when he claimed fiction offered a "public service" to its readers, the champions of genre were rarely content to see it as a form of entertainment alone.

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fiction, they suggested, offered a popular critique a decadent society.

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Source 3b

Cawelti, John G. "Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture." Critical Inquiry, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1975, pp. 521-541.

Americans have a deep belief in the moral necessity of violence and that this belief accounts for the paradox of an ostensibly peace-loving and lawful people being so obsessed with violence. It also, I think, helps explain certain aspects of the actual character of violence in America, in particular that which grows from our inability to control the spread of firearms throughout our society. The gun is our prime symbol of moral violence. Until we can change the imaginative connection between possession of guns and the moral stature of the individual in our society, we will remain in the thrall of what I have called, in another essay, the six-gun mystique. [...] In this paper, I hope to make a tentative contribution to this analysis by examining more fully the theme of the moral necessity of violence in some of our most pervasive literary formulas. The formulas I have in mind are those of the western, the hard-boiled detective story, the gangster saga, and the police melodrama. While these genres by no means encompass the totality of American popular culture, they are the popular genres in which crime and violence are the central themes." Presumably the way in which these genres represent the

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world is sufficiently close to the public's sense of what is significant, interesting, and plausible to be satisfying as a fictional experience. We can hardly claim that these genres fully coincide with the public's attitudes, but they must present at least an acceptable picture of the world for the purposes of entertainment and escape. We can assume, then, as a preliminary hypothesis, that the themes which appear in all these popular genres are of compelling interest to their audiences. And of such themes,

the most obvious and recurrent is that of the moral necessity of violence. [...]

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The treatment of heroic violence as morally justified has been an almost inevitable accompaniment of stories of heroic adventure since the epics of Homer. To have a truly splendid hero we must have a man who faces the ultimate challenge of life and death and emerges triumphant. And if the hero becomes involved in violence, his action must be justified in some sense, if only because it is performed by a hero. It is perhaps interesting to raise the question as to why American culture has seemed to need so many different sorts of adventurous heroes and to wonder whether this penchant for adventurous heroics is a more or less univer-

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sal constant in human nature or whether some cultures tend to turn more dominantly to this heroic archetype, but such a complex inquiry exceeds the limits of my knowledge at the present. Instead, I want to look into the more specific sorts of interpretations given to the pattern morally necessary violence in American popular media. How, in other words, do American stories of violence tend to justify the culminating acts of violence? As I see it, these justifications are typically built into stories themselves in the form of patterns of circumstances and choice which enforce upon the hero the necessity of acts of violence. [...]

1. The Myth of "Crime Does Not Pay," or "As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap"

In the more overtly moralistic 1930s, such explicit statements as these used to appear at the beginning and ending of such gangster films as *Little Caesar* (1931), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932). This myth reflects one of the oldest and simplest human conceptions of justice, the *lex talionis* or "eye for an eye" principle of retaliation which most civilized societies have rejected. However, there is something profoundly satisfying and morally neat about this kind of justice which has made it flourish in the area of popular literature. There, unlike life, the circumstances can be manipulated to insure a moral and poetic equivalence between the criminal act and the hero's vengeance. [...]

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However, even in the case of the relatively simple and straightforward myth of "Crime does not pay," we encounter a further complexity. While this myth does provide an obvious moral justification for the killing of gangsters or murderers by G-men, detectives, or policemen, it becomes more ambiguous [when] the gangsters themselves are clearly the protagonists [...] Here, "Crime does not pay" was an official motto, a bit of publicly acceptable moralism. The actual sympathies of the audience were

probably as much with the gangster who initiated the violence as with the lawman who retaliated against it. [...]

