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Revenge, Detection and Dangerous Women in Mickey Spillane’s Postwar Fiction

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Abstract

This article examines the intersections between themes of revenge, detection and the representation of dangerous women in Mickey Spillane’s postwar crime fiction. It showcases Spillane’s detective as an “antihero” who carries out a personal vendetta against those he deems a threat, hence redefining justice as revenge. This article argues that Spillane presents two types of dangerous women: the femme fatale and the capable female detective. This two-fold portrayal of dangerous femininity challenges the detective’s display of macho masculinity and subverts his all-encompassing role as crime solver/vigilante. This article will examine how Spillane’s fiction is driven by the competition between the two versions of dangerous femininity against a detective who believes that he is not merely a representative of the law but the law itself. By closing-reading Spillane’s 1950 *Vengeance is Mine*, this article argues that Spillane’s dangerous women mirror postwar anxieties about gender roles and politics highlighting how Spillane’s novel leans on two models of women; Velda, Hammer’s secretary/partner/detective and Juno, a femme fatale who turns out to be a male and one who receives the vengeful wrath of Hammer. It is also argued here that the detective’s agenda of revenge is inseparable from the reading of justice and law and order in the postwar milieu in America, but it is also attached to the gender dynamics and the representation of women at that time.

Keywords: Mickey Spillane, hardboiled crime fiction, revenge, the detective, the femme fatale



الانتقام، التحري والنساء الخطيرات في روايات ما بعد الحرب لميكي سبلين

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الخلاصة

يتناول هذا البحث الارتباط بين ثيمات الانتقام والتحري الجرائم وتمثيل النساء الخطيرات في روايات الجريمة التي كتبها ميكي سبلين في فترة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية. ويبرز البحث شخصية المحقق في روايات سبلين كـ"بطل مناهض" يُنفذ تارةً شخصياً ضد من يعتبرهم تهديداً، مُعيداً بذلك تعريف العدالة على أنها انتقام. ويبين البحث بأن سبلين يُقدم نوعين من النساء الخطيرات: المرأة الفاتنة والمحققة الكفؤة. وان هذا التصوير المزدوج للأنوثة الخطيرة يتحدى استعراض المحقق للرجولة المفرطة ويُقوّض دوره الشامل كحلّال للجرائم ومُدافع عن العدالة. ويُحلل البحث كيف أن روايات سبلين مبنية على التنافس بين هذين النوعين من الأنوثة الخطيرة ضد محقق يؤمن بأنه ليس مجرد ممثل للقانون، بل هو القانون نفسه. ومن خلال قراءة متأنية لرواية سبلين "الانتقام لي" الصادرة عام ١٩٥٠، تُجادل هذه البحث بأن شخصيات سبلين النسائية الخطيرة تعكس مخاوف ما بعد الحرب بشأن الأدوار الجندرية والسياسة، مُسلطةً الضوء على اعتماد رواية



سبلين على نموذجين من النساء: فيلدا، سكرتيرة/شريكة/محققة، وجونو، المرأة الفاتنة التي يتضح أنها رجل وتتلقى غضب هامر الانتقامي. كما يبين البحث بأن دافع المحقق للانتقام لا ينفصل عن فهم العدالة وسيادة القانون في بيئة ما بعد الحرب في أمريكا، ولكنه مرتبط أيضًا بديناميكيات النوع الاجتماعي وتمثيل المرأة في ذلك الوقت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ميكى سبلين، روايات الجريمة، الانتقام، المحقق، المرأة الفاتنة

Introduction

Mickey Spillane is a case worth investigating. He brought the anxieties of the postwar years to life with narratives that are full of violence, vengeance and conspiracies. Spillane's contribution to the hardboiled crime genre involves creating a unique fictional world which brings forth all the facets of life in America under McCarthyism. Not only does Spillane's stories delve into the contemporary volatile political milieu, but it also explores gender, race and a range of themes about vigilante justice, violence, and morality in a cynical pessimistic world after the Second World War. What John Cawelti calls the "Spillane Phenomenon" can be summarized in the success and popularity that Spillane achieved with his bestselling books selling millions of copies "far better than those of any other writer in the formula" (Cawelti, 1976, p.21). As one of the "most popular crime writers in the world", Spillane is a force not only in terms of his book sales but also in how his writing, described as "perversely humorous" vividly captures the 1950s pulp culture (Haut, 1995, p. 95-60). Spillane's stories, however, are not easy to read and have not always been described in favorable terms; Spillane is often accused of having "ruined the genre" (Dietze, 1998, p. 647). His books are full of characters and situations that "strain credulity to its limits; they frequently turn the stomach as well" (Cawelti, 1969, p. 9). Stephen Knight also suggests that crimes in Spillane's novels, which are known for their "ferocity", are "sadistic" with a detective who inflicts harm on others at every turn (2004, p.123).

