Marlowe, Carmen and Vivian

An interpretation of “The Big Sleep”

by Raymond Chandler
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1 Introduction

This term paper deals with the analysis of the triangle of Philip Marlowe, Carmen Sternwood and Vivian Regan in Raymond Chandler’s hard-boiled crime fiction novel “The Big Sleep”.

At first I will shortly outline the narrative situation of the novel. Afterwards I will focus on each character and each name in more detail. The next part is the analysis of the three characters’ relations and interactions according to their appearances within the discourse. Because of the special narrative situation I will have to split it into two different angles: One part will be the relationship of Marlowe and Carmen; the other part will be that one of Marlowe and Vivian. And last but not least I will provide a more general view of the triangle.

2 The narrative situation

The whole story is told to the reader through the eyes of PI Philip Marlowe. It’s a first-person narrative that shares an episode in the life of the protagonist, Marlowe (I-as-protagonist). The focus is more on the experiencing-I and not so much on the narrating-I. The narrator is quite involved in the world of the story. He is the frame that links the events and the characters within the novel.

All information in the book is filtered through Marlowe’s perception. The reader has to rely on his report and descriptions. A particular feature of the narrative perspective within the book is that all other characters are represented through direct speech in dialogues with the narrator Marlowe. Here, the reader gets all information directly through the ears of Marlow. Additional information is provided (through his eyes) by interior monologue. So, all other character’s minds, except the narrator’s, stay inaccessible. The reader doesn’t get an immediate insight into them, but only a vague impression of their attitudes and motives in the course of the book. The interpretation of the characters completely belongs to the individual perception of the reader and not to the explanation of the author.

The narrator gives an exact and often ironic report of the incidents and his encounters with other characters. There is not much room for personal retrospection or
introspection for the protagonist often has to react to the quickness of events or actively drives the plot further on. I’m of the impression that the author, Raymond Chandler, uses different, more subtle narrative layers to display his personal attitudes and views of the world. One layer is the use of the often ironic, even cynic comments of Marlowe. Another layer shines through short, but deeper conversations with respectable characters such as General Sternwood and DA Wilde (Chandler 2005:124). The last layer is Marlowe’s description of the world around him (LA in the year 1939) and his subjective impressions (Chandler 2005:250).

3 Main characters

3.1 Philip Marlowe
In my edition of the novel there is a quite detailed description of Philip Marlowe before the story starts that attempts to look like a realistic quotation of the narrator himself about his life:

I’m a licensed private investigator and have been for quite a while. I’m a lone wolf, unmarried, getting middle-aged, and not rich. I’ve been in jail more than once and I don’t do divorce business. I like liquor and women and chess and a few other things. The cops don’t like me too well, but I know a couple I get along with. I’m a native son, born in Santa Rosa, both parents dead, no brothers or sisters, and when I get knocked off in a dark alley sometime, if it happens, as it could to anyone in my business, nobody will feel that the bottom has dropped out of his or her life. (Chandler 2005)

I’m not sure whether this introduction of the protagonist and narrator has been included in the original issue, but it’s part of my edition and the first impression the reader gets. So I’d like to deal with it. What do we get to know from this introductory paragraph? One focus lies on his being alone. One reason for that is not out of his will. He hasn’t got any family any more. So, he has no roots, no family bonds or duties to distract him from his job. The other aspect of having no wife is probably due to his deliberate choice; he takes over the role of the lonely wolf (together with its various layers of connotation).
He is a native son of Santa Rosa and therefore he is no stranger in the setting (LA, California in 1939). It’s his own territory (wolf) where he knows what to do, how to live according to the rules of society and in which he probably has a personal interest.

Although his description of himself seems to be quite direct and open there’s still room for mystery. Why has he been in jail? He admits his weaknesses (liquor, women), isn’t rich and not a young and shining hero any more.

Despite, he appears to be quite tough, because he is used to acting alone on a dangerous job. He has to make his own choices without the advice and support of others (family, partners, friends?) and, what’s even more important, he holds himself responsible for his own decisions and deeds (jail). He is a man of principles (no wife, no divorce jobs). He appears to be honest, sticking to his principles and not seeking a profitable career.

