

How Gay Is Geiger?

The Queer-Volution of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*—from Short Story (1935) to Novel (1939) to Film Noir (1946)

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Mid-twentieth-century hardboiled detective stories, novels, and films—very hostile, very urban—present a decidedly macho notion of American civilization, a world in which one's hierarchical status as a man—very masculine, very heterosexual—determines one's dominance and prestige within any workaday or even criminal undertaking. It is into this fictionalized locale that Raymond Chandler, one of the most influential authors of the hardboiled genre, situates his stories *and* his characters—alienated, misanthropic beings who must (man)euver the dangerous streets of a crime-infested city, usually a modified Los Angeles or its environs, where unbridled political corruption and *mafioso* exploitation ran rampant during the 1920s through the 1940s, according to Chandler, an observant inhabitant of Southern California for forty years.¹ With almost two dozen short stories, seven novels, five screenplays, two Academy Award nominations for Best Original Screenplay, one Edgar Award for Best Mystery Novel, and scores of other publications, namely the essay entitled “The Simple Art of Murder,” an abbreviated master class for any budding crime writer, Chandler obviously understood the demands of narratology: wordsmithing, characterizing, plotting, pacing, peaking, satirizing, moralizing—even mood lighting, so to speak.

At times, however, some of Chandler's memorable creations—apart from Philip Marlowe, the author's famous detective—seem more stereotypical than prototypical: A female character might be read simply as an ingénue, a tramp, or a good mother/wife while a male

¹ Williams, Tom. *A Mysterious Something in the Light: The Life of Raymond Chandler*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012.

character might be read simply as either a valiant crusader, much like Marlowe, or a hardened hustler. This latter group, the street-savvy hustler, serves as the broad focus of this investigation into Chandler's unsavory, minoritized characters. More specifically, however, this analysis examines a particularly complex character from Chandler's oeuvre: Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a blackmailer and pornographer, whose sexual orientation, very likely homosexual, is masked within queered subtext which, when deciphered, may be read both as a common component of the hardboiled genre and occasionally as ingenious. Geiger first appears in the short story "Killer in the Rain" (1935) and then becomes a key villain in the novel *The Big Sleep* (1939)—Chandler himself explained that he "cannibalized" his earlier stories for content²—and finally Geiger transforms into a monstrous enigma within the eponymous film version (1946), adapted for the screen by William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman. During Geiger's journey from short story to novel to film, readers/viewers also meet Carol Lundgren, a petty grifter and Geiger's surreptitious boyfriend, who provides additional clues about Geiger's sexual orientation and criminal motivations within the two stories and one film. This analysis of Geiger and Lundgren, then, provides readers and viewers with a clearer understanding of the mid-twentieth-century queered experience found within an important text of the American literary canon and within representative *mises en scène* of film noir from the 1940s.

Raymond Chandler's "Killer in the Rain" (1935)

Between 1920 and 1951, *Black Mask*, a pulp-style literary magazine, published hundreds of detective stories, launching the careers of noted authors, such as Dashiell Hammett (his novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, being serialized in 1929); Erle Stanley Gardner, the creator of Perry Mason; Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a noted suffragette and environmentalist; and Chandler, whose first short story "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" appeared in 1933 and introduced readers to a private investigator named Mallory, the prototype for Phillip Marlowe.³ Two years later, in 1935, *Black Mask* published a story set within the

² Merrill, Robert, "Raymond Chandler's Plots and the Concepts of Plot," *Narrative* 7, no. 1 (1999): 3.

³ Brownfield, Troy, "Black Mask Turns One Hard-Boiled Hundred," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2020/04/black-mask-turns-one-hard-boiled-hundred/>.

dystopian confines of a reimagined Los Angeles—a rainy, gloomy city rife with crime and vice.

Into this shadowy underworld, Chandler positions a mid-tier hustler, Harold Hardwicke Steiner (the blueprint for Geiger from *The Big Sleep*), a man who sells rare books by day and who peddles pornography and blackmails its participants and consumers by night. The story's generalized plot, as it applies to Steiner, is as follows: A crude, nouveau-riche businessman, Anton Dravec, visits Phillip Marlowe, a private detective, who narrates the story's action, and asks Marlowe to retrieve obscene photographs of his (adult) daughter, Carmen Dravec, from her blackmailer, Steiner. Marlowe agrees to the request and soon encounters a host of sleazy characters, who traffic in pornographic grift; two murders (of Steiner and of a young man in love with Carmen); and eventually, a climactic ending and resolution wherein every loose end finds its satisfying conclusion.

