

Article**Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction as a Vehicle of Social Commentary in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Walter Mosley's *Devil In A Blue Dress*.**

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore whether popular detective fiction can function as a social commentary. The authors studied are Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley, and the selected novels are *The Big Sleep*, published in 1939, and *Devil In A Blue Dress*, published in 1990. Key themes which will be analysed are: literary conventions of the hard-boiled fiction, which is to say how the protagonists and setting are depicted, race, particularly concerning Mosley, and additionally, how the nature of these experiences may affect the author's ability to use narratives as a social commentary.

Keywords: Raymond Chandler, Walter Mosley, *The Big Sleep*, *Devil In A Blue Dress*, Social Commentary.

Introduction and The Origins of The Hard-Boiled Hero

It is well known that Shakespeare, in his position at the top of the English literary canon, employs classical myths and folk-tales as building blocks in the foundations of his narratives. In genre fiction, these literary devices are known simply as: 'conventions'. Genre fiction writers, such as Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley, while not part of the traditional literary canon, do not draw on classical Greek mythology for their narratives, their fiction – and protagonists – are far from unconventional. The reader of genre fiction knows his hard-boiled detective to be hard-drinking, probably a smoker, a wise-cracker and a cynic. These traits of the detective are staples within the genre, as evidenced by notable detectives including Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Mosley's Easy Rawlins, amongst others. Attempts have been made to analyse the origins of these conventions: in his essay: *Hard-Boiled Virgil*:

*Early Nineteenth-Century Beginnings of a Popular Literary Formula*¹, William W. Stowe attempts to trace these conventions back to the old American frontier. He cites the example of Virgil Stewart, a vigilante who pursues a known outlaw, John A. Murrell. Stewart, ostensibly at least, embarks upon a vigilante crusade against known criminals who threaten the prosperity of the slave-owning Southern states, despite having a record of business dealings with said criminals, including Murrell! Stowe proposes that the importance of Stewart to the conventions of the hard-boiled genre are that he attempts to create a legend of himself: he writes literature alleging his exploits; that he is thus a master in self-aggrandisement and promotion. In writing himself into history, Stewart transcends the boundaries of real and literary, becoming a contentious figure of both fact and fiction. As noted by Stowe, it is clear that Stewart had hoped to capture the Zeitgeist and exploit it for his own sense of morality. Chandler's Marlowe, while not seeking to impose his sense of morality, is certainly perceived by the reader as a moral figure. A noteworthy goal of Stewart's self-promotion was that he saw himself as a defender of righteousness, and a reactionary against what he saw as moral decadence (Murrell's thieving, though interestingly, not the slavery which was an acceptable part of Southern American society in the 19th century). In *The Big Sleep*, we also see decadence as a theme, though it manifests itself in the wealthy rather than the criminally enterprising. Specifically, this decadence includes: gambling, pornography, recreational drugs and of course, murder. Marlowe becomes entangled in the decadence of the Sternwood daughters - and arguably of the social class they inhabit -, but as an observer, and perhaps, given that he attempts to protect his client, General Sternwood, a saviour of sorts. He is an observer in the sense that he doesn't act as *agent provocateur*, as per Stewart or his almost-contemporary, Dashiell Hammett's Continental Operative. In *Red Harvest*, the Continental Op, like Stewart, is seen to set parties against each other. It precisely this distance between the detective and the society he inhabits which allows him to comment on the world as he sees it, and not as an *agent provocateur* or righteous defender of morals. In *The Big Sleep*, the reader sees this decadence begin to implode on itself, culminating in the attempted murder of Marlowe himself by Carmen Sternwood. Marlowe and Rawlins, wholly fictional detectives, perhaps find themselves derived from frontiersmen like Stewart. Some of the conventions in genre fiction, while originating further back than the genre itself, thus enable the protagonist to be both distinct from and belong to society. These conventions, while allowing him to comment upon, in reality, underline his inability to effect change or impose his own form of morality. With these conventions in mind, these novels will be analysed considering location and the role of the protagonist, particularly his experience, and how these function as a commentary on society. In addition, more general themes (that is, not genre specific) concerning social class and race will be examined in relation to the texts.

