

Review #12 : *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phUxnXGhEiI>

SYNOPSIS

Directed by John Huston in 1941, *The Maltese Falcon* reprised Dashiell Hammett's thriller. Hammett practically invented the **tough guy so deep in cynicism** nobody could hope to put anything past him. The novel, thick with plot, wasn't easy for director John Huston to untangle. Few people who cherish this film can summarize its story in a sentence or two. I'll try. San Francisco private eye **Sam Spade** (Humphrey Bogart) is pulled into the search for a fabulously valuable statue by a woman who seeks his help. First, his partner is killed, then Spade pushes through her lies to uncover connections to an effete foreigner (Peter Lorre) and a mysterious kingpin (Sydney Greenstreet). The story then unfolds like a crumpled paper.



REVIEW

But the whodunit becomes less important than how we respond to the strong screen presence of Bogart and his co-stars. That's what makes *The Maltese Falcon* a classic. We see more and appreciate more each time we watch it. The art of Huston and Bogart doesn't come across until a second or third viewing. Huston invented what the French later called “film noir” in honour of Hollywood films that took no-name stars into city streets to pit tough guys, often with a vulnerable streak, against dangerous dames. Audiences knew that when the tough guy said ‘I love you, babe’ he would be dead within a reel or two. Bogart was luckier than most noir heroes. Struggling to **maintain his own independence** – against the claims of love or his own penchant towards dishonesty – the Bogart hero can do little better than surrender, with a rueful shrug, to the irony his survival depends on.

The climax of *The Maltese Falcon* ranks with the last scene of *Casablanca*, another Bogart vehicle, in showing how the tough guy has to put himself back together after his emotions almost get the better of him. That **assertion of strength, bowed but not broken,** defines the enduring quality of Bogart onscreen. For Huston, telling this story posed a different problem. Telling it straight wasn't possible – too many twists. Huston chose to **focus on characters.** One way to appreciate Huston's choices is to LISTEN to the movie. Hear the voices. Notice how in long sequences narrating back story, Huston relies on the accents of his characters to keep us interested. Could we endure the scene in which Greenstreet explains the history of the Maltese falcon unless his clipped, somewhat prissy English accent held our attention? Also, we watch Bogart slip into drug-induced sleep while Greenstreet drones on. Has any director thought of a better way to keep us interested during a long narrative interlude? And is there a bit of wit in our watching Bogart nod off during a scene which, if told straight, would make US doze?

All of this leads to the ending, minutes of screen time in which more goes on, gesture by gesture, than a million words could summarize. Sam loves Brigid, but he won't be a sucker. The cops come in, and the **emotional colour shifts to gray.** Bars on the elevator door as Brigid descends in police custody foreshadow her fate in the last image of Huston's film. But after the film, we're left with Spade, whom we like and loathe, a man whose **sense of justice squares,** just this once, with our own, maybe. Black and white morality prevails...