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2. The Myth of the Vigilante

Where the myth of “Crime does not pay” emphasizes the evil deeds of the antagonist, the admirable motives of the hero’s violence and the inevitability of the process through which bad acts of violence beget retaliation, the myth of the vigilante dwells on the weaknesses and corruption of society. In this myth the hero is typically reluctant to use violence. Only after it has become absolutely clear to him that the legally constituted processes of society cannot bring about justice does he step in and take the law into his own hands. Sometimes the hero’s family or friends become victims of an act of criminal violence which the law is unable to avenge. When it becomes evident that the police, the courts, and society in general cannot either protect the innocent or avenge acts of criminal violence, then the vigilante must himself become the law. Since he is only an individual (or a small group without legal authority), his only possible means of securing justice is counterviolence. With no court but his own judgment, his only choices are either to destroy the antagonist or let him go. Since failure to destroy the villain will only free him for further evil deeds-- the community being either helpless or in some way supportive of the criminal-- the hero must confront and destroy the criminals through violence [...]

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3. The Myth of Equality through Violence

This myth centers around stories of how lower or lower-middle class individuals use their skills in violence to achieve a level of equality with persons of established wealth and power. [...] Many of our gangster stories portray the gangster’s rapid rise from obscure poverty to power and affluence as an obvious variation on

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the Alger story, the protagonist’s technique of success being not pluck and luck but his free and easy manner with a .45 or submachine gun. [...]

The myth of equality through violence is closely related to the conception of America as a frontier society where violent confrontations are part of the ordinary course of life. This is a pervasive vision in our popular literature and films, whether set in the Wild West or the jungle of the modern city. In the western, attacks by Indians or outlaws are an everyday occurrence, just as in the city of contemporary police, detective, and gangster stories, the threat of criminal violence is the dominant characteristic of life. In such a setting, violence is normative rather than exceptional, and the hero who can use it for just and valuable purposes is inevitably a leading citizen. But, in this context, the mere achieving of equality or status is rarely treated as a sufficient justification for the hero’s violence. More

importantly, the hero's action is seen either in terms of the myth of the vigilante, which we have already discussed, or that of the hard-boiled hero and his code.

4. The Myth of the Hard-boiled Hero and His Code

For the hard-boiled hero, violence is a test of honor and integrity, a means of proving an individual code of morality which transcends both the law and the conventional morality of society. He is prepared to risk his life in man-to-man confrontations with the criminal, but it is also significant that he uses his violent abilities with extreme moral restraint. [...]

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Though the Code is an unwritten law, engraved only on the hearts of its adherents, it is, nevertheless, a stringent set of moral rules concerning, above all, the proper uses of individual violence. The Code assumes that neither written law nor the conventional standards of society are adequate guides to moral conduct. True morality can be judged only by a man who is prepared to face extreme situations of violence with trust in his own individual judgment backed up by a willingness to place his life on the line at the proper moment. The tough private investigator and the heroic policeman are both usually presented as being deeply concerned with the moral conditions of their acts of violence. A substantial part of their special tough-guy heroism results from their willingness to bend or break the law when it seems right to them to do so. [...] The hard-boiled hero's acts do not derive from an unrestrained delight in violence or from a willingness to use violence for personal ends of wealth and power. This is the immoral mode of criminal and outlaw. The hard-boiled hero's violence must be accomplished in such a way as to prove the validity and propriety of his personal code. He is a curious sort of crusader who wanders through the endemic criminality, violence, and corruption of the frontier West or the urban jungle attempting not so much to save society as to preserve the honor and integrity of his character. [...]

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Source 4b

Marling, William. "The Black Mask School." detnovel.com, June 2007,
<http://www.detnovel.com/Black%20Mask.html/>.