1 William W. Stowe, *Hard-Boiled Virgil: Early Nineteenth-Century Beginnings of a Popular Literary Formula*, in Barbara A. Rader & Howard G. Zettler (eds.) *The Sleuth and the Scholar*, (London: Greenwood Press 1988).

Hard-Boiled Narratives and Conventions

As already mentioned, of the more notable aspects of genre fiction is its conventional approach to writing, as narratives tend to rely on repeating themes or tropes. In the case of hard-boiled detective fiction these tropes are usually evidenced in the protagonist, and to a lesser extent in place and setting. These themes focus on urban centres as hubs of corruption, usually large metropolises rather than small towns. However, and perhaps perversely, in both Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* and Hammett's *Red Harvest*, the small town is depicted as being more corrupt than the large city. Seemingly, there are some similarities between Shakespeare's plays, where the rustic setting, away from the city, is idealised as a place of joy, healing and escape. The urban environment is thus a device to bring realism and life-like authenticity, that is, represent elements of the reader's own life and experiences, and therefore provide legitimacy to the narrative. This is especially so as Chandler's and Mosley's readers are themselves mostly urbanites – in contrast to Virgil Stewart's, who occupied the frontier. Therefore, it could be suggested that the city is the new frontier in detective fiction. If we consider so-called 'Golden-Age' detective writers, for example, Agatha Christie, who uses pastoral England in her *Miss Marple* murder mysteries, hard-boiled fiction renounces these conventions as unrealistic, and indeed rightly so, otherwise rural, middle-class England would be littered with countless hapless murder victims.

With these conventions in mind, it should be considered that genre functions better as a *commentary* of society's ills, rather than a *critique*. Though a commentary may also include criticism, it is not the function of the detective to satirise society or people, at least not in the sense that they would be in, say, a Dickensian novel. This is due to the somewhat passive, observational role of the protagonist. He, being essentially the reader's looking glass into a microcosm of society, both instantly recognisable yet compressed and condensed within the conventions of the genre. The reader discovers through experience: the detective's role is largely empirical as both Marlowe and Rawlins function to create a shared experience for the reader. We, the reader, are being asked to accept their experience, and narrative, uncritically, as we are being confided in and entrusted with the truth. Thus, Marlowe and Rawlins 'tell it like it is', rather than how it should be. Unlike Stewart, the genre fiction of Mosley and Chandler is not purposely used as a vehicle to articulate a personal opinion or an in-depth analysis of a perceived injustice or inequality - though the protagonist himself may have a code of honour by which he abides. Nevertheless, these literary conventions can be exploited for commercial purposes, becoming formulaic or repetitive, and indeed genre fiction can and often does achieve a substantial 'lay' readership based on the appeal of the protagonist. The potential for 'sending a message' to a large audience exists, though it can be argued that the conventions of the fiction do not allow for prescription; *The Big Sleep* is not a handbook, but rather narration. As a matter of course, there are advantages (usually commercial) and disadvantages (restrictions that conventions place on the narrative) to writing for mass publication. In addition, the typical readership of genre fiction approaches the genre for entertainment rather than education. Inevitably, the genre is interpreted as a form of escapist fiction. For hard-boiled detective fiction to function as an effective critique of society it must

be presented in such a form as to relate to the reading public on a personal, or empirical, rather than academic level. This is true of both Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*² and Walter Mosley's *Devil In A Blue Dress*³.

