

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett

Book Information

Dashiell Hammett, The Maltese Falcon
Quiz Number: 8662
Random House, 1957
ISBN 0-679-72264-5; LCCN
217 Pages
Book Level: 6.0
Interest Level: UG

Modern classic of mystery and suspense as private-eye Sam Spade tracks down a statuette worth a fortune.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Mysteries, Lost Items; Mysteries, Who-dun-it; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Brigid O'Shaughnessy a lying adventuress who gets Sam involved in the pursuit of the falcon
Bryan the District Attorney who thinks Thursby's killing involves the gambling mob
Captain Jacobi captain of the ship "La Paloma"
Casper Gutman "the fat man," who has been pursuing the falcon for seventeen years
Effie Perine Sam's devoted secretary
Floyd Thursby Brigid's O'Shaughnessy's one-time partner, who is shot dead early in the story
Iva Archer Miles's wife, who is having an affair with Sam Spade
Joel Cairo a small fussy man, who is pursuing the falcon
Lieutenant Dundy a detective who doesn't like Sam and enjoys interrogating him
Luke the hotel detective at the Belvedere hotel, where Cairo is staying
Miles Archer Sam's partner, who is shot and killed early in the story
Rhea Gutman Gutman's daughter
Samuel Spade the protagonist of the book; a hard-nosed private detective
Sid Wise Sam's lawyer
Tom Polhaus a detective who likes Sam

Wilmer Cook a young man who works for Gutman

Vocabulary

dingus a word Sam uses to refer to the falcon
excelsior a material of curled shreds of wood used for packing
fall-guy a scapegoat; someone set up to take the blame for a crime
sap a gullible person; a dupe
singlette an undershirt or jersey

Synopsis

This book opens with a beautiful woman, who calls herself Miss Wonderly, hiring Sam Spade, a private detective, to follow a man named Floyd Thursby. She claims her sister has run away with Thursby. While they are in the office, Sam's partner Miles Archer enters and volunteers to tail Thursby.

Later that night, Sam receives a phone call. Archer has been shot and is dead. Even later that night, two police officers come to Sam's home. Thursby has been shot, he is dead, and they suspect Sam shot him in retaliation for Archer's murder.

The next day Miss Wonderly calls, tells Sam her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy and she has no sister, and asks him to continue to work for her. Back at his office, he meets Joel Cairo, who pulls a gun on him and searches his office for the statue of a black bird. On his way back to see Brigid again, he realizes he is being tailed.

Brigid avoids answering his questions and says she will after she meets Cairo. They meet in Sam's rooms. Brigid and Cairo fight, the door-bell rings, and it is the police. They hear Cairo call for help from within, but Sam convinces them it is all a joke so they don't have to go to the police station. After the police leave, Brigid finally tells the story of a black falcon she had been hired to steal. She, Cairo, and Floyd Thursby had stolen it from a Russian. She believed that Cairo was going to desert them, so she and Thursby took the falcon themselves and left.

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There is a good deal of chasing around trying to find the statue. Sam meets Casper Gutman, "the fat man," who tell him the story of the falcon, including why it's worth so much money and how he has been hunting it for seventeen years. Eventually Sam learns that Brigid and Thursby had shipped it on a slower boat than the one they took. The boat captain turns up at Sam's office with the bird and then dies from numerous gunshot wounds he sustained on the way there.

Sam puts the falcon in storage and then mails the storage ticket to himself. He arranges a meeting with all the concerned parties. He persuades them that the police will need someone to "hang the murders on," and persuades them to give up Wilmer, the little guy who has been tailing him, who, incidentally, works for Gutman. Sam produces the falcon. Gutman tests it and realizes it is fake. Everyone but Brigid leaves. Sam calls the police so all the men who left will be arrested. Then he asks Brigid for the truth. He knows she must have shot Miles Archer, and he coerces the story from her. She thinks that because he loves her he will not turn her in to the police, but he does, saying he will wait for her.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Describe the events that occur between Sam's two possessions of the falcon.

Captain Jacobi brings the falcon to Sam's office. Sam checks it into the Parcel Room of the Pickwick Stage terminal and then mails the check to himself. After he has all the concerned parties assembled in his rooms, he calls Effie and asks her to get the check from their post office box, retrieve the falcon, and bring it to the office. She does. In the meantime, Sam has arranged for Wilmer to take the fall.

Literary Analysis

Who do you think is really the antagonist of this book? Who or what causes all Sam's problems? Gutman? O'Shaughnessy? Or the pursuit of the falcon?

A case can be made for any of the above. O'Shaughnessy originally got Sam involved, and she causes most of the trouble. Gutman gets in Sam's way because of his single-minded pursuit of the falcon. In a way, the lies Brigid tells cause most of Sam's problems.

Inferential Comprehension

Do you think any of the characters have changed by the end of the book? If so, who and how?

The only character who seems to have changed at all is Effie, who shies away from Sam at the end. Otherwise, no--Sam is the same; the police officers are the same; Brigid is the same; most of the other people are dead.

Constructing Meaning

What do you think Sam would have done had the falcon been real?

Students can either think that Sam would have been so enticed by the money that he would have run away with Brigid or that he would have remained true to his values and turned Brigid in to the police. The latter choice is probably more likely.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The Maltese falcon had a long and rich history associated with it. Have the students make a map of the falcon's travels, from Malta, on the ship to Spain, to Algiers, to Sicily and Turin, to Naples and Paris, and then to Constantinople. They could also trace the bird's travels from Constantinople to San Francisco, even though this is not the real falcon.

Understanding the Author's Craft This book is pretty much unremittingly serious, even bleak. Have the students pick some event in the book and try to write it with a different spin, for

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example, making a scene humorous and light-hearted through descriptions and clever dialogue.

Comparing and Contrasting A very good movie was made from this book. Have the students see the movie. Note any similarities and differences. Concerning differences, have the students discuss why the movie-makers probably changed the book.

Recognizing Details A fairly good description of the falcon is given to Sam by Gutman in the story. Have the students make a model of what they think the falcon would look like. They can either make it like the original and encrust it with "jewels," or make it black.