The first significant hard-boiled authors appeared around 1923 and at the same magazine, *The Black Mask*. Ironically, *The Black Mask* was created to help pay the costs of *Smart Set*, which was similar to today's *New Yorker*. Its founders were drama critic George Jean Nathan and iconoclast critic Henry L. Mencken. When *Smart Set* floundered in 1918, they set up two pulps, *Parisienne* and *Saucy Stories*, which were highly profitable. But they needed another. According to historian Ron Goulart, they "turned down the opportunity to do an all-Negro pulp ... [and] finally decided they'd try a mystery magazine," probably because of Smith and Street's success with *Detective Stories*.¹

The first issue appeared in April, 1920 and featured stories of “Detection, Mystery, Adventure, Romance and Spiritualism.” Its editors wanted to play the field. Mencken later said that “reading manuscripts for it is a fearful job” but “it has kept us alive during a very bad year.” After only eight months, he and Nathan sold out to “Pop” Warner and Eugene Crowe, publishers of Smart Set, who would own the magazine for two decades. ² *The Black Mask* did well enough publishing imitations of the English School in its first two years, but in October, 1922 editor George W. Sutton and associate editor Harry North took control and decided to focus on tough detectives. Sutton stayed on for two years, replaced in 1924 by Philip C. Cody, the circulation director. North remained as writing coach extraordinaire. Sutton, North, and Cody recruited the first group of hard-boiled writers, and the magazine’s repute began to rise. Its rank as the premier detective pulp came with a subsequent editor, Joseph T. Shaw, who promptly dropped *The* from *Black Mask*’s title. Hired in 1926, “Cap” Shaw was a descendent of blue-blooded New Englanders, a graduate of Bowdoin College, and a national saber champion.

What “Cap” Shaw created has become a legend. “The greatest change in the detective story since Poe,” wrote popular culture scholar Russell B. Nye, “came in 1926 with the emergence of the *Black Mask* school of fiction.” ³ Shaw had a romantic sense of his audience. *The Black Mask* reader, he wrote, “is vigorous-minded; hard, in a square man’s hardness; hating unfairness, trickery, injustice, cowardly underhandedness; standing for a square deal and a fair show in little or big things, and willing to fight for them; not squeamish or prudish, but clean, admiring the good in man and woman; not sentimental in a gushing sort of way, but valuing true emotion; not hysterical, but responsive to the thrill of danger, the stirring exhilaration of clean, swift, hard action – and always pulling for the right guy to come out on top.” ⁴

Returning to the U.S. after several years in Europe, Shaw had been shocked to find American tabloids celebrating gangsters such as Capone and Dillinger, to witness the scandals of the Harding administration and the blatant disregard of Prohibition. The republic appeared more threatened, he said, by corrupt judges, political deals and institutional sickness than by petty criminals. Shaw was an able editor, as well as a moral reformer. In his letters and memos, he articulated a clear vision of hard-boiled fiction. “We wanted simplicity for the sake of clarity, plausibility and belief,” he wrote. “We wanted action, but we held that action is meaningless unless it involves recognizable human character in three dimensional form.” Critics have called this style “objective realism,” but Shaw’s own explanation stresses the difference between exterior appearance and interior emotion. He counseled his writers that “in creating the illusion of reality” they should let their characters act and talk tough rather than make them be tough. This model of character -- a crisp exterior but an amorphous interior -- corresponds to Shaw’s idea of his readership. Nor did Shaw urge plots of relentless action on his writers. “To accomplish action it’s not necessary to stage a gun battle from start to finish, with a murder and a killing in every other paragraph,” he later told Raymond Chandler: “You can keep it alive through dialogue.” ⁵

As an editor Shaw went beyond close editorial work and a new vision; he was a superb writing coach and an enthusiastic recruiter. His coup was to convince Dashiell Hammett, an ailing ex-Pinkerton agent who had published stories under Sutton and Cody, to write for the magazine again. Hammett’s knowledge of real detective work -- that it involved stake-outs as well as chases, interviews as often as fisticuffs -- gave the magazine the tone of authenticity it sought. Hammett’s reputation soon drew

other writers.