Spillane's world depicts the societal and generic transformations where the "hells of Auschwitz and Hiroshima intruded strangely on the childlike universe" and "[r]eality rushed in on the world of fantasy; and, the barrier between them broken, the two flowed together." The image of society that came out of the 1930s pulps speaks "of secret societies bent on world domination, mad sadistic scientists, and bloody avengers" (O'Brien, 1997, p.101). However, there was a transformation that changed the fantasy of the 1930s to a grimmer and more pessimistic postwar life. What used to be a pure fantasy, World War Two changed into reality "since the unbelievable had already happened, henceforth anything could be believed" (O'Brien, 1997, p.101). The "uncertain, fearful mood" during the Cold War years-controlled people's lives and "uprooted old values and depersonalized people's living habits" (Lane 1974, p.295). Indeed, the shift of American society in the postwar period cannot be understated especially the way it impacted popular literature and crime fiction. This impact of the postwar experiences, ingrained in conservative politics, touched every aspect of life in America where

[d]emagogues such as Senator Joseph R. McCarthy channeled the anxieties into a major Red Scare, as they blamed communism for the complex problems which frustrated the nation. Yet the act of conjuring up a villain did not exorcise the disease; it just poisoned the national temper. By 1952 an invisible shield separated the generation brought up by the ordeals of privation and warfare from their children who were born in the atomic age (Lane, 1974, p.295).

In this turbulent context, Spillane's Mike Hammer was born as one of the most hardcore detectives of the genre. He is the product of anxieties of the disillusionment after the Second World War. As a veteran who experienced the horrors of the War, Hammer is an example of the disgruntled soldiers returning home after the War. Presenting a new face to the postwar detective, Hammer is violent and he is driven by revenge and a warped sense of justice. He is a vigilante who does not hesitate to cross boundaries and inflict harm on others. Hammer represents an image of the hyper-masculine identity of the postwar era; he personifies the shift from the classic detectives of the hardboiled genre such as Raymond Chandler's Philip



Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, who embody the idealized image of the detective 'hero.' Hammer stands in contrast to the classic and widely circulated definition of the detective established by Chandler in "The Simple Art of Murder":

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor (Chandler, 2002, 18).

Hammer, with an agenda of his own and a vendetta he seeks to achieve in the name of justice, shows the realities in the political and sociocultural arenas in America following the War. He also exemplifies the "tough, unsentimental language and attitude of the detective/writer himself, in his careful detailing of physical violence, and, most of all, in his descriptions of 'urban America'" (Ogdon, 1992, 74). Unlike the image of the romantic lone detective hero that Philip Marlowe represents best, Hammer is rough, anti-communist, with a questionable moral compass. Hammer is the product of an environment full of discord and unrest on social as well as political levels. The postwar polices in the US offered a ripe ground for authors such as Spillane to write about disillusionment and gender anxieties that produced, in Sean McCann's words a "bristling militarist fraternity" centering on an enlarged sense of masculinity to face real and perceived threats (McCann, 2000, p.147). In this 'fraternity' that Spillane's work establishes, violence especially against women, is the dominant language. In Dietze's words, Spillane

shifted the weights of the hard-boiled code in two key areas: sexuality and violence. He made naked women permanent guests in mystery novels and staged the annihilation of the bad guy as an orgy of violence motivated by the personal desire for revenge and depicted in great detail (1998, p.647)



Women are complex creations in Spillane's work who display various facets. On the one hand, Spillane features Velda, Hammer's secretary and his peer in many respects. Having her own detective license, she does detective work and, like Hammer, she comes under threat during her investigation. Velda is dangerous in the way she challenges Hammer and subverts his role as a detective. She is capable and culpable, and it is through her character that Spillane presents a different facet to the femme fatale stereotype that fills his works. Indeed, Spillane creates many femmes fatales, the dangerous seductresses who jeopardize Hammer and pose a true threat to him and his detection. Spillane's work portrays women who commit crimes, even murder (Charlotte in *I, the July*, for example); these women also stand on a par with Hammer's brutality and ruthlessness. The correlation between these two types of female roles against the vengeful detective not only shapes the plots in Spillane's texts, but it also impacts the reading of gender dynamics in relation to postwar politics, as this article will illustrate.