Right at the beginning, in the second chapter, this description is even complemented during his conversation with General Sternwood:

“Sure, but there’s very little to tell. I’m thirty-three years old, went to college once and can still speak English if there’s any demand for it. There isn’t much in my trade. I worked for Mr. Wilde, the District Attorney, as an investigator once. His chief investigator, a man named Bernie Oehls, called me and told me you wanted to see me. I’m unmarried because I don’t like policemen’s wives."

“And a little bit of a cynic,” the old man smiled. “You didn’t like working for Wilde?"

“I was fired. For insubordination. I test very high on insubordination, General.”

“I always did myself, sir. I’m glad to hear it. (Chandler 2005:9)

Here he creates an image of being educated (college), but modest (able to speak English). And we also get a glimpse of his sense of humour that will be a major characteristic element within the whole novel: “I’m unmarried because I don’t like policemen’s wives.” So we learn that we have to be careful not to take every utterance in a literal sense. To underline this even the author (Chandler) directly hints at this when he speaks through the General: “And a little bit of a cynic”. Now even the last one should have understood the intention.

A very important character trait is his insubordination. This implies a very strong and independent character who lives according to his own rules and who isn’t that easy to be influenced and manipulated. Not a bad feature for a PI. Here, it’s also a warning for the
General and a hint towards future trouble and suspense for the reader, but it’s approved by the General (and therefore probably by Chandler).

We also get to know that Marlowe has once been an official investigator for the DA. He hasn’t been fired because of incompetence so he must be quite a good PI. He still does have connections to the DA and although Marlowe is a lone wolf Bernie Ohls and DA Wilde can be considered perhaps as friends or at least as being well-disposed towards him.

3.2 Carmen Sternwood

Right on the second page the most mysterious character of the novel is introduced through the perception of Philip Marlowe: Carmen Sternwood.

It was a girl. She was twenty or so, small and delicately put together, but she looked durable. She wore pale blue slacks and they looked well on her. She walked as if she were floating. Her hair was a fine tawny wave cut much shorter than the current fashion of pageboy tresses curled in at the bottom. Her eyes were slate-grey, and had almost no expression when they looked at me. She came over near me and smiled with her mouth and she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin too taut lips. Her face lacked colour and didn’t look too healthy. […] Her eyes rounded. She was puzzled. She was thinking. I could see, even on that short acquaintance, that thinking was always going to be a bother to her. (Chandler 2005:2-3)

Although she seems to be a quite pretty, little (and harmless?) girl her first appearance in the book is accompanied by some hints that she shouldn’t be underestimated. Through the surface there are her predatory fangs glistening. This alludes to her being a wolf in sheep’s clothing and this fits to the image of Marlowe being a wolf, too. Here, Carmen is a potentially dangerous beast in good disguise. Marlowe seems to in a way sense that and keeps a professional distance, but at this point he underestimates her like everyone does in the course of the discourse. He even makes fun of her introducing himself being Doghouse Reilly. He degrades himself voluntarily from wolf to dog, not being aware of her dangerousness.

This view would support another possible interpretation where Marlowe can be seen as the dog sniffing his way down the trails and Carmen as the cat being the natural opponent of a dog. This fits if one thinks of her aggressive hissing noises when she is
mad and her rat-like giggling. So, Carmen would be in the role of the antagonist (beside her sister who also shares features of a promiscuous straying cat). The other impressions that will be of importance in the future are that Carmen does not look too healthy and that she is slowly thinking, perhaps a bit mentally retarded.