When he began, Shaw already had Carroll John Daly, a famous pulp writer. Daly was a slight man who had worked as a theatre usher, a stock salesman, and manager of a fire-alarm company. He had first aspired to become an actor, but he was too shy; his acquaintances described him as a bumbling recluse who lived the life of a hermit in White Plains, N.Y. According to William Nolan, Daly's only research consisted of buying a .45 automatic, since his hero carried two of them, but on his way home, he was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. ⁶ "That was the end of Carroll's criminal research," said a friend. Daly was so absent-minded that after trips into New York City to meet his editors he sometimes could not find his house in White Plains.

Daly created a hero who remedied his personal defects, and he once admitted that he was "Carroll John Daly in the daytime and Race Williams at night." ⁷ This hero was focused, crude, illiterate, opinionated, and a crack shot who slept with a gun in his hand. "There is nothing soft-boiled about him," said Daly. ⁸ He sold his very first story to *Black Mask* in 1922, the era of Sutton and North. It took him three more tries to arrive at the character of Terry Mack ("Three Gun Terry," *Black Mask*, May 1923), who many scholars believe is the first authentically hard-boiled detective. Mack was the prototype for Race Williams, who first appeared in "Knights of the Open Palm" (June, 1923). ⁹

Race Williams recovered the larger-than-life qualities and under-world immersion that had been missing in the Nick Carter era; he harked back to the Pinkerton novels and even to Old Sleuth and Old Cap Collier. He was ruthlessly blunt: "I do a little honest shooting once in a while -- just in the way of business [but] I never bumped off a guy what didn't need it." In *The Snarl of the Beast* Race Williams said that "right and wrong are not written on the statues for me, nor do I find my code of morals in the essays of long-winded professors. My ethics are my own." A typical Race Williams story ended on this note: "I sent him crashing through the gates of hell with my bullet in his brain." ¹⁰

Editor Harry Sutton seized on Race Williams and urged Daly to keep on writing about him; he wanted to develop his audience's interest in serial characters. He urged his other writers to create comparable serial heroes. Daly wrote three or four Race Williams stories a year through 1924. When "Cap" Shaw became editor in 1926, he picked up the pace, publishing as many as seven in 1928. The first of his seven novels based on *Black Mask* publications appeared in 1927. In all there were twenty-seven Race Williams stories in the magazine. In 1934 Daly and Shaw had an argument, and the writer took Race Williams to *Dime Detective* and then to other magazines. The character continued to be popular through the Great Depression, but by 1940 his run was over. The last Race Williams novel (*Murder from the East*) was published in London in 1940. During World War II, readers seemed to lose interest in Williams, perhaps because of actual violence. Ironically, the character was almost immediately reincarnated, with the strongly sexual motives that Race lacked, in Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer (I, the Jury, 1947). Daly, however, was too complacent or unskilled to change. He sold a story or two a year in the 1950s and died on January 16, 1958, in California, where he had moved hoping to break into television. ¹¹ The *Thrilling Detective* website has a Race Williams page here.

There were two famous authors who wrote for *Black Mask*. Dashiell Hammett also made his first appearance in *Black Mask* in late 1922. He also appeared in *The Smart Set* that year, and by the end of 1923 had four more short pieces published there. Ironically, the editors either told him to aim lower or he decided for himself. He published stories under the pseudonym "Peter Collinson," some based

on his seven years of intermittent employment as a Pinkerton. The third introduced his famous, nameless Continental Op, who also narrated Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929). Hammett became not only the most famous writer at the magazine but an overwhelming influence on it. Erle Stanley Gardner later charged the editors with trying to make everyone imitate him. In eight years Hammett wrote over fifty stories for *Black Mask*, as well as stories for eight other pulps. He is treated in the section on classic authors.

Raymond Chandler, also treated in the classic authors section, made his first appearance in *Black Mask* in December, 1933, with "Blackmailers Don't Shoot." A transplanted Irishman, educated in England, Chandler had worked for a decade in the Los Angeles oil industry before being fired for drunkenness. His first two stories treated a tough detective named Mallory, his next four an extension named Carmody; both were rough drafts of Philip Marlowe. Like several other writers, Chandler left *Black Mask* when Shaw was fired, but he reworked the plots of these early stories for two of his finest novels, *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940).