It is evident from Spillane's texts that his representations of women involve misogyny and sexualization. Descriptions of women include their sexualized bodies and the danger they prove to the detective. In *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1952), Spillane uses language that reduces women to "firm lips, large, ripe, parted slightly over the even lines of her teeth [...] I could see her mouth open even more, the tip of her tongue impatiently waiting, then the impatience broke and it met me before the lips did" (Spillane, 2001b, p. 472). In another 1950 text, *Vengeance is Mine*, Mike Hammer categorizes women in accordance with their physical appearances, "Some women are beautiful, some have bodies that make you forget beauty; here was a woman who had both" (Spillane, 2001a, p. 375).

This objectification of women is accompanied by an emphasis on their dangerous sexuality. Spillane's work provides many examples of how Hammer is both allured and threatened by the female body, a dichotomy that drives him eventually to exact revenge on women. In *Vengeance is Mine*, which will be discussed in this article, the "queen of the goddesses" is illustrated by metaphors of a painting or a sculpture: "She could have been a statue standing there, a statue molded in creamy white flesh" (Spillane, 2001a, p. 512; p. 454). Hammer in *I, the Jury* also describes Charlotte as "what you would expect to find in a painting if each of the world's greatest artists added their own special technique to produce a



masterpiece” (Spillane, 2001a, p. 26). These examples show the reduction of women to objects, but at the same time demonstrate the power that women hold over the detective.

Contextualizing these examples, a pattern – a “topography of the female body” emerges which “signifies the topography of gender of the fifties.” Through this “topography” Hammer attempts to affirm his “virility by adoring, unveiling, conquering, and destroying the female body of evidence” (Dietze 1998, p.656).

This article examines the representation of the new hardboiled “antihero” detective of the postwar era as depicted by Mike Hammer and how this representation is tied to dangerous women in Spillane’s work. It argues that Spillane presents two types of dangerous women: the femme fatale and the capable female detective. This two-fold portrayal of dangerous femininity challenges the detective’s macho display of masculinity and subverts his role as crime solver/vigilante. Spillane’s texts are driven by the competition between the two versions of dangerous femininity against a detective who believes that he is not merely a representative of the law but the law itself. This competition outlines the postwar pessimism and cynicism and exposes gender anxieties that governed not only crime narratives but societal images of American women at large. By closing-reading Spillane’s 1950 *Vengeance is Mine*, this article will highlight how dangerous women mirror Cold-War anxieties about gender roles and politics. This article will thus delineate the role of Velda as she holds the key to read detection in the postwar period, as well as that of Juno, a femme fatale who turns out to be a male and one who receives the vengeful rage of Hammer as he seeks to eliminate the threat to his masculinity. It is argued here the detective agenda of revenge is inseparable from the reading of justice and law in the postwar years, but it is also attached to the gender dynamics and the representation of women.

Mike Hammer: Postwar detection and dangerous femininity

The model of detection that Hammer exemplifies is associated with a violent and extreme outlook on the world. His role as a detective is embedded in a Cold-War milieu fueled by distrust and fear. The increased government control was accompanied by a heightened sense



of uncertainty. With the establishment of the CIA in 1947 and the *House Un-American Activities Committee*, which was tasked to hunt any individuals or organizations suspected of any subversive behavior or disloyalty, the pursuit of enemies became part and parcel of life during the Cold War. Communists or anyone suspected of affiliation to communists became targets, which only increased the paranoia and launched a new culture of control and surveillance. This also created a “more skeptical view of historical evidence and narrative” (Rzepka, 2005, 218).

This “skeptical view” of a world gone wrong is mirrored in Spillane’s fiction. As a rightwing writer, Spillane’s narratives reflect the turbulent McCarthy era in the US. His detective had an agenda that included hunting down and eliminating anyone he perceived as an enemy. In *One Lonely Night*, Hammer declares that “I killed more people tonight than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it [...] They were Commies” (Spillane, 2001b, p.169). As the name of his detective indicates, Spillane “hammers away at the narrative and the culture contained within it” (Haut, 1995, p. 96). Indeed, Hammer fights a violent and chaotic world but he himself is a conduit for this violence.