3.3 Vivian Regan

Vivian’s character is introduced by her father, General Sternwood, who gives a quite open description of his two daughters:

I think they go their separate and slightly divergent roads to perdition. Vivian is spoiled, exacting, smart and quite ruthless. Carmen is a child who likes to pull wings off flies. Neither of them has any moral sense than a cat. […] ‘Vivian went to good schools of the snob type and to college. Carmen went to half a dozen schools of greater and greater liberality, and ended up where she started. I presume they both had, and still have, all the usual vices. (Chandler 2005:12)

Vivian is the smarter and older one of the two sisters. She is rather rational and a tactical thinker whereas Carmen represents the emotional and impulsive component of the duo. Vivian is a gambler and likes to drown her sorrows in alcohol (not unlike Marlowe). Although she is a few years older than Carmen and has already been married three times, she hasn’t got much money of her own and is dependent on her father (or on gambling or men) in that respect. She is the oldest child of the Sternwood family and she will “inherit the throne” of her father. She already acts like being the queen of the house when Marlowe first visits her. (Chandler 2005:16-17). She is a very attractive woman and knows how to seduce men to achieve her goals. Also note the comparison of the two girls with cats in the quotation above: “Neither of them has any moral sense than a cat.” This is in contrast to Marlowe having rather wolfish or doglike character traits.
3.4 Telling names

3.4.1 Philip Marlowe alias Doghouse Reilly
The last name Marlowe relates the protagonist to another famous character of the same name in “The heart of Darkness”. This fits in respect of questions of good and evil in society which Marlowe has to encounter, too.

I think Marlowe (Chandler) chooses his mock name Doghouse to emphasize his position in society and to show the contrast towards the Sternwoods. He can be seen as a tamed wolf living in a shabby, little dog-hut on the edge of society. He deliberately lives like that in a small flat, without maintaining close relationships and without seeking for wealth or a higher position in society.

3.4.2 Sternwood
This family name is really telling when you think of the General and his ancestors. The Sternwoods are a family of firm soldiers. And the old General, although weak now, must have been a tough and strong character all through his life like a stern, old oak tree. The Sternwood family is not part of old aristocracy, but belongs to a new kind of American aristocracy, namely newly rich oil barons that have served the country as high rank soldiers for ages. The two sisters, the last representatives of the family tree, have inherited the name but they don’t prove worthy of it. They tend to be rather of “rotten blood” than of the family’s “wild blood”.

3.4.3 Carmen Sternwood
Her Christian name Carmen doesn’t fit for an innocent little girl or princess. It’s a more dangerous name connected with the famous protagonist in Bizet’s opera “Carmen”. So, this kind of name already hints to her appetite for men and that she might be more dangerous than she appears at first view.

3.4.4 Vivian Regan (formerly Sternwood)
Vivian is a Sternwood in disguise. She has been married three times and taken the last name of her husbands. Perhaps she wanted to flee from the burden of being a Sternwood, but she couldn’t escape from her destiny. Her father is too weak and so she must take over the responsibility for her younger sister. Once a Sternwood, always a Sternwood. What a tragedy.
4 Marlowe and Carmen

4.1 First encounter
(Page 2-4)
Their first encounter is like a staged one. Carmen enters through a door under the stairs of the Sternwood residence, approaches Marlowe and tries to evaluate him. She flatters him (tall, prizefighter) and tests how far she can go (falling into his lap). But Marlowe can’t be fooled and tests her intelligence instead (Doghouse Reilly). Altogether, the reader gets the first impression that Carmen is a very uncommon person. She is naïve, childish, quite unintelligent, a bit dramatic and playing with her environment. She can be seen like a little eccentric, but harmless princess. An estimation that changes during the course of the novel.

4.2 Second encounter
(Page 36-43)
The next time Marlowe meets Carmen in a totally different setting and state. Naked and totally drugged she poses for pictures on a throne-like chair in the house of a homosexual pornographer who becomes the victim of a murderer in the meantime. This totally contradicts her image of being an innocent and naïve child and the throne reinforces the princess angle. The sentence “They were mad eyes.” on page 38 already leads to the trail that her mental state might not be that healthy and taking drugs probably isn’t helpful in case of a mental disease.

Because Carmen is in a totally helpless state Marlowe takes over the role of her protector. He doesn’t misuse the situation and acts like a nobler knight than that one in the picture over the Sternwoods’ front door. It can be argued that in this situation Carmen is in a victim’s role, but I’m not that sure. At least she doesn’t seem to have been forced to go to Geiger and she must have known him and his business for a longer time (gambling debts bill).