By the mid-1930s *Black Mask* had lost momentum. William Nolan points out that "Cap" Shaw increased circulation from 66,000 in 1926 to 130,000 in 1930, but that he began to take himself too seriously, proclaiming that his magazine was read by "clergymen, bankers, lawyers, doctors" and "the heads of large businesses." In Shaw's romantic view, the reader knew "the song of a bullet, the soft, slithering hiss of a swift-thrown knife, the feel of hard fists, the call of courage."¹² There was a wide gap between this idealized masculinity and the reality of the early Depression years, when readers knew unemployment, emasculation, depression and, often, illness or alcoholism. There were also hundreds of competitors in the magazine market. By 1935 the circulation of *Black Mask* had fallen to 63,000. The publishers told Shaw that the writers' pay would have to be cut, but the editor refused. Just as Shaw was bringing aboard a new bread-winner -- Lester Dent, author of the Doc Savage novels -- the pay dispute escalated and Shaw was shown the door. The "Black Mask Boys" reacted immediately; Dent and Nebel quit and Chandler went to *Dime Detective*, while Cain turned to Hollywood.

Yet *Black Mask* had a final phase. The masthead of the first issue of 1937 listed F. Ellsworth as editor. "Fanny" Ellsworth guided the magazine through its last major period. "She was an extremely erudite woman," wrote Frank Gruber. "She knew what she wanted." What she wanted was "a more humanistic" detective, a "softer, more nakedly-emotional approach" to hard-boiled fiction.¹³ Within a year she brought such significant writers to the magazine as Cornell Woolrich, Frank Gruber, Steve Fisher, and Frederick Faust (who wrote as "Max Brand"). These writers were less hard-edged, stressing the hero's emotional response to the dark and threatening city, a tactic taken from the popular romance/adventure stories of Depression (see Frederick Nebel above). This tactic acknowledged a sense of powerlessness among "little man" heroes, who recognized truth or beauty or love and made an attempt to respond to them. Gone was the hard-shelled, action-oriented hero.

By 1940 circulation had dropped farther, and the owners decided to sell *Black Mask* to their competition, *Dime Detective*. A new editor tried to make the magazine tough again and brought in new writers, but the problem was no longer the magazine. The technology of entertainment was changing. Readers had taken up comic books and mass-market paperbacks during the Depression, and by 1940 radio was also taking away audience. These media were, variously, either cheaper or more durable or resellable or more immediate. Its days numbered, *Black Mask* staggered on, using

lurid covers of sex and violence, featuring espionage stories during World War II and finally cutting back to fortnightly publication. The magazine's size was reduced, the price raised -- nothing helped. The last issue appeared in July 1951. After thirty-one years of publication, *Black Mask* folded: it had printed over 2,500 stories by some 640 authors and been the dominant magazine in hard-boiled fiction.¹⁴

As many of these biographies indicate, hard-boiled writers also worked for Hollywood movie studios. Some of the best, such as W.R. Burnett, never appeared in *Black Mask*. It is important to understand Hollywood as the other major source of hard-boiled writing. Its appetite was fed by the success of crime movies, which became popular in the late 1920s, as people grew cynical about Prohibition and curious about Bootleggers.¹⁵ For information about this, see the section on Film Noir. *Black Mask* has been revived, for its historic interest, at this website.

End Notes

1 Goulart quoted in William Nolan, *The Black Mask Boys* (New York: William Morrow and Co.), 20.

2 Mencken quoted in Nolan, *Black Mask*, 20.

3 Russell B. Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), quoted in Nolan, 15.

4 Joseph Shaw, quoted in Frank MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler* (New York: Random House, 1976), 46; Shaw, "Greed, Crime and Politics," *Black Mask*, March 1931, 9.