Both *The Big Sleep* and *Devil In A Blue Dress* are urban novels set in Los Angeles. Walter Mosley himself was born in 1952 and raised in Los Angeles. His protagonist, Easy Rawlins, is of Mosley's father's generation, and the novel is set in the years proceeding World War Two, prior to the civil rights movement. Rawlins, however is not a native of Los Angeles, but of Texas, a Southern state with a history of historical, but not contemporary (to either Rawlins or Mosley) slavery and segregation. Rawlins has both sought to escape the poverty of the South; the war having created job opportunities for the poor, including blacks⁴, and also alter-ego and foil for black rage, his friend 'Mouse'. For Mosley, Rawlins is both a rejection of the old ways and an embrace of a new frontier – the city, notwithstanding his own knowledge and background in Los Angeles. It is also an embrace of one of the key conventions of hard-boiled fiction. Thus, as Mosley's place of birth and raising, Los Angeles provides Mosley with the setting to draw from his own personal experiences, and that of those inevitably recounted to him by his father's generation. In drawing from personal experience, Mosley is not alone. Dashiell Hammett, one of the pioneering writers of hard boiled detective fiction, utilised his experiences as a private detective for the firm Pinkertons when creating his Continental Operative. In addition, Los Angeles represents a kind of experience for the collective American readership, it is a contemporary representation of multiculturalism and racial segregation, and of its associated problems such as crime and ghettos, tension and violence. These tensions are not merely literary fiction; they manifested themselves profoundly and in actuality in the 1965 Watts and 1992 Rodney King riots. While Chandler's readers may not have been aware of such tensions, Mosley's most certainly are. Furthermore, Los Angeles is also the home of the American film industry, and all its trappings and wealth. In this respect, Los Angeles exemplifies the huge disparity in wealth between rich and poor, and to a certain extent, white and black. Though Chandler was writing before the race riots, and Mosley post (at least post Watts), Chandler's depiction of black Americans in *Farewell, My Lovely* suggests that Los Angeles was already a divided city ripe for conflict even before the Watts riots. In light of Los Angeles' sometimes turbulent history, the irony of the city's name (the Angels) cannot be lost on either author or reader, either now or then.

Experience and Writing Crime

Raymond Chandler was born in Chicago in 1888, and spent some of his formative years in England. It was there that he developed an interest in literature as he was wealthy enough to be able to spend time attending to academic work. He returned to the United States in 1912, and later, after the Second World War began working for a bank in San Francisco. Unlike

2 Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, (London: Penguin, 1993).

3 Walter Mosley, *Devil In A Blue Dress*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990).

4 Cook, Robert, *Sweet Land of Liberty?*, (London: Longman, 1998).

Mosley, Chandler came from a relatively privileged middle-class background; however, like Mosley, and perhaps inspired by Hammett, in his writing he included themes relating to his experience, or rather, his lifestyle. This is particularly so in his depiction of the hard drinking, self-employed (or perhaps unemployable; he is sacked from the District Attorney's office) detective, Marlowe: "...Chandler lost his job in the Great Depression – he was fired for drinking and absenteeism..."⁵. Chandler's Los Angeles is one set in 1938, between two of the worst events in history; the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. By the late 1930s the United States had still not recovered from depression, and many of the industrialised cities were suffering from high unemployment and developed slum districts of immigrants and unemployed. Considering Chandler's own unemployment resulting, at least in part, from economic depression, *The Big Sleep* offers little analysis concerning the employment struggles of the workforce. Instead, Chandler, through Marlowe, chooses to commentate upon the degeneracy of the wealthy and also the criminals who have profited from others' hardship. Conversely, that Marlowe, like Rawlins, is self-employed, shows Marlowe distancing himself from big business and associated corruption; that Marlowe's lack of complicity shows a principled, virtuous nature: that he is an unsung yet true champion of moral decency, not dissimilar to the narrative that Virgil Stewart creates for himself. Moving from author to narrative, an equally important event in U.S. history prior to the Great Depression was Prohibition. Prohibition saw an entirely legal enterprise – the sale of alcohol – forced almost wholly onto the black market. These restrictions on the sale of alcohol, originating in the 1920s saw the rise of a new type of gangster, the bootlegger, and for Chandler the bootlegger has the pedigree to make a 'Mr Big' style criminal. Chandler's town of birth, Chicago, saw the rise of one of the most famous bootleggers: Al Capone, and with the rise of the gangster (as exemplified by the several Mafia families on the East and West coasts of the United States) came a corresponding rise in gangland killings. Prohibition, along with associated activities such as gambling, was exploited as a nexus between criminal enterprises and big business. This illegal supply of alcohol was a readily developed supply chain in Los Angeles by the time of *The Big Sleep*. Chandler presents the kind of 'Mr Big' gangsters, exemplified by Eddie Mars, as being quasi-legitimate businessmen. By 1938: "The room had been a ballroom once and Eddie Mars had changed it only as much as his business had compelled him."⁶ However, an alternative reading of Chandler could suggest that big business and criminal activities had become inseparable, something that Marlowe remarks of every large American city⁷. Further, it could be suggested that the evolution of organised crime and Prohibition was inextricably linked with the growth of the city; that the expansion of Los Angeles provided the market for the forces of supply and demand, and criminal enterprise followed as a consequence.

