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Crossing shadows: Bridging the voices of hard-boiled detective and noir crime fiction

Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of Voice. It attempts to articulate the nature of voice in hard-boiled detective fiction and noir crime fiction. In doing so, it examines how these narrative styles, particularly found within private eye novels, explores aspects of the subjectivity as the narrator-investigator; and, thus crossing and bridging a cynical, hard-boiled style and an alienated, reflective voice within a noir world.

Keywords: *hard-boiled detective fiction, noir fiction, voice, authenticity*

Introduction

In crime fiction, voice is an integral aspect of the narrative. While plot, characters, and setting are, of course, also instrumental in providing a sense of authenticity to the text, voice brings a sense of verisimilitude and truth to the fiction the author employs. Thus, this paper discusses the nature of voice within the tradition of the crime fiction subgenres of *noir* and hard-boiled detective literature. In doing so, it examines how voice positions the protagonist; his subjectivity as the narrator-investigator; and, the nature of the hardboiled voice within a *noir* world.

Establishing authenticity

The artistic, literary, and aesthetic movement of Modernism, during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, describes a consciousness of despair, disorder, and anarchy, through ‘the intellectual conventions of plight, alienation, and nihilism’ (Bradbury & McFarlane 1985: 41-47). Thus, in an attempt to create a realistic voice for their protagonists, and sense of realism for the reader, both hard-boiled detective and *noir* crime fiction writers employ a Modernist technique, notably interior monologue, which applies to passages of free direct discourse that, as scholar David Herman notes, ‘though stripped of quotation marks and tag phrases such as ‘she reflected’ or ‘he wondered’ can be assumed to correspond to or quote the unexpressed thoughts of a character’ (Herman 2011: 247). Similarly, critic Pericles Lewis notes that interior monologue, initially developed by writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry James and Gustave Flaubert (Lewis 2007: 158; Childs 2008: 81), attempts to describe ‘the experience of reality’ as lived by the individual (Lewis 2007: 158).

While eschewing the omniscient narrator, literary writers such as James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway *et al* tilted the balance toward what critic Ian Watt describes as a ‘realism of presentation; in that, the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it’ (Watt 1972: 215), demonstrating not necessarily how life is, but how life is experienced, and ‘what it feels like