Although Steiner later appears as Geiger in *The Big Sleep*—very likely, a gay man—Chandler, when writing “Killer in the Rain,” gives Steiner an ambiguous sexual orientation. Readers first gain an impression of Steiner when Marlowe, while surveilling Carmen and Steiner, enters Steiner's house on La Verne Terrace after hearing a series of gun shots late at night:

[The living] room reached all the way across the front of the house and had a low, beamed ceiling, walls painted brown. Strips of tapestry hung all



Raymond Chandler's short story "Killer in the Rain," the genesis for the novel *The Big Sleep* (1939), appears in *Black Mask* (1935), a popular publication for crime stories. The magazine's illustration gives readers their first visual of Harold Hardwicke Steiner, the blueprint for Arthur Gwinn Geiger.

around the wall. Books filled low shelves. There was a thick, pinkish rug on which some light fell from two standing lamps with pale green shades. In the middle of the rug there was a big, low desk and a black chair with a yellow satin cushion at it. There were books all over the desk.⁴

The interior of Steiner's house employs two decorative styles: (1) retro-Tudor dependent on "a low, beamed ceiling [and] walls painted brown...[with s]trips of tapestry" and (2) colorful maximalism reminiscent of Dorothy Draper, a mid-twentieth-century interior decorator, who clashed color-blocking and flashy fabrics, an ornamental mix much like a "pinkish rug...[paired with] a black chair [and] a yellow satin cushion" and "a couple of thin purple glasses...on a red lacquer tray on...[a] desk" with a "mulberry-colored phone."⁵ This eclectic, inimitable style, I suggest, "codes" Steiner's sexual orientation as *gay*—especially when coupled with his clothing, which Marlowe soon describes: "Steiner was [dead]...on the floor, just beyond the edge of the pink rug...[and] was wearing Chinese slippers with thick white felt soles. His legs were in black satin pajamas and the upper part of him in an embroidered Chinese coat."⁶ Marlowe's sartorial report nearly places Steiner "in drag"—he appears as an effeminate man wrapped in luxurious, stylish fabrics, which suggests a thought-out "look" for the safety of home, far away from his ersatz bookshop in a conventional, respectable part of the city. During the 1930s, laws governing transvestism (a word I use cautiously) would have criminalized cross-dressing in public, so men like Geiger, suggests George Chauncey, would have "don[ned] a woman's... wardrobe...only in relatively secure settings"⁷—or at home, say, on La Verne Terrace, a coded descriptive (perhaps) whose verbal lilt suggests a drag queen's bawdy pseudonym. In any event, "Killer in the Rain" continues—and after returning to the house the next day, Marlowe views Steiner's sleeping quarters: "I...poked into a fussy-looking bedroom that looked like a woman's room more than a man's. The bed had a long

⁴ Chandler, Raymond, "Killer in the Rain," in *Collected Stories* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002), 174.

⁵ Ibid, 174, 175, 179.

⁶ Ibid, 175.

⁷ Chauncey, George, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1980-1940* (New York: Basic Books), 51.

cover with a flounced edge.”⁸ Steiner’s heterogeneous, iconoclastic style—apparent within his living room and bedroom and within the design and fabric of his clothes—indicates that Steiner likely holds a homosexual orientation.

Other clues about Steiner’s blurred sexual orientation exist elsewhere within “Killer in the Rain.” Later in the story, Marlowe describes his odd dream about “a man in a Chinese coat with blood all over the front who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings”⁹—a bizarre evocation that challenges Marlowe’s earlier estimation of Steiner, who in this dream now lusts after the women he drugs and then photographs for his collection of pornography, women like Carmen Dravec who wore “long jade earrings” as she posed “stark naked” for Steiner.¹⁰ These lewd snapshots of Carmen, in fact, are the very reason that Carl Owen, a man who wants to protect Carmen from exploitation and blackmail, kills Steiner, whose clients number in the hundreds. To gather additional evidence about the murder and the incriminating photographs, Marlowe next visits Steiner’s bookstore and, before entering, notices a jeweler, whose “faint, knowing smile curve[s] his lips as [Marlowe goes] past him into [the shop].”¹¹ The reason for the jeweler’s smirk derives from one of two interpretations: The jeweler suspects that Marlowe is either Steiner’s client, searching for smutty ephemera, or Steiner’s “friend,” likely looking for confidential companionship. Thus, these two textual clues about Steiner’s sexual orientation—one clue within an absurdist nightmare, the other from a meddling jeweler—invite numerous interpretations, ultimately grounding Steiner’s sexual orientation and characterization in obfuscation.