4.3 Third encounter
(Page 69-75)
The following morning Marlowe meets Carmen in front of Geiger’s house. She obviously has some remembrance of the previous night and is looking for her photograph. She isn’t ashamed of the fact that she has been a naked model, but she
really is upset when Marlowe mentions Joe Brody and she wrongly accuses him of being Geiger’s murderer. She switches into her role of the innocent little thumb-sucking girl again and really seems to be a slow thinker, but she also reveals an impulsive, calculating and even mean side (accusing Brody of the murder). She consciously tries to outwit Marlowe when she lies about having been ill last night. There glimpses a different, darker side of her character, “a foxy glitter at the back of her eyes” (Chandler 2005:70). In addition, we encounter one of her hysterical fits and her giggling “like rats behind the wainscoting” (Chandler 2005:72 and 168) that leads to doubts of her mental sanity.

She has parked her car at the backside of the house, so she can’t be that naïve. And when she realises that Brody has got her photograph, she quickly wants to leave probably to take it off him like we will see in the next scene of her appearance.

4.4 Fourth encounter
(Page 92-97)
This chapter is quite interesting. It shows Carmen in an aggressive role for the first time. She uses her gun to get back her photographs from Brody but unlike her last meeting with Rusty Regan she doesn’t hit him. She knows how to shoot and has already shot Rusty dead before. Why doesn’t she hit her aim this time? That’s an important question and one answer might be that she doesn’t have an epileptic fit this time. So, perhaps Carmen has a kind of schizophrenic mental disease that is marked by one of her epileptic fits.

Another crucial incident is Marlowe’s reaction towards her. He tries to soothe her and obviously doesn’t take her serious. This is the beginning of a fatal misconception of both characters that leads to their central conflict. Marlowe tells her to wait for him at home and mentions his dancing girl tattoo on his thigh. That’s the reason why Carmen misunderstands him. She obviously thinks he is sexually interested in her which leads to their next catastrophic scene in Marlowe’s bedroom. Now, she sees in him the heroic knight and protector who has to be rewarded by Princess Carmen.

4.5 Fifth encounter
(Page 167-173)
This scene is the turning point of their relationship. Carmen offers herself to Marlowe, but to him it’s like an invasion into his inner sanctum. At first he tries to be polite and
moves like the knight on his chessboard but this kind of behaviour doesn’t work in case of the Sternwoods. When Carmen realises that she is being rejected her mask falls down and her ugly, mad side is revealed. Being a Sternwood means that she is proud and Marlowe’s behaviour is the ultimate insult. It’s a tragic situation. Our protagonist can’t make a right decision. In either way he has to lose this unsolvable chess game.

This encounter really shakes both characters. Carmen is hurt and leaves in a mad state and Marlowe looses the privacy of his home (his castle, his monastery, his doghouse). He doesn’t own much in life but this privacy. His flat is his last place of refuge that now has been stained by a female intruder.

4.6 Sixth encounter

(Page 234-240)

This is the climax of the whole novel and of their conflict. It’s the solution of the murder case, too. Carmen tries to shoot Marlowe like she has shot Rusty before, in the same manner. Her evil and insane side of personality is revealed here which reminds me a bit of a mixture of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” and of “Of Mice and Men”. There is the splitting of Carmen’s character into a good and an evil side and the image of a mentally retarded person that involuntarily becomes a deadly threat to society.

Afterwards, Marlowe urges Vivian to let Carmen be treated in a hospital where she can’t endanger society and where she has the chance to be cured of her mental illness. So, in my opinion poetic justice is served. Since you can’t cure mental illnesses in a jail and because Carmen probably had no control over her deeds the end of the novel is satisfying enough.

5 Marlowe and Vivian

5.1 First encounter

(Page 16-21)

Their first encounter takes place in Vivian’s room (her territory) where she receives Marlowe like a queen in her white, glistening ice palace. The whole atmosphere and Vivian’s appearance reminded me a bit of an ironic image of Princess Snow White. When Marlowe enters Mrs. Regan has draped herself on the chaise-longue (throne?) and tries to hypnotise and lure him into security by her sexual attraction. But this
doesn’t work with him. A dialogue begins that resembles a sports match (chess?) or game of power. It’s a question of domination and subordination and we already know that Marlowe doesn’t like subordination.