In Spillane’s work, the nature of detection is no longer about a lone hero who is responsible for achieving and resorting law and order. Rather, it is about revenge and vendettas that rely on a twisted sense of justice and usually involve a personal quest. As William Ruehlmann points out, Spillane allows Hammer to have his “evangelical mood”, he is “never hired” to carry out detective work, yet he “operates out of his personal interest alone”, which shifts the “professional ethic” to a “private one” (1974, p. 98). Hammer’s version of detection is not objective or professional; it is personal, violent and often imbued with hatred and revenge. For example, when his friend Jack Williams in *I, the Jury* is killed, Hammer goes into one of his missions not only to find but to punish and torture the murderer. He clearly states that “I’m the law, and I’m not going to be cold and impartial”, a statement not short of a complete obliteration of the criminal justice system and policing that he is supposed to serve (Spillane, 2001a, 7). There is an aggression to the way Hammer carries out his detection; it is not simply part of the job that earlier detectives such as Marlowe, The Op and Spade experienced. This aggressiveness and recklessness, in Rzepka’s words, can be summed up as



“sadism and voyeurism, the puritanical hypocrisy and misogyny, and the holier-than-thou disrespect for legal 'niceties” that are the defining features of Hammer’s books (2005, p.219).

There is a stark simplicity to the brutality of Spillane’s detective. This is reflected in the language of the texts and the way Spillane re-imagines the role of the detective. With a physical and linguistic prowess, Hammer is a “prototype for countless later protagonists who are ‘out for vengeance.” He is a representation of the “super-macho punisher-hero” who “spoke most directly to those for whom the virility and validity of aggressive individualism offered a way of combating Cold War insecurities” (Horsely 2005, pp.88-9). Through his detective, Spillane paints an extreme form of masculinity that his work launched in the early 1950s and became more dominant in late 1950s and 1960s. Spillane depicts chaos and turmoil better than most hardboiled crime writers, yet it is the characterization of his detective that is perhaps his most memorable achievement. Facing the “social paranoia, with its hysterical fears of urban sophistication” only Hammer, the “lone wolf of destruction” can “bring the elites of evil to their reckoning” (Cawelti, 1969, p.19).

As a prototype of the hardboiled detective of the postwar era, Hammer also presents a new gender politics and dynamics in the crime fiction genre. He displays an all-encompassing masculinity and relies on a show of power and dismissal of any weakness. Spillane’s detective states: “You have to be quick, and you have to be able, or you become one of the devoured, and if you can kill first, no matter how, and no matter who, you can live’ (Spillane, 2001a, pp.153-4). As a veteran, Hammer is the face of “a transitional period of conflicted signals in gender politics” where soldiers returning from the War “encounter a generation of virginal women committed to marriage, domesticity, and childbearing” (Dietze, 1998, p.646). Indeed, the 1950s experienced unsettled and incongruous gender politics driven by a tension “between an assumed norm of masculinity and new forms of masculinity based upon notions of companionship and cooperation with the family and workplace” (Gilbert, 2005, p. 3).

In Spillane’s fictional world, the tough detective is presented to have strained and hateful relations with women. Hammer appears to gain power and show dominance over the women he encounters. In one story after another Spillane presents his detective’s craving to punish women to defend his imagined ideals of masculine power. As Stephen Knight points

out, Spillane “consistently condenses the corruption theme with personal betrayal [...] The weight of punishment falls on characters seen as aberrant to the American way of masculine life – women, especially seductive ones, are always a threat” (Knight, 2004, p.123-4). The female in Spillane’s texts is thus shown to be an ‘other’ who is a danger, a threat to the detective masculinity and his very being. Hammer’s motives for the violence he commits are integrated in a hostile context of the postwar where people were ruled by their “own ruthlessness towards internal as well as external enemies” (McCann 2000, p.204). Hammer thus appears to repeatedly exact acts of violence against women, and his ruthlessness and drive for revenge are both personal and public. He seems to be driven by a code, not a moral one, but a code that stems from a belief that defines his heavy-handed actions and reactions to any perceived threat. Hence, any “victory” that Hammer achieves is based on his “sheer popular virility” which makes him “dismiss every restraint that resists the huge force of this body” (McCann 2000, p.203). In this sense, Mike Hammer is the

reincarnation of the avenging vigilantes of the early pulps, re-tooled to focus and reflect back to Spillane's largely male, high-school-educated readership the anti-intellectual fury of a triumphant America facing down the apocalyptic threat posed by godless Communism and its effete 'fellow-travellers': college-educated professionals, homosexuals, and sexy, demanding females (Rzepka, 2005, p.219).