Last, however, a vital clue appears when Guy Slade, Steiner’s associate, discovers Marlowe and Carmen at Steiner’s house after the murder—yet to everyone’s dismay, Steiner’s body has vanished. A conversation unfolds about the missing corpse/person:

“Or do you think Steiner gunned somebody and ran away?” [Marlowe] suggested.
 “Steiner didn’t gun anybody,” Slade said.
 “Steiner didn’t have the guts of a sick cat.”

⁸ Chandler, “Killer in the Rain,” 179.

⁹ Ibid, 179–180.

¹⁰ Ibid, 175.

¹¹ Ibid, 185.

[Marlowe] said: "You don't see anybody here, do you? Maybe Steiner had chicken for dinner, and liked to kill his chickens in the parlor."¹²

The key to understanding this conversation resides within the semantics of the gay-slang term *chicken*, a word well in use during the 1930s when *Black Mask* published Chandler's story. Simply put, *chicken* means *gay man*—a euphemistic replacement for more pejorative terms, including words like *fairy*, *pansy*, *Nancy-boy*, and *queer*, the latter signifier not yet "reclaimed" by the gay community, which remained resolutely underground before and after World War II.¹³ When talking to Slade, Marlowe theorizes that a *chicken*—or rather, a clandestine sex partner—killed Steiner or that Steiner murdered a *chicken* and then fled (as Slade remains unaware of Steiner's murder). Moreover, the conversation raises further questions: How would Marlowe know about a *chicken*—because of his job (after all, he is the quintessential hardboiled detective, reflective of the city's darkest denizens) or because of his *own* hidden sexual orientation? Interesting to note is that never once does Marlowe condemn Steiner (*i.e.*, his profession, his sexual orientation) but instead merely narrates the story, providing a reasonably objective account of the facts.

Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939)

Four years after writing "Killer in the Rain," Chandler reimagined the story by adjoining it to "The Curtain," a story written for *Black Mask* in 1936, altering the stories' characters, changing some of their names, and reinventing their histories; thus he created *The Big Sleep*, a novel published in 1939 by Alfred K. Knopf. Chandler's expanded narrative also includes a pernicious pornographer, who receives, however, a fresh soubriquet, going from rare-bookseller Harold Hardwicke Steiner to rare-bookseller Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a man whose sexual orientation finds clear expression on the page: "[His house] had a stealthy nastiness, like a fag party."¹⁴ Chandler's homophobic prose recharacterizes

¹² Chandler, "Killer in the Rain," 198.

¹³ Norton, Rictor, "The History of the Word 'Gay' and Other Queerwords," *Gay History and Literature*, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/though23.htm>.

¹⁴ Chandler, Raymond, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002), 55.

Marlowe as well; he is a grittier, nastier hardboiled detective, a misogynistic, xenophobic narrator who ogles and slaps women and who derides the escalating diversity of Los Angeles in the 1930s, especially Jews and African Americans. Within this urban milieu, contextualized by Marlowe's storytelling, Geiger resides as a gay man who pays the ultimate "literary" price—fatality—and who, just as troublingly, exists without vocality: When readers finally meet him, he is merely a corpse: "His glass eye shone brightly up at [Marlowe] and was by far the most life-like thing about him. ... He was very dead."¹⁵

The Big Sleep, as it applies to Geiger, presents numerous similarities to "Killer in the Rain": Marlowe snoops outside of Geiger's house, spying on Carmen (this time, surnamed Sternwood, not Dravec) to gather information for her concerned father, General Sternwood, a new character borrowed from "The Curtain." Again, Marlowe hears a series of gunshots, quickly enters Geiger's house, and surveys the décor, which appears decidedly more decadent:

It was a wide room, the whole width of the house. It had a low beamed ceiling and brown plaster walls decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames. There were low bookshelves, there was a thick pinkish Chinese rug in which a gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap. There were floor cushions, bits of odd silk tossed around, as if whoever lived there had to have a piece he could reach out and thumb. There was a broad low divan of old rose tapestry. It had a wad of clothes on it, including lilac-colored silk underwear. There was a big carved lamp on a pedestal, two other standing lamps with jade-green shades and long tassels. There was a black desk with carved gargoyles at the corners and behind it a yellow satin cushion on a polished black chair with carved arms and back. The room contained the odd assortment of odors, of which the most emphatic at the moment seemed to be the pungent aftermath of cordite and the sickish aroma of ether.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid, 31.

¹⁶ Ibid, 30.