Walter Mosley was a child of Los Angeles, born in 1952 to a black American father and

5 Books and Writers, Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), World Wide Web, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/rchandle.htm>. (08/12/2010).

6 Raymond Chandler, p96.

7 Books and Writers, Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), World Wide Web, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/rchandle.htm>. (08/12/2010).

a immigrant Jewish mother. He was raised in a poor area of Los Angeles called Watts, the scene of racial violence in 1965. When examining the differences in upbringing it is clear that Mosley was confronted with such personal issues that never presented themselves to Chandler: issues of race, poverty, street crime and a rising black civil rights consciousness. In comparison, Chandler was positively Bohemian. A profile of Mosley on the *Biography Resource Center* suggests that his inspiration for creating Easy Rawlins was located in the backdrop of his father's life; he (the father) had fought as an equal in the Second World War and was obviously dismayed at his second class status upon returning back to civilian life.⁸ Rawlins, like Mosley's father, is himself a war veteran, though this contribution to American society is casually disregarded by the main - white - antagonist in *Devil In A Blue Dress*. In the meeting between Rawlins, and former boxer and bartender friend Joppy, the shady Dewitt Albright listens to Joppy and remarks: "[Joppy] And he's a war hero, Mr. Albright. Easy went in with Patton. Volunteered! You know he seen him some blood." "That a fact?" Albright said. He wasn't impressed."⁹ While betraying the callousness of Albright, his flippancy demonstrates that, in Rawlins's eyes, his contribution to society will never truly be appreciated by whites. Indeed, the defining event for Mosley's realisation of his narrative and awareness is quite dissimilar to Chandler's: it is the Second World War. For Chandler, Prohibition can be seen as the birth of true organised crime in urban America, for Mosley the birth of the black civil rights movement does not come till much later. Robert Cook notes of the Second World War: "Its acceleration of a plethora of modernising forces including technological change, bureaucratic statism and urbanisation had inevitable social consequences for African Americans..."¹⁰ Of these, the urbanisation of black Americans and the continuation of racial segregation between whites and blacks are central to Mosley's narratives. Indeed, much of *Devil In A Blue Dress* creates the impression of the perennial segregation and partitioning of society, especially Rawlins's brutalisation at the hands of the Los Angeles Police. The civil rights movement in America did not gain momentum until the 1950s, and by this time, Los Angeles had already a sizeable black and Hispanic population. Some twenty years earlier, Los Angeles had a black population of less than 40,000. Some, like Easy Rawlins, had earlier moved up from the South, especially from places like Houston, Texas, and others had established themselves in the cities as a direct result of the war and the availability of jobs that the war provided. After the war, Los Angeles quickly became a multicultural, if segregated city, and this perhaps, is something that Mosley overlooks. Mosley views post-war struggles almost exclusively along racial lines; he overlooks the consequences of war and urbanisation on the wider society. Perhaps this somewhat reductive perspective of the period stems from his own background and race. In other words he chooses only to comment upon the part of society to which he has empirical knowledge: he and his father's generation belong. In this respect, Chandler's looking-glass is trained not on racial

8 Biography Resource Center, World Wide Web, <http://www.africanpubs.com/Apps/bios/0640MosleyWalter.asp>. (08/12/2010). Walter Mosley, p12.

9 Walter Mosley, p12.

10 Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty?*, (London: Longman, 1998). p71.

struggle but with wealth and organised crime, so perhaps Mosley, rather than being merely reductive, is working within the confines of the genre. Also, it should also be noted that Chandler was writing contemporary to his time, and Mosley retrospectively and with hindsight.