Spillane creates a formula with two versions of dangerous women. The first is the femme fatale, a lethal woman who causes men to fall into ruin. Using her sexuality as a weapon, this woman is not only seductive but manipulative and threatening. Examples include Charlotte in *I*, *The Jury*, and Lily Carver in *Kiss Me, Deadly*, and Juno in *Vengeance is Mine*. These women face the fury of the detective, and he usually exacts his revenge upon their bodies at the end of the stories. The second is the intelligent culpable woman who is an active member of a dysfunctional society and more significantly she is able to handle the male detective and beat him at his own game. Velda, Hammer’s secretary and partner is a prime representation of this model. Velda is both a skilled detective and a seductive woman who is dangerous. Velda



appears in a number of Hammer's novels, from his first book, *I, the Jury* to *Vengeance is Mine*, but takes a more prominent role in the 1962 *The Girl Hunters*. Velda is an example of the paradoxes that define Spillane's work. She is not the femme fatale who filled the pages of hardboiled and noir texts and who is usually contained and punished at the end of the story. Velda, on the other hand, stands to challenge both the detective and his misogynistic agenda. As an equal to Hammer, Velda is a threat and at the same time a mirror that shows a different face to the detective, one with professionalism, competence and intelligence. Through her detective work, Velda challenges Hammer in the professional arena, and in so doing proves to be the biggest danger to the detective.

These two models of dangerous women reveal a paradigm driven by the detective's quest for revenge and his insecurity in the face of the dangerous femininity. There is a correlational relationship between the two models of dangerous women, which stands in contrast to the revenge agenda of the detective and offers a gender reading of Spillane's work. This correlation between these two types of female roles against the vengeful detective not only shapes the plots in Spillane's texts but it also impacts the reading of gender dynamics in relation to postwar politics, as the discussion of Spillane's *Vengeance is Mine* will explain.

Vengeance is Mine: The female detective, and the femme fatale

In *Vengeance is Mine*, Spillane establishes the markers of the transformations in the postwar hardboiled genre. The narrative uses many of the conventions and themes of the hardboiled writings, yet it re-envision the genre with the creation of the hardcore vengeful detective. In *Vengeance is Mine*, Spillane resorts to a first-person narrative through his tough detective, Mike Hammer and scripts a plot that is driven by crime, revenge and dangerous women. The novel is a story predicated on the theme of revenge for the death of Mike Hammer's veteran friend, Chester Wheeler. Hammer wakes up him next to Wheeler's body who appears to have committed suicide, but it turns out that he was murdered. The story follows Hammer's investigation alongside his secretary/partner, Velda, which leads to a blackmail scheme that involves Juno, the femme fatale who turns to be a biological male and

the one who murdered Wheeler along with many others. The novel details the detection process, looking for evidence, following leads, and more importantly engaging in some violent encounters to find out the killer. Hammer's encounters with Juno, the story's villain, and his relationship with Velda as an equal are at the crux of the gender dynamics in the book.

On the one hand, Spillane creates the persona of a detective who is interested in the solution of the mystery, but at the same time the text leaves room to question and problematize the very process of detection and the instigative methods and motivations of his detective. Spillane portrays a complex image of the detective: Hammer invests in his own personal feelings and his agenda of revenge and hatred, and he has to accept a female detective who does nothing but cast doubt on the totality and reliability of the role of the tough male detective. So, Hammer is shown to go on a mission to avenge his friend, not merely find his killer. He tells Rainey, another villain who is also involved in the blackmail scheme:

You've forgotten I've been in business because I stayed alive longer than some guys who didn't want me that way. You've forgotten that I've had some punks tougher than you'll ever be on the end of a gun and I pulled the trigger just to watch their expression change. (Spillane, 2001a, p. 433)

This admission by Hammer that he "pulled the trigger just to watch their expression" is a shocking and a clear indicator to the new persona of the detective. Spillane's detective challenged the formulaic conceptualization and canonization of the hardboiled detective by changing the main features of the detective from cynical loner to an avenging crusader. On a related front, Frank Krutnik maintains that the "masculinisation of language", evident in Spillane's text, is closely associated with the detective, and it is "often more a measure of the hero's prowess than the use of guns and other more tangible aids to violence" (2006, p.43). The physical violence, especially the way Spillane's detective behaves, is accompanied by a violent language in Spillane's narratives. With "lashings of sadism" Spillane's texts are "fanciful, perverse and psychotic" His writing "mirrors a "pulp culture paranoia, confusion and fear"

(Haut, 1995, p. 95-6). An example of this can be found in the first lines of *Vengeance is Mine* when Hammer states:

The guy was dead as hell. He lay on the floor in his pajamas with his brains scattered all over the rug and my gun in his hand. I kept rubbing my face to wipe out the fuzz that clouded my mind but the cops wouldn't let me (Spillane, 2001a, p. 349).

The matter-of-fact and dry tone of the very first sentence of the novel launches the vicious cycle of violence that will follow and sets the ground for the first-person narrative that gives us a glimpse into the detective's mind. From the start, the persona of the detective is established—he is not an objective professional who is there to solve a crime; rather, he is personally implicated in revenge, and he is at the center of the resulting action.