Once compared with the same panorama in “Killer in the Rain,” this passage instead reveals a Technicolor trove of *fin-de-siècle* delights: Asian wall hangings, luxurious carpets, poufy cushions, a fainting sofa, Carmen’s rejected undergarments, mood lighting, sculpted ebony hardwoods, Gothic ornamentation, and a heady bouquet, redolent of depravity and laudanum, both of which figure prominently within the scene. Geiger’s living room, in fact, conjures immediate images of queer-icon Oscar Wilde—a *bona fide* homosexual cipher within the literary tradition inherited from the late nineteenth century, à la Wilde’s risqué *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, a novel about a cruel gay man in Victorian London, “one of the first attempts to bring homosexuality . . . [into] English [literature],” writes Wilde’s biographer, Richard Ellman.¹⁷ Gay men, insinuates *Dorian Grey*’s lurid prose, merely exist (as does Geiger) within a sadomasochistic netherworld of (homo)sex, drugs, and lawlessness:

At the end of the [flophouse, notices Dorian,] there was a little staircase, leading to a darkened chamber. As [he] hurried up its three rickety steps, the heavy odour of opium met him. He heaved a deep breath, and his nostrils quivered with pleasure. When he entered, a young man with smooth yellow hair, who was bending over a lamp lighting a long thin pipe, looked up at him and nodded in a hesitating manner.¹⁸

After “coding” the living room with Wildean innuendo, Marlowe documents Geiger’s garments—“Chinese slippers with thick felt soles, . . . legs . . . in black satin pajamas [and a torso in] a Chinese embroidered coat”¹⁹—and his ladylike boudoir: “It was neat, fussy, womanish. The

¹⁷ Ellman, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 318. Chandler would have known about this story, character, and author given his parvenu English upbringing at Dulwich College (where P. G. Wodehouse, another author of record, graduated just as Chandler matriculated) and his circle of professional contacts, chief among them Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde’s one-time obsession (and downfall) and eventual owner and editor of *The Academy and Literature*, a magazine for which Chandler wrote book reviews in 1911 and 1912 (see Williams, 44).

¹⁸ Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Project Gutenberg, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>.

¹⁹ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 31.

bed had a flounced cover. There was perfume on the triple-mirrored dressing table.”²⁰ Here, Marlowe equates homosexuality with femininity, criticizing both sexual orientation and gender while elevating his own masculine positionality within Geiger’s private jurisdiction—a hideout, thinks Marlowe, where avant-garde women, like Carmen, and cross-dressing *homme fatales*, like Geiger, commit sexual transgressions against the macho-moral hegemony.

At this point in the narrative, however, the novel drastically departs from “Killer in the Rain” as Chandler imagines Geiger’s backstory, a side plot that introduces readers to another gay character, Carol Lundgren, a young man who secretly dates Geiger. When readers first meet Lundgren, they do so through Marlowe’s (un)intentional homoerotic description: “[Geiger’s boyfriend had m]oist dark eyes shaped like almonds, and a pallid handsome face with wavy black hair growing low on the forehead in two points. A very handsome boy indeed.”²¹ As the scene continues, Marlowe begins to press Lundgren about Geiger’s murder: “‘The fag gave you [a key to his house]. You’ve got a nice clean manly little room in there. He shooed you out and locked it up when he had lady visitors [to drug and photograph]. He was like Caesar, a husband to women and a wife to men. Think I can’t figure people like him and you out?’”²² Understanding the implications of these accusations, Lundgren swings at Marlowe, who then narrates the unfolding action: “I backstepped fast enough to keep from falling, but I took plenty of the punch. It was meant to be a hard one, but a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like.”²³ This exchange suggests alternate exegeses—broadly speaking: that Marlowe struggles with his own masculinity as he is simultaneously sickened by and attracted to Lundgren—a *hard one*?!—and/or that Marlowe conscripts customary homophobic tropes of the 1930s, tossing out words like *fag* and *pansy*, and even activates a hate crime amidst the protection of any likeminded confederates, should they be nearby. When reading passages like these, scholars have consistently recognized a homosexual, homophobic current within Chandler’s prose²⁴—an interpretive hunch, if you will, that biographer

²⁰ Ibid, 33.

²¹ Ibid, 84.

²² Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 86.

²³ Ibid, 86.

²⁴ For example, Nicholson, Mervyn, and Robert L. Carringer, “Raymond Chandler and *Strangers on a Train*,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 116, no. 5 (2001): 1448-1450.