Capturing the Zeitgeist

As stated, the socio-economic setting of both the author and of the period in which Chandler (contemporary) and Mosley (retrospectively) were writing reflects the social issues or Zeitgeist of the time. It is also necessary to consider how the detective represents or considers these social issues. The detective is the agent or vehicle by which the reader explores the city; through him, the setting and characters are filtered and interpreted rather like a prism or looking-glass. The focus of 'our' agent is that the author endeavours to immerse his protagonist in a world that resembles that of his readers'. This is particularly true of Chandler, whose writing was largely contemporary. Chandler's image of Los Angeles is distorted like one would expect looking in a convex mirror – it reflects aspects of the reader's own experience of society that he suspects to be true: Chandler is mining people's collective concerns of organised crime; media articles on gangland activities were not uncommon during the period (especially those of Al Capone). Indeed, in the early 1930s Eliot Ness frequently invited reporters to gangland raids. Marlowe himself can be seen to personify a certain amount of voyeurism; the (usually) male reader is allowed to peer into concealed criminal spheres and see the interlinked activities of the wealthy and criminal classes. As such, Marlowe's avid reader is like a man glancing surreptitiously at the diary of his wife who he suspects of infidelity.

In contrast and while striving for authenticity, the conventions that Chandler and Mosley observe amount to a rejection of the 'Golden Age' detective fiction. Chandler finds inspiration from his English academic experience; *The Big Sleep* retains the noiresque mystery and atmosphere of Conan-Doyle yet simultaneously rejects the restoration of order and equilibrium that is characteristic of Agatha Christie's solved murder stories. Chandler's is a quest for authenticity; figures like Eddie Mars are clearly supposed to be realistic representations of masterminds of organised crime. There is no resolution; though the villain may be killed or imprisoned, the evil continues to exist. Mosley in particular tries to communicate with his readership on a more personal level. He is clearly exploiting the new sense of identity that black Americans have developed as a result of the consciousness movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Mosley wants his readers to identify with Rawlins's personal crises and feelings; this is fundamentally different to Marlowe, whom the reader does not overtly sympathise with. We, the reader, are not asked to identify with Marlowe on a personal level – he is too much of an übermensch to be a personally identifiable figure. Thus Mosley's narrative tries to be more intimate and connect with his reader; it is subjective in that he allows his protagonist to become more attached to the other characters in the story (his friend Dupree and wife Coretta). Marlowe, on the other hand, has no friends, but instead, acquaintances. Mosley's narrative has a distinctively authentic (that is, 'true to experience'),

biographical quality; perceived authenticity is crucial to his reading of the hard-boiled genre, as *Devil In A Blue Dress* utilises both a historical, post-war setting and empirical experiences (that of Mosley and his father) in conjunction with each other. Yet, it is this subjective, sympathetic quality in Easy Rawlins which makes *Devil In A Blue Dress* somewhat less of a social commentary than *The Big Sleep*. Rather than capturing the Zeitgeist Rawlins, and to a lesser extent, Marlowe, are as much exploited by that society as they are able to affect it.

Location and Writing Crime

In terms of location, Chandler and Mosley are quite descriptive of the protagonist's immediate location, and the people with which he interacts. This is important because location can have a strong class/racial identity. Marlowe remarks of the Fulwider building: "There was a tarnished and well missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat. A case of false teeth hung on the mustard-coloured wall..."¹¹ By providing detail of location, Chandler places Marlowe in a much more intimate and definable world; one that the reader may have read in the press or seen in passing. Furthermore, Chandler's descriptions of place suggest that corruption manifests itself in a way that is inherent within the fabric of place. Or rather, that the city is in a process of decay – despite Los Angeles's rapid growth through the period. Evidently, Chandler does not link growth with vitality and progress. "I leaned against a pepper tree in the parkway and waited. The thunder in the foothills was rumbling again"¹². Chandler utilises vivid imagery to create a genuine sense of atmosphere rather rely solely on his protagonist. In this way, urban decay also symbolises moral decay. Marlowe's Los Angeles creates a lasting impression upon the reader; of an ominous yet indistinct threat of violence. The seemingly relentless storms herald an unnatural lust for retribution; almost suggesting that there is a preternatural origin to the street violence. Marlowe's is clearly a city that has attracted a divine displeasure, much like the biblical city of Sodom. In contrast, whilst Marlowe's activities, and clients, are predominantly in middle class suburban Los Angeles, Rawlins explores the territory of the black working class. There are historical events that both Chandler and Mosley refer to in their writing, for example both Mosley and Chandler reference Prohibition. In *Devil In A Blue Dress* black social gatherings are focused on a former speak-easy; and though not a gangster himself, by association Rawlins becomes immersed in the gangland underworld. Marlowe, though, concerns his business with the wealthy middle class, that is, those with money and power. Rawlins's Los Angeles is symptomatic of the decadence that Chandler presents, though the focus on peripheral characters differs. For both Chandler and Mosley, being poor does not necessarily imply freedom from corruption.

