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Traditional and Modern Aspects of Crime Literature in Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction

In the 20th century detective stories and crime novels aroused a widespread interest among various critics and writers. The works of such well-known authors as Agatha Christie, G. K. Chesterton and Dorothy Sayers helped to constitute the canon of British crime literature and reflected the established social and cultural norms in this country before and shortly after World War II. Nevertheless, the classical model of this genre, deeply rooted in the European literary tradition, mostly in Great Britain and France, despite their ascents and triumphs at the turn and in the first half of the 20th century soon became questioned revealing structural and thematic weaknesses. First and foremost, the classic Golden Age novels used to be perceived as hermetically sealed stories, typically by location in a country house which represented an isolated setting as well as by their 'artificial' structural pattern, most notably, by their insertion of seemingly 'unreal' elements, such as the amateur status of the detective and the omission of any forensic and scientific police investigation (Abrams 2000: 194).

Together with the public's gradual tiredness and diminishing interest in the traditional model of this genre a new kind of detective literature began to flourish shortly overwhelming the previous one. The so-called hard-boiled fiction, with its origins in the early 20th century American crime literature constituted a strong reaction against highly artificial classical detective stories of the interwar period, mostly in Britain. Contrary to its former subgenre, this type of crime literature reflected the norms and standards of popular culture and social relations in the USA before and after World War II, such as the interest in police and detectives' work, their background, the quest for sensational subject-matter and the engrossment in the psychological aspect of crimes. Although it is generally assumed that hard-boiled detective fiction refers chiefly to the realms of the American popular culture of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, some of its aspects, for instance the urban concerns of modernism, could be seen in the works of some prominent British writers, such as Agatha Christie. Taking into account the pattern and major constituents of hard-boiled detective novels, among others the presence of the detective, the criminal and the motive of the homicide, this type of crime literature, despite its modified structure and subject-matter, indubitably conformed to the rules and conventions of the classical detective fiction. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s than there appeared new tendencies in this field of literature which reflected broader alterations and modifications in art and culture.

The crucial elements of the hard-boiled detective stories, that is a sensational and violent aspect of crime, the urban setting, a neutral and plain style, a colloquial, straightforward language devoid of rethoric and pathos, and a graphic, true-to-life depiction of events and characters. However, after inspecting this subgenre more closely one ought to refer to its other components and features, such as a personal and psychological dimension of crime, a detective (or a gumshoe) presented as a professional, the procedural side of the police investigation and, last but not least, the dominance of male protagonists in the narrative fiction.

When reading attentively the novels of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler or James M. Cain it becomes apparent that both the story and the plot are of equal importance. For this reason, such novels may fall into the category of the suspense, in particular into one of its two subtypes, namely 'the story of the vulnerable detective' (Todorov 1988: 164). In the works of Hammett, Chandler or Leonard the detectives lose their immunity and their lives are constantly put at stake. On the other hand, the circumstances of the homicide are shrouded in mystery, especially those concerning the identity of the culprit, thus the reader's curiosity is aroused till the final pages of the book.