Tom Williams also holds: “Many have used [Marlowe’s homoerotic] language to suggest that a latent homosexuality makes itself known in Ray’s fiction.”²⁵

Nevertheless, readers again encounter Lundgren once Bernie Ohls, a chief investigator for the Los Angeles District Attorney, asks Marlowe about two additional dead people: Owen Taylor, who, readers later learn, killed Geiger because he (Taylor) was in love with Carmen, and Joseph Brody, who was shot by Lundgren because he (Lundgren) believed that Brody killed Geiger for control of the local erotica cartel. Ohls then offers more incriminating information about Lundgren—“Geiger was living with the punk I got outside in my car. I mean living with him, if you get the idea”²⁶—and on pondering this evidence, Marlowe quickly unknots the strands of the yarn’s tangled plot:

[Lundgren] hasn’t told us, but he must have [moved Geiger’s body]. The boy must have got home when I was away taking Carmen to her house. He was afraid of the police, of course, being what he is, and he probably thought it a good idea to have the body hidden until he had removed his effects from the house. He dragged it out of the front door, judging by the marks on the rug, and very likely put it in the garage. Then he packed up whatever belongings he had there and took them away. And later on, sometime in the night and before the body stiffened, he had a revulsion of feeling and thought he hadn’t treated his dead friend very nicely. So he went back and laid him out on the bed.²⁷

Appearing a decade before Alfred Kinsey’s consequential *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), which exposed pervasive homosexuality within America, this passage about Lundgren reveals a dominant conviction during the 1930s and 1940s—a worldview grounded in the multi(ne)farious psychological, criminal underpinnings of homosexuality: With limited cognitive and social skills, Lundgren communicates only with profanity (his crude vocabulary—*go fuck yourself*—reveals itself repeatedly); suspiciously

²⁵ Williams, 157.

²⁶ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

avoids everyone's detection and supervision; lacks fundamental empathy; and fetishizes necrophilia—as implied by Marlowe: Lundgren “*laid* [Geiger]...on the bed.”²⁸ Therefore, Lundgren, like Geiger, must be punished for his contraventions against the status quo—a topsy-turvy biosphere wherein even “straight” blackmailers and grifters, like Brody and Eddie Mars, another racketeer, hold apex privileges—so Lundgren, Marlowe warns, receives a fitting punishment for his retaliative killing and goes “straight” to prison: “Carol Lundgren, the boy killer with the limited vocabulary, was out of circulation for a long, long time, even if they didn’t strap him in a chair or over a bucket of acid.”²⁹ In “The Cold War Closet,” Michael Bibler reminds readers about people like Geiger and Lundgren—“[I]n mainstream literature...queer characters were punished with violence, depression, exile, and death—often suicide—because of their nonnormative desires”³⁰—a narratological certainty echoed in *Murder Most Queer: The Homicidal Homosexual in the American Theatre*, written by Jordon Schildcrout: “[Any ‘gay’ story or subplot, like *The Big Sleep*,] allows its audience to enjoy the homophobic fantasy of eliminating homosexuality.”³¹ Thus, Chandler, channeling Marlowe, situates this Los Angelenos exposé of the 1930s squarely within the mid-twentieth-century American literary canon, murdering Geiger and banishing Lundgren, making each gay man, realistically and figuratively speaking, to “be sleeping the big sleep.”³²

Howard Hawk’s Film Version (1946)

Chandler’s short story and novel—as they pertain to Geiger and Lundgren—find very few similarities to Howard Hawk’s film, also entitled *The Big Sleep*, released in 1946 and using a screenplay written by William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman. These screenwriters—working under the regulations of 1934’s censorial Hays Code, which expressly forbade the “sympath[etic

²⁸ Ibid (italics added for emphasis).

²⁹ Ibid, 111.

³⁰ Bibler, Michael. “The Cold War Closet,” in *American Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. Scott Herring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122-138.

³¹ Schildcrout, Jordon. *Murder Most Queer: The Homicidal Homosexual in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 45.

³² Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 198.

treatment]...of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin”³³—repositioned much of the novel, softening it, if you will, and delivering a kindlier iteration of the nastier archetypes: wayward women, pornographers, addicts, swindlers, murderers, adulterers—and pansies (to borrow from Chandler’s lingo). As a result, Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman bowdlerized the novel, fashioning a romance between Marlowe and Vivian, Carmen’s sensible sister (who appears only in *The Big Sleep*, the novel, and not in “Killer in the Rain”), erasing most every homosexual cue—blatant or implicit—from the script, and thereby producing, at times, a muddled story line. It is into this new telling, then, that Geiger and Lundgren find themselves set adrift: Although they appear in the film’s final cut—the studio shared a trial version in 1944 with service men and women yet re-edited the film before its widespread release in 1946—both gay men have their colorful identities “bleached” by the black-and-white medium of film noir.