11 Raymond Chandler, p19.

12 Walter Mosley, p34.

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

Concerning the virtues of the protagonist, Mosley's presentation of Rawlins, as a typical 1940s black urbanite is thus: "Life is still hard in L.A. and if you worked every day you still found yourself at the bottom"¹³. The city is not a place of refuge for the detective; Rawlins's challenge is to preserve his dignity and simply to forge an existence, whereas Marlowe must espouse his own values, lest he become like those he pursues. In *Devil In A Blue Dress*, it could be interpreted that there is no place of refuge for a black man; Rawlins fears his psychotic friend Mouse, and also persecution by Police. Additionally, Rawlins considers his house to be his only sanctuary; in an inversion of master/slave relationship, he has become the fierce and protective property owner cum husband: "I loved her and I was jealous of her and if the bank sent the country marshal to take her from me I might have come at him with a rifle rather than to give her up."¹⁴ Thus Rawlins's virtue lies in his hard work and honesty. Andrew Pepper notes that: "Despite the dangers that confront Rawlins when he moves outside the various black neighbourhoods, he remains captivated by the city's physical landscape..."¹⁵. This optimism is presented to the reader as Rawlins's optimistic sense of hope, closely linked to his ideal (to be a home owner). Pepper analyses Rawlins fear to be the threat from 'the other' (as represented by the whites in general and specifically their agents of the judicial system). Rawlins is also threatened by those who are his social peers; he describes his near fatal clash with Junior Fornay and his fear of Frank Green, all with reason. The impression Rawlins creates is that everyone is 'out to get him', his employer, the police, his friends. Like Marlowe, Rawlins is a lonely character, unable to fully identify with any one group. Possibly this reflects not only Mosley's mixed race parentage and upbringing, but also the experience of being a black man in 1940s America. Seemingly, Rawlins's crisis is one of identity; he adopts a chameleon persona as a defence mechanism, changing depending on whose company he is keeping. Rawlins' identity crisis is in part a reaction to the lifestyle of his acquaintances; he does not wish to conform to the criminal ideology of Mouse and Frank Green, yet he is proud of his blackness. This pride distances Rawlins from whites like Albright, much in the same way that Marlowe distances himself from corruption by his own clear, distinct personal values. Chandler also presents his characters vividly, if problematically, as Lee Horsley writes: "...figures like Eddie Mars and Laird Brunette do remain 'civil' and 'presentable'."¹⁶ It would seem that in his attempt to portray reality, Chandler omits to condemn 'respectable' criminals, thereby denying the reader a form of critique. Furthermore, Marlowe's selective sense of justice weakens his character, seemingly Chandler is merely concerned with chronicling reality. Where Chandler succeeds is in his powers of description that clearly focus on something that concerns a contemporary reader, and even as something acute some sixty-five years after the publication of the novel. Where

13 Walter Mosley, p20.

14 Andrew Pepper, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). p 129.

15 Raymond Chandler, p121.

16 Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). p36.

Chandler fails, perhaps, is that there is no resolution; Marlowe has no goals, ambitions or desires save to advocate his own personal integrity. At no point does the reader believe that Marlowe is a visionary or idealist like, for example, Lenin, or a philosopher like Marx. If Chandler is offering a serious critique of 1930s Los Angeles, then his outlook is quite pessimistic; those who die are often undeserving of their fate, and equally, those who prosper are befitting to their wealth.

Mosley's priorities differ considerably from Chandler, instead of the 'tell it as is' presentation of Los Angeles, *Devil In A Blue Dress* is best described as 'as seen through the eyes of a black American'. Instead of the backdrop of Prohibition and the Great Depression, we see the Second World War and the beginnings of black consciousness being prioritised. Mosley, then, being more subjective, has a rather more limited scope to comment.

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