As for the main characters of the hard-boiled fiction they assume similar roles to those played in the classical detective story though their status is quite different. The first of them, the detective is a professional gumshoe who endeavours to solve a criminal riddle and find a culprit on his own. Unlike the sleuth in the traditional detective novel, he is portrayed as a sophisticated hero, a tragic figure, a sensitive decent individual who operates in a world full of violence and corruption, and who is frequently confronted with the brutality and amorality of the police (Willett 1992). Taking into consideration the profession of the detective in the hard-boiled fiction, often called the 'tough school' of writing, he may be neither a private eye nor a police officer but instead he could be a jornalist who solitarily investigates criminal cases and who invariably brings into light the corruption of the police system. From the above statement it transpires that this type of crime literature places the emphasis not exclusively on the discovery of the identity of the murderer and finding a solution to a criminal puzzle but also on the depiction of the police work and the exposition of the evil, wicked side of some high-rank police officers (Willett 1992). In this regard, the hard-boiled story reflects the themes characteristic of the police procedural rather than a pure crime novel (Hamilton 1993: 214). This is the case of Raymond Chandler's *Good-bye My Lovely*, *Killer in the Rain*, Elmore Leonard's *Glitz* or Paul Auster's *Squeeze Play*. The representatives of the above-mentioned tough school recurrently depict hostile, all the greater war-like relations between the main protagonist and one of the police officers, which evokes the struggle between the detective and the culprit. It seems from the above that the figure of the policeman and the murderer are frequently merged. Needless to say, unlike in the classical detective story, particularly in the whodunit, the positions of the detective and the criminal cannot correspond to those of the pursuer and the pursued. In the hard-boiled fiction it is rather the reversal of the roles: on account of his high position the murderer (the policeman) chases the pursued (the main character who plays the role of the detective). However, such model is one of a few possible scenarios written by many prominent authors of the hard-boiled detective literature who many a time, yet not always portray policemen as culprits. In doing so they strive to draw the readers' attention to the amorality and ruthlessness of the legal system in the USA, therefore their works have visible didactic and moralistic tones.

Another crucial element of the hard-boiled fiction is the setting or the milieu. It is the city, its lifestyle and culture that permeates the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Elmore Leonard, or Paul Auster, and that gives a meaning and shape to their novels. Regarding the milieu described in the fiction of the above-mentioned writers Tzvetan Todorov classifies these hard-boiled novels as thrillers though their composition brings them closer to suspense (Todorov 164). Apart from that, some literary critics, among others Cynthia Hamilton or Emony Elliott refer to the hard-boiled detective stories as the successors of the 'city novels' since they epitomise the roots of crime and detection (Hamilton 321). Throughout the history of the hard-boiled detective fiction

and crime literature in general, the city has constituted a pivotal part of any detective story. First of all, the city reflects social and cultural relations among its main characters, in this case the tensions and clashes between the police and the criminals, as well as the conflicts between the ordinary citizens and local authorities. The city novels, the predecessors of the hard-boiled detective stories, shortly acquired great popularity in the United States due to its exposition of sensational crime, violence and frictions, the delineation of social tensions in the lawless world in which an individualist hero is forced to live and survive (Willett 1992).

Some critics claim that cities, in particular the metropolises graphically illustrated in Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, George Lippard's *The Quaker City*, James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* are frequently criticised owing to the fact that they represent the basest instincts of human society. Since they are built versions of Leviathan and Mammon they map the power and domination of the bureaucratic machine of the social pressures of money (Zukin 1995: 1). Accordingly, the urban realism which mirrors predominantly the US tradition and culture and which thus has become synonymous with American detective fiction betokens chaos, disruption and unflinching resolute criminality. Such bleak reality which indubitably casts a shadow over the American dream and which epitomises social dislocation, abuse of power and affluence, and the so-called diffused violence of late capitalism fit the pattern of the hard-boiled fiction, specifically its radical mode (Willett 1992).

The hard-boiled fiction is closely related to gender roles, another crucial element of this subgenre. The core of this kind of literature lies in the exposition of male toughness, their power and dominance. The world dealineated in such novels revolves around 'togh guys' in which there is little space for women. Female characters appear in the hard-boiled fiction exclusively as male sexual fantasies who "threaten the very life of the hero" (Elliott 1991: 371). It is a woman who brings about chaos and puts the detective's life in jeopardy, like Ellen Wade in Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, Velma Valento/Helen Grayle in *Farewell, My Lovely*, or Judith Chapman in Auster's *Squeeze Play*. The above-mentioned characters embody sexy *femmes fatales*, they are represented as deviant, provocative in their (female) sexuality on the one hand and erratic in their "unfeminine" rejection of male supremacy on the other hand (Willett, 1992). Contrary to the classical detective story, especially a whodunit which focusses predominantly on the confrontation between a sleuth and a murderer, and on a detective's endeavour to solve a criminal riddle, the hard-boiled fiction places the emphasis on a gender conflict in which the "innocent" and naive gumshoe falls prey to a woman's wiliness and manipulation. In the hard-boiled detective stories female protagonists who frequently play the roles of murderesses and seductresses epitomise chaos and disorder of modern cities and the corruption of capitalist societies. Accordingly, their luxurious lifestyle, ostentatious display of wealth, power and provocative behaviour reflect social and cultural crisis of contemporary metropolises and threaten the dominant position of men. Hence, contemporary critics of the hard-boiled fiction many a time call it a misogynist type of detective literature due to the specifically ironic, all the more cynical way in which the authors of this kind of crime fiction depict female characters (Mickey Spillane *I, the Jury*, Raymond Chandler *The Lady in the Lake*, Paul Auster *Squeeze Play*).