To aim accusations of homophobia solely against Hawks, the director, and his screenwriters, however, is to relinquish recognition of Hollywood’s history during the Great Depression—a decade initially guided by the Motion Picture Production Code (1930 to 1934), a seldom-enforced list of “don’ts” and “be carefuls,” which quickly segued into the restrictive Hays Code (1934 to 1968), an intra-industry supervisory office first spearheaded by Will Hays, then by Joseph Breen (1934-1955). During the 1930s, clarifies Mark A. Vieira, gay and lesbian characters achieved a relative commonness in motion pictures: “[T]he *Hollywood Reporter* was one of several trade journals reporting on the...prevalence of ‘lavender men’ and ‘mannish’ women on the screen.”³⁴ Moreover, in the groundbreaking *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Vito Russo provides an exhaustive report of every pre-Hays-Code film that depicts homoeroticism, homosexuality, and homophobia—all of which, he argues, demanded Breen’s priggish oversight starting in 1934: “Once the connection between homosexuality and coded references to it was established, the fact of homosexuality had entered, however vaguely, the public consciousness. [The Hays Code] was mainly to prevent the focusing and exploration of this

³³ “The Hays Code,” *Screenonline*, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/592022/>.

³⁴ Vieira, Mark A., *Forbidden Hollywood: The Pre-code Era (1930-1934)* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2019), 190.

awareness that the censors acted.”³⁵ Another scholar, Chon Noriega, who expanded Russo’s research by investigating critics’ attitudes towards homo-themed films from 1934 to 1962, summarizes the ultimate intent of the Code’s watchdogs, heteronormative men like Hays and Breen, who grimaced about cinematic, queered otherness and promiscuity: “Although the Code placed numerous restrictions on sex, it was most emphatic about homosexuality...[and the] prohibition of homosexual content would last the longest of the restrictions on sex—until October 1961—when the Production Code began to collapse in the mid-1950s along with the studio system upon which its control depended.”³⁶ Although these three cineastes—Vieira, Russo, and Noriega—provide a telling account of the purge of queer characters and motifs from American cinema during the mid-1930s through the early-1960s, the scholars never address *The Big Sleep* explicitly—probably because Hawks’s version of Chandler’s novel is almost wholly “de-gayed,” with Geiger and Lundgren reduced to mere seconds of film time, with nary any personal backstory, homosexual or otherwise. Thus, any homo-analysis of *The Big Sleep* resides merely within a hypothetical exegesis given the lack of substantial clues from the script and from any representative *mise en scène*.

In any event, one must assume that Hawks, Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman clearly *knew* that Geiger and Lundgren were gay and, therefore, cleverly used stage directions, dialogue, and the camera to code queerness into *The Big Sleep*. The plot of the film—as it relates to Geiger—compares to “Killer in the Rain” and Chandler’s novel: Geiger drugs Carmen Sternwood, photographs her naked body, then blackmails her wealthy father—demanding that he, General Sternwood, pay \$5000 for the negatives to avoid public exposure and ruinous scandal. Once contracted by the General to track down Carmen’s blackmailer, Marlow quickly learns about Geiger’s *métier* and thus visits the pornographer’s bogus bookshop—innocuously named Rare Books and Deluxe Editions—to collect intelligence, yet Geiger’s associate, Agnes, remains resolutely reticent about her employer. Marlowe gains his first clue about Geiger from a neighboring

³⁵ Russo, Vito, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 59.

³⁶ Noriega, Chon, “Something’s Missing Here!: Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934-1962,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 1 (1990): 22.

bookshop's "proprietary," who describes the reclusive bookseller: "[He i]s in his early forties, medium height, fattish, soft all over, a Charlie Chan moustache. Well dressed, goes without a hat, affects a knowledge of antiques and hasn't any. Oh yes, his left eye is glass."³⁷ From this description, the astute viewer may understand that Geiger is "othered" as a pseudo-man—one who eschews the sartorial trappings of hardboiled masculinity and muscularity and becomes utterly feminized: He possesses a voluptuous figure, displays vanity and brazenness (*no hat?!*), and has, alas, only a *ditzy* grasp of interior decorating. In effect, Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman—as Chandler had—make Geiger the quintessential *femme fatale* or, rather, an *imitateur féminin*—a woman who must be punished for *her* wrongdoings. The "proprietary," whose designation in the screenplay aligns her with Geiger—she, too, carries feminine markers of inferiority—also mentions Lundgren, whom she calls a "shadow," a coded reference to his twilight status amidst the heterosexual orthodoxy: men like Marlowe and families like the Sternwoods.³⁸