Spillane presents revenge in a close association with violence; it is the central theme in *Vengeance is Mine* with Hammer creating his own brand of justice. Revenge is also connected to the gender politics of gender roles in the 1950s. The story revolves around solving a murder case. However, Spillane shifts focus from the conventional frameworks of crime resolution and identifying the criminal to exploring detection and revenge through a new, more extreme, lens. In Spillane's postwar world, the processes of detection and crime resolution center on the personal vendetta of the detective, his masculine identity and "policing gender" (Humann, 2011, p. 67). Spillane's variety of detection reflects the conservative ideological stance of the 1950s and, as Corber puts it, keeps up with the "regulatory fictions that governed the production of gender and sexual identity' at that time" (1997, p.5). With what Peter Knight defines as "vigilante ethics" (Knight, 2004, p.123), Hammer is shown to constantly use force to punish those he deems transgressive of norms and boundaries that he himself sets. At a time when women were driven to "domestic subordination in response not only to their husbands' return from the war, but also to their own newfound independence" in the US (Rogin, 1984, p.6), Spillane's detective used "legitimated sadism" to negotiate his relationship with women (Cawelti, 1976, p.186).

The excessive violence that Hammers resorts to often too quickly can be read in light of how he desires to assert himself and his dominance over others, especially women. With a confrontation with Connie, a dancer and a model in the talent agency he investigates, Hammer states, “I reached up and smacked her across the mouth as hard as I could. Her head rocked” (Spillane, 2001a, p. 383). Violence is perhaps the only language that Hammer understands and practices, and it is tied to generic conventions of the hardboiled genre being re-imagined and redefined by the use of visceral and hyper-aggressive detective. As Cawelti opines, “sexual provocation by women and violence against men lead specifically to the infliction of pain and death upon women, often in connection with the sexual act” (Cawelti, 1969, p.15). Therefore, Spillane creates a text that propagates a unique, transgressive formula of detection: a violent detective who despite his tough persona relies on a woman to proceed with his investigation. With his license revoked, Hammer has to depend on Velda to find the killer. She is the lead investigator in this story, which is a new turn in hardboiled writings. Velda, using her own her private detective license, competes with Hammer and seems to be in control. Flying to Ohio, she investigates Wheeler’s background and then she gains insight into the illegal operations in relation to the investigation. She acts more like a partner than a secretary taking more of an active role as she is part of the action in the book. During her investigative work, she shoots a man, which only puts her on equal footing with the detective for they are both involved in the violence and chaos that ensue.

Hammer’s relationship with Velda is interesting. Although they are partners in this book, yet he tries to police and control the way she looks and talks. For example, when she asks him about what happened after the death of Wheeler and shows sympathy, Hammer is more concerned with the way she acts “womanly” than anything else, “It had been a long time since I’d seen Velda playing woman like this. My great big beautiful secretary was human after all. She was better this way” (Spillane, 2001a, p.357). Despite Hammer’s misogyny and his attempts to undermine Velda, she stands up to him, which constitutes a threat to his professional persona as a detective as well as to his masculine identity. Velda is a dangerous woman, not in the lore of the femmes fatales who fill the hardboiled crime narratives including Spillane’s. Velda’s agency, unlike lethal seductresses like Brigid in *The Maltese Falcon* and



Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* lies in the way she challenges Hammer and proves her professional role as a detective against his.

Velda appears in the first two books, *I, the Jury* and *My Gun is Quick* but in *Vengeance is Mine* has a more prominent role. Hammer describes her as “lovely” with “the kind of curves that made you want to turn around and have another look” (Spillane, 2001a, 359). But when she realizes her power, she changes, and Hammer is aware of this transformation: “There wasn’t any kitten-softness about her now” (Spillane, 2001a, 359), and the “lush fullness of her lips” turned into a “snarl” and her eyes became “carnivorous.” From Hammer’s perspective, Velda could be seen in “the jungle watching you from behind a clump of bushes” (Spillane, 2001a, 359). This animal imagery, painted by Hammer, reduces Velda to not only an animal but a predator. It points to Hammer’s misogyny and his distrust of women, and it also reveals that he regards her as a threat, a danger that he is wary of. He calls her “the boss” in a clear admission that she has the upper hand (Spillane, 2001a, 462)

There is a role-reversal as far as detection is concerned. Velda’s relationship with Hammer changes from a professional to a competitive one. It is noteworthy to mention that Hammer is obsessed with avenging himself against transgressive women; he is traumatized by his former lover, Charlotte whom he killed after discovering that she was the one who killed another friend of his, Jack Williams in *I, The Jury*. He has nightmares about Charlotte and the brutal murder scene. Charlotte, posing a danger, remains a fixation to Hammer, “I slept and I talked, hearing my own voice in the stillness [...] the voice I tried to scream with was only a hoarse, muted whisper saying ‘Charlotte, Charlotte.’” He seems so completely taken by Charlotte’s deception and his own failure to read her correctly that he vows to kills her again “I’ll kill you again, Charlotte” (Spillane, 2001a, p.470). This background explains Hammer’s insecurity and his constant rejection of women. It adds to his persona as a tough detective only in the sense that he feels threatened by women such is the case in *Vengeance is Mine* and his encounters with Juno.