5 Shaw quoted in Nolan, 26-29; MacShane, *Life*, 50.

6 Nolan, *Black Mask*, 38.

7 Ibid.

8 Daley quoted in Nolan, *Black Mask*, 38.

9 Nolan, *Black Mask*, 36.

10 Carroll John Daly, in Philip Durham, "The Black Mask School," *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed David Madden (Carbondale, IL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 55-57.

11 Nolan, *Black Mask*, 42.

12 Nolan and Shaw in Nolan, *Black Mask*, 29, 28.

13 Gruber and Ellsworth quoted in Nolan, *Black Mask*, 31, 30.

14 Nolan, *Black Mask*, 31-32.

15 The Hollywood locus of hard-boiled fiction has recently received more critical attention. David E. Wilt covers McCoy and Cain, as well as Eric Taylor, Dwight V. Babcock and John K. Butler, all of whom had associations with both *Black Mask* and Hollywood studios, in *Hardboiled in Hollywood* (Bowling Green, OH.: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991). W. T. Ballard, another Hollywood screenwriter who contributed to *Black Mask*, even invented a studio detective named Bill Lennox. These stories, edited by James L. Traylor, have been reprinted by Bowling Green State University's Popular Press in *Hollywood Troubleshooter: W.T. Ballard's Bill Lennox Stories* (1985).

Source 5b

Worthington, Heather. Key Concepts in Crime Fiction. Palgrave, 2011.

In contrast to the mannered, middle-class bourgeois material of Golden-Age crime fiction, which offered comforting resolution and in which even the violence inherent in the act of murder was muted and discreet, the pulp magazines delivered hard-hitting, often graphic and frequently sadomasochistic and misogynistic representations of crime and its omnipotence in society which more closely resembled reality. In the face of such realism, the rarified intelligence of a Sherlock Holmes or the little grey cells of a Poirot were clearly going to ineffectual, inappropriate, and incredible. The man-- and it was always a man-- who investigated the crime and corruption on the city streets of America during the 1920s and 30s, the time of Prohibition (1920-1933) and the Great Depression (1929-1939), facing gangster and corrupt police and government officials, needed to be tough and to understand

the streets; to speak the right language and possess the right skills for the job.

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The urban setting of the city is central to the hard-boiled crime narrative as it been to the nineteenth-century detectives in Britain and America. [...] The city brought wealth and poverty into close proximity and so encouraged crime; it provided the anonymity which enabled the criminal to avoid capture by the police [...] For the later hard-boiled detective, the city retained these functions, but was also a breeding ground for corruption in the forces of law as well as criminals, the ideal location for gangsters to carry out their business, and an environment that fostered alienation [...]

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Source 6b

Pronzini, Bill and Jack Adrian. Introduction. Hard-Boiled: An Anthology of American Crime Stories, Ed. Pronzi and Adrian, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 3-19.

The subject matter [...] on which Shaw would focus *Black Mask* was not the bloodless crimes of Victorian-era mysteries or the hack-generated imaginary felonies of the dime novels; it was genuine sin and vice, of the sort their readers saw all around them and read about in their daily newspapers. The 1920s were a lawless decade, for this was the era of the Volstead Act, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which expressly forbade the brewing and distilling of all intoxicating alcohol. Prohibition, however lofty the motives and intentions behind it, was a staggering legislative and human blunder whose ramifications are still being felt three-quarters of a century later. The illicit manufacture of and trafficking in liquor was a winked-at commonplace, and illegality became an accepted norm. This nationwide amorality-- crime almost as a way of life-- allowed the underworld to organize and grow strong enough for its corruption to reach into the highest levels of government and society. Feud as they might, kill one another as they did, Alphonse Capone and his gangster cohorts flourished in a climate of violence, brutality, and unconstrained social and commercial vice. It was inevitable that the hard-boiled-fiction movement [...] would also grow and flourish against this background of disorder and disaffection.

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