As the film continues, Marlowe travels to the street on which Geiger lives—Laverne Terrace, a geographical marker that subtly connects to *lavender*, yet another derogatory term from the 1930s for men like Geiger and Lundgren. (The spelling of the street, I note, shifts from two words in "Killer in the Rain"—*La Verne*—to one word, a woman's name, in both the novel and the film.) Next, Marlowe parks his car and—in a manner quite similar to the previous versions—surveils Geiger's residence, watches Carmen make a suspicious visit, and eventually hears gunshots, which demand his presence. On entering the house, Marlowe surveys the living room: "The room is wide, low-beamed ceiling, brown plaster wall with strips of Chinese embroidery and Oriental prints on them. Low bookshelves, a desk, thick rug floor cushions, low divans—an exotic messy atmosphere."³⁹ Although the screenwriters' description of Geiger's interior lacks Chandler's visual wallop, queer codes nevertheless infiltrate the story—"Chinese embroidery," "exotic," and "messy" come to mind—yet these markers lose their connotative power within the restrictive confines of film noir's black-and-white

³⁷ *The Big Sleep*, screenwriters Faulkner, William, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman (1946; Warner Brothers), https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Big_Sleep.pdf.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

mise en scene. Next, Marlowe discovers Geiger's body on the floor—"[h]is embroidered coat is soaked with blood"—and notices Carmen, who, while clearly intoxicated, trains a "queer fixed stare [toward Geiger]...her lips curved to a smile" as if to signal Geiger's complicity, deviance, *and* sexual orientation.⁴⁰ At this point in the scene, however, the homo-ciphers disappear from the screenplay, leaving Geiger's positionality within the remaining story a mystery: Who killed him, and why does his body disappear—only to return later to his bed?

In a subsequent scene on Laverne Terrace, as Marlowe and Carmen discuss a possible reason for Geiger's murder, Marlowe learns that Joe Brody, another grifter, killed Geiger for control of the local pornography racket (or, the audience wonders, was the murderer another dead man—Carl Owen, the Sternwood's chauffeur, who was secretly in love with Carmen?). As the conversation unfolds, and as the plot grows ever more curious, Eddie Mars, Geiger's landlord, arrives—and then a fight erupts. Mars says to Marlowe, "My guess is, you need some help yourself [to solve the murder]," and Marlowe responds, "Not me. It's Geiger's kinfolk that need help—provided a man like Geiger had anybody who loved him and will care who bumped him off."⁴¹ This informative exchange gives the audience one final clue about Geiger—very likely a gay man, whose "kinfolk" apparently disowned him after discovering his sexual orientation. When applied to a film like *The Big Sleep*, a salacious story rife with sexual nonconformists, blatant carnality, and criminal predators, the Hays Code was ruthless and expressly demanded that screenwriters not depict, or glamorize, homosexuality—a code of honor, so to speak, that if broken would prevent a studio from releasing any film with queer subtext and thus from turning a profit. Therefore, Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman surely understood their rhetorical task: to scrub Chandler's naughty novel clean—even more so, to cleanse the textual taint of men like Geiger and Lundgren.

With his sexually ambiguous name and "dark, handsome" appearance, Carol Lundgren enters *The Big Sleep* when Marlowe visits Geiger's bookstore for the second time.⁴² While again interrogating Agnes, Geiger's associate, Marlowe surveys his surroundings and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

glances up sharply as Carol Lundgren...in [a] leather jacket...opens the door in the rear wall. Behind him, through the open door, we see the back room, littered with the papers and boxes of hurried packing, and a gaunt, hard-looking man with certain animal attractiveness in the midst of it, cramming folios and stacks of large-sized envelopes into the packing boxes. Carol is obviously strained under tension, looking as though he has not slept.⁴³

Here, the screenwriters give Lundgren a generic description, which befits a man of modest status within Los Angeles's underworld; like Geiger, consigned to a silk hanfu, Lundgren too receives a stereotypical uniform: the hoodlum's requisite leather jacket, which sartorially positions Lundgren beneath his sharply dressed associate, Joe Brody, who stands to the side. Although Geiger/Steiner retains his essential characterization within the short story, novel, and film (*i.e.*, a pornographer and blackmailer, who is very likely gay), Lundgren shape-shifts between narratives, altogether disappearing from "Killer in the Rain," to occupying a secondary status within the novel as Geiger's jealous boyfriend, to mutating into just a middling delinquent—a small-time crook who soon shoots Brody, his double-crossing partner in crime.