When the investigation leads to Juno Reeves who can be regarded as the story’s dangerous femme fatale but who turns out to be an unrevealed transgender, Hammer faces a dilemma. The characterization of Juno is distinctive among the villains of the hardboiled texts.



Juno “disrupts the conventionality of the novel” and presents a challenge to Hammer and the reader:

As a transgender individual, Juno remains in a precarious position in terms of what her presence signifies as well as the degree of access the reader is given to her perspective—and both of these concerns are only further complicated when considering the enormous transgression posed by her lifestyle according to the standards of mainstream U.S. society circa 1950 (Humann, 2011, p. 67).

When Hammer meets Juno for the first time, he expresses admiration and the language used is sexual and revealing. The detective says that she “had the breasts of youth—high, exciting, pushing against the high neckline of the white jersey blouse, revolting at the need for restraint.” Hammer is so mesmerized that when Juno “held her hand out to me, letting it slip into mine with a warm, pleasant grip” and “introduced herself”, he “was too busy cursing the longer hemlines to get it” (Spillane, 2001a, p. 376). Spillane uses sexually charged language to describe his detective’s reaction to Juno, “When she sat down again with her legs crossed I stopped my silent protests of long dresses when I saw how tantalizingly nice they could mold themselves to the roundness of thighs that were more inviting when covered” (Spillane, 2001a, p. 376). Hammer describes Juno as a “queen of the lesser gods and goddesses” and adds that “Juno was a queen and she didn’t want to be. She wanted to be a woman” (Spillane, 2001a, p. 416-7). This description establishes a palpable irony that runs through Spillane’s narrative and significantly problematizes his “tough-guy” and macho persona. The fact that Hammer is misled and misguided by Juno’s identity is the twist in the plot that takes Hammer along with readers to the discovery that Juno is indeed a biological male. This discovery leaves the detective seething and unleashes his violence in a way that is both shocking and foretelling of the more vividly violent and intense books that Spillane later produced, such as in his 1952 *Kiss Me, Deadly* where he directs his violence against another woman, Lily who presents herself as a timid woman in need of Hammer’s protection but turns out to be lethal.

When Hammer meets Juno with her “supernatural loveliness as if some master artist had improved on nature itself”, he feels uncomfortable and perhaps threatened, he admits “I don’t like her and I don’t know why” (Spillane, 2001a, p.393). This anxiety, although it is a foreshadowing to the revelation that Juno is a biological male, is indicative of the detective’s loss of control when it comes to women. Hence when Juno asks Hammer to visit her, he admits, “I couldn’t have said no. I didn’t want to. I nodded and my lip worked into a snarl I couldn’t control. Even my hands tightened into fists until the broken skin over my knuckles began to sting” (Spillane, 2001a, p.395). This loss of control when Hammer faces Juno is the biggest threat to his masculinity, with his fear of being fooled or manipulated by women. It is a trap that happens to Hammer repeatedly from being tricked by Charlotte in *I, the Jury* and getting engaged to her while he failed to recognize her play on him, to Juno who clearly deceives him and hides her masculine identity from him. This masquerading, when dangerous women hide behind domestic femininity, triggers fear in the detective and provokes him to exact revenge on the woman’s body.

At the end when Hammer discovers that Juno is a man, his first reaction is berating and questioning himself, “Me the guy who likes women, a guy who knows every one of theirs stunts [...] and I fall for this.” He is enraged, perhaps at himself more than at Juno, and this rage is translated into a bloodthirst when he started laughing “through the blood on my lips and brought the Luger up as Juno swung around” (Spillane, 2001a, p.512). As Dietze suggests, Spillane presents a phallic symbolism with the “rod” that Hammer uses to beat Juno to death (1998, p.650). Hammer does not act to fulfil justice or uphold the law; he is pure hatred as he kills Juno. His mask of a professional detective falls and he is driven by a vengeance:

The rod was jumping in my hand, spitting nasty little slugs that flattened the killer against the wall with periods that turned into commas as the blood welled out of the holes. Juno lived until the last shot had ripped through flesh and intestines (Spillane, 2001a, p.512-3).