Vivian tries to get out information about the purpose of Marlowe’s visit and he tries to outwit her by squeezing out her secret motivation without answering her questions. In the end it’s a more or less equal match without a clear winner.

5.2 Second encounter
(Page 60-66)
This meeting is different from that before. Vivian needs the help of Marlowe in case of the blackmailing with Carmen’s nude photos. Therefore she is in a more dependent position and has to use a more decent tactic. Her whole appearance is not one of aggressive seduction but more subtle and down to earth, Robin-Hood-like (Chandler 2005:60). Although the purpose of her visit seems to be different from their last encounter (Rusty), she hasn’t given up the topic and tries to get information out of Marlowe by leading false trails, but in vain: “Eddie’s blonde wife is the lady Rusty ran away with. […] You’re the hardest guy to get anything out of.” (Chandler 2005:65)
She seems to admire Marlowe for his honest and reliable attitude that she obviously hasn’t met often in her life. She is attracted to him and offers him to call her by her first name, but Marlowe rejects her: “Thanks Mrs Regan.” (Chandler 2005:66). So they part in conflict once again.

5.3 Third encounter
(Page 148-166)
Both characters meet on neutral but familiar ground. It’s the place representing their weaknesses (liquor for Marlowe and gambling for Vivian). During this sequence their balance of power begins to tend from equality more towards Marlowe. He gets the opportunity to prove his knightly talents in saving her from Lanny’s robbery and in taking over the role of her companion from the disappointing, drunken Larry Cobb.
Marlowe meets her in a week moment where she is in desperate need of help and protection that she couldn’t find elsewhere. Her male acquaintances are either dead (Rusty) or drunk (Larry). Her father is deadly sick, her sister a lunatic murderess and to protect her family she had to give herself into the hands of the gangster Eddie Mars. No
wonder that she desperately seeks for a saviour to protect her and to solve this mess. In this situation a cold-blooded killer would perhaps be more helpful than a knight. She offers herself to Marlowe in a quite honest way this time, but like always Marlowe is the one who rejects the woman. Although he is interested in the physical benefits of women he can’t stand real intimacy. He must have had too many disappointing encounters with women during his life and is fed up now: “You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women.” (Chandler 2005:174)

5.4 Fourth encounter
(Page 241-250)
This last encounter takes place in Vivian’s room again, but in a totally different situation. Marlowe confronts Vivian with the whole truth and she finally has to surrender and can lay down her façade in front of him. What is left of her is a week and helpless woman that has to admit her failures. The whiteness of her room doesn’t have the bright and shining touch any more but it represents a worn out colour and maybe a white flag of surrender.
Now Marlowe has got the moral superiority and he is the one who makes the (more responsible) decisions for Carmen’s future. On one hand he protects Carmen from the world; on the other hand he protects the world from Carmen. He leaves the not only wild, but rotten branch of the once proud Sternwood family in disgust.

6 Conclusions
In his novel Chandler plays with various ironic references to fables, fairy tales and medieval novels.
One way of interpretation is the Sternwoods being a new sort of royal family with General Sternwood being the old and week king on his mock wheelchair throne who has lost control over his daughters, Princess Carmen and the (nearly) Queen Vivian. Marlowe slips into the role of a knight who is intended to save the family’s reputation. But he has to realise that the time for knights is over in this kind of rotten society without any innocent virgins left to be rescued any more. So he becomes the tragic hero who lives in the wrong century.
Another way of understanding the book is the two Sternwood sisters being two bored, straying cats that like playing games with an originally well-disposed dog that has lost many of his wolfish instincts due to the circumstances of his environment (Marlowe). In either way, women (mainly represented by Carmen and Vivian) and society don’t leave a very positive image in the end.

7 References

7.1 Primary sources

7.2 Secondary sources