After killing Brody, Lundgren flees, yet Marlowe eventually traps Lundgren and forces his captive to return to Laverne Terrace, where the two men trade swipes: "Lundgren goes for the gun...[and] Marlowe steps in fast, bringing his knee up into Lundgren's face...[so that] Lundgren falls heavily. Marlowe [then] unlocks the door...drag[s] Lundgren inside...[and puts him] on the couch, his hands bound behind him."⁴⁴ This scene—when Marlowe assaults Lundgren—parallels the novel when Marlowe punches Lundgren in front of the police station—"It was meant to be a hard one, but a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like"⁴⁵—yet the screenplay lacks any effective indication of vicious homophobia that would, at least, solidify Marlowe's irrational hatred for Lundgren. Next, Bernie Ohls, another investigator, arrives at Geiger's house and joins Marlowe—with

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 86.

both men heading towards the bedroom, where they discover Geiger's corpse, which has miraculously returned to the crime scene: "Geiger is laid out on the bed. Two strips of Chinese embroidery cover the wounds on his breast, in the shape of a cross, his hands folded over them."⁴⁶ Doubting the plausibility of Geiger's resurrection—coupled with a makeshift altar, "two black candles burning on either side of the bed"—Ohls asks Marlowe, "Nice gesture of friendship. [Did] Lundgren [move the body]?" Marlowe replies, "Yeah."⁴⁷

Here, viewers are befuddled by an inscrutable screenplay: Why, they ponder, did Lundgren create a tender memorial for Geiger if he (Lundgren) worked with Brody to commandeer the local-ized smut trade and then *killed* Brody to circumvent Brody's confession to Marlowe...or if...? Indeed, the Hays Code gave Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman a run for their money, so to speak, as none was able to tease out credible motives for Lundgren's indeterminate criminality—or for his repressed feelings for Geiger (or even for Brody).



Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) rediscovers the corpse of Arthur Gwynn Geiger (Theodore von Eltz) in Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946)

Conclusion

Within Chandler's "Killer and the Rain" and *The Big Sleep* and within Howard Hawks's film adaptation of the novel, Arthur Gwynn Geiger (alongside his prototype, Harold Hardwicke Steiner) and Carol Lundgren hold troubling characterizations: Although they are (assuredly) gay men—rather, bereft gay racketeers—they nevertheless trade blackmail, secrets, pornography, drugs, and sex for momentary respite within Los Angeles, a homophobic hellscape, though accurately reflective of the mid-twentieth-century's zeitgeist. Moreover, these two fictional characters fall by proxy into the queer historiography, offering their crucial "voices" as evidence of an othered,

⁴⁶ *The Big Sleep*, screenwriters Faulkner, William, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

marginalized existence during the 1930s—(man)ipulating a patriarchal order by embarrassing its disobedient women and living successfully (at least, for a while) within a flourishing metropolitan region, alongside fellow grifters, greedy opportunists, and homophobic enemies, and within circa-World-War-II Hollywood, an industry guided by the censorial, destructive powers of a sexually repressive Hays Code. In *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*, Christopher Bram endorses this claim, delivering, however, a caveat, one grounded in the psychosexual verity of the mid-twentieth-century American literary canon: “[S]uch books [like those by Chandler] are [not] about homosexual love, but only about the fear of sex between men.”⁴⁸ Although never certain of Chandler’s intent—*Was the author homophobic? Was Geiger, in fact, gay or instead bisexual? Was Marlowe closeted?*—scholars nevertheless find partial evidence to support such “queered” assumptions within “Killer in the Rain” and *The Big Sleep*—both of which served as a roadmap for Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman as they embarked on a reworking of Geiger’s and Lundgren’s side-stories for Warner Brothers, Hawks, and even the good-natured American public. In his recent biography of Chandler, Tom Williams concludes his research with a suggestion for scholars: “[Chandler’s] novels have been strip-mined for homoerotic content...[yet at] the very least, [Chandler’s] own sexual opacity [as a writer] has helped keep readers of both his fiction and his letters intrigued.”⁴⁹ And that advice is what ultimately matters: Without Chandler’s towering creativity, this scholar would be set adrift, left without any imaginative queered possibilities when reading *The Big Sleep* and its pre- and post-iterations.

⁴⁸ Bram, Christopher, *Eminent Outlaws: Gay Writers Who Changed America* (New York: Twelve, 2012), 43.

⁴⁹ Williams, 335.