Hammer seems to be completely preoccupied by the idea of women's power over him. He is obsessed with punishing Juno's body and what he perceives as a transgression of gender roles. When he kills Juno, Hammer declares, "I knew why I'd always had a resentment that was actually a revulsion when I looked at her [...] *Juno was a man!*" (Spillane, 2001a, p.513). The murder here solves the mystery of the detective's uncertain attraction to Juno as well as the killing of his friend. Hammer at the end of the book tries to over-compensate for his own failure as a detective where he could not see what is behind the image of a beautiful woman—a murderous mastermind who killed seven people in full view of the detective without being questioned. Juno's power thus lies in the masquerading—the dichotomy between 'her' image as a harmless seductive woman and the lethal murderous man she hides. So, when Hammer kills Juno, it is the "killing of the evil one" which is

a matter of self-defense, vengeance, and the righteous execution of a vicious killer who endangers society. But the killing is given further moral overtones as an appropriate response to an immoral use of feminine sexuality for the purpose of betrayal. It becomes a purification of the obscene as well as the destruction of a killer (Cawelti, 1975, p. 527)

This obsession with violence against women is a repeated motif in Spillane's work. To Hammer, Juno represents a challenge to the norms of femininity and sexuality crossing the boundaries of the accepted gender roles. For Velda, she transgresses to the professional arena of the hyper-masculine detective, hence subverting the very process of detection that defines the identity of Hammer and the genre in general. The ending of the book, therefore, sees Hammer trying to restore his place in the world, his ego and status, not achieve justice. He attempts to maintain his own brand of law and order through murder and revenge, and by so doing, he attempts to conform to the normative gender roles of the 1950s.

Conclusion

Reading Mickey Spillane's work, it is evident that there is misogyny in the way his detective, Mike Hmmer interacts with women. He is vulnerable to women's sexuality and

power; thus he overcompensates with hyper-aggressive and vengeful reactions. His role as a detective is tied to his perceptions of his gender identity in a world full of anxieties and unrest during the postwar era. But it is the characterization of women that mirrors these anxieties around gender and the “changing expectations and increasing autonomy of women in mid-twentieth-century America, an anxiety that both Spillane and Hammer seem to share” (Humann, 2011, p. 69). Spillane who “always presents women as powerful and deadly dangerous” (Dietze, 1998, p.650) configures a paradigm for detection in relation to women and crime where revenge and vigilantism performed by the detective crusader against women’s bodies are the primary factors at play in novels that rely on the first-person narratives.

The mission of Spillane’s detective is thwarted by women who impede the detection process and at the same time post a serious threat to the detective. Spillane outlines a pattern where his detective ends up killing the woman who threatens him. Spillane suggests the “only possible resolution” to the tension between the sexual gratification that women provide and the threat that women represent is “the simultaneous possession and destruction of the female, a goal that can hardly be achieved except in fantasy” (Cawelti, 1976, 159). This “fantasy” is magnified in the ending of Spillane’s first book *I, the Jury* which sees Hammer killing the successful seductive psychiatrist, Charlotte Manning in order for him to eliminate any threat she posed, then it is emphatically repeated in *Vengeance is Mine* where he kills Juno to avenge his own ego as he failed to ‘detect’ Juno’s identity correctly, a frustration that translates into extreme violence. The detective, not concerned with law and justice, eventually fulfils his own agenda with his own brand of justice.

Spillane ultimately succeeds to portray the cynical and dark mood of postwar America, especially the dysfunctionality of the legal system and law and order. Through his violent and vengeful detective, Spillane highlights the concerns and anxieties of that time underlining the corruption and failure of the criminal justice system that drives Hammer to go on crusades to fulfil his own goals. Through Hammer, Spillane also questions and problematizes the very definition of the hardboiled detective and the canonization of the detective as a hero and creates a new persona of not only a violent detective but one with distorted morality and a twisted sense of justice. This also opens a window to see the masculinity crisis in the 1950s when a



new form of masculinity was developing. The 1950s promoted a type of masculinity to represents “the residual values and ideologies of the frontiersman, of the rugged, individualist of the US myth” (George, 2013, p.14), which are all personified in Spillane’s detective, Mike Hammer. Indeed, Spillane’s work, which emphasized the hypermasculine identity of the detective in his urban corrupt environment, can be read in a larger context of the conservative American ideology of the 1950s and the palpable anxieties regarding shifting gender roles in America in the postwar period.



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