One cannot fail to notice that structurally the hard-boiled literature mirrors accurately the thoughts and beliefs of their male protagonists. The novels of Hammett, Chandler, Leonard or Spillane are written from the perspectives of 'tough guys', the sleuths who attempt to solve criminal enigmas and

face the corruption and decadence of modern concrete jungles. For that matter, the language of the hard-boiled detective stories is marked by realism and plausibility, the style is plain and transparent, devoid of grandiloquence and pomposity. It is the concoction of linguistic rationalism, harshness, sensuality, laconic wit, a graphic, all the greater gruesome detail that pervade the works of Chandler, one of the icons of this subgenre.

The hard-boiled stories are marked by a street-corner style, they are at times pervaded by vulgar, crude language and a plain, colloquial style and therefore go beyond the classical model of this genre. This fiction refers to and closely reflects the realms and standards of popular culture, and lives up to the tastes and expectations of its readers. Nevertheless, according to postmodern critics the hard-boiled detective literature is equipped with various linguistic deconstructive procedures and mechanisms by means of which the language constitutes the play of signs which challenges traditional concepts of truth, certainty and reality. Once the hard-boiled novels are read and analysed in terms of linguistic deconstruction these texts become discussive, therefore their meaning dissolves. The hard-boiled texts, mirroring popular culture, constitute a blend of struggle and negociation. In this regard part of the battle derives from the status of the crime novel as mimesis – that is, as registering a definite sense of the American urban setting, the salient examples of which are *Butter Medicine*, *Day of Wrath* and *LaBrava* (Willett 1992).

All things considered, the hard-boiled fiction has indubitably become one of the most popular subgenres of detective literature in the interwar years and shortly after World War II. Having its roots in the episodic city novel and referring to the tradition of the frontier written works, this type of crime fiction soon commenced touching upon social, political and cultural issues in the interwar and postwar America and thus became the icon of popular culture. Despite the fact the hard-boiled novels were by and large regarded as parts of 'tabloid' or popular literature, some critics, among others Howard Haycraft, William Marling and Steven Marcus place this kind of crime fiction in one of the categories of belles lettres. What currently remains disputable in the works of Hammett, Chandler or Leonard is the stereotyped depiction of male and female protagonists, and the authors' biased attitude towards women characters. The reaction against the denigrated position and marginality of women outlined in the subgenre has recently been the spread of the feminist crime writing and literary criticism. The most impressive works could be found in Anne Cranny Francis's, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* and Marilyn Stasio's "Lady Gumshoes: Boiled Less Hard" (Willett 1992).

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STRESZCZENIE: Niniejszy artykuł ukazuje proces kształtowania się powojennej amerykańskiej literatury kryminalnej, w szczególności tzw. czarnego kryminału po okresie dominacji klasycznej angielskiej powieści detektywistycznej. Tekst ukazuje najważniejsze cechy dystynktywne czarnego kryminału odróżniające go od tradycyjnej powieści detektywistycznej, takie jak zmieniający się status detektywa, miejski realizm, sprawy płci kulturowej oraz zależność od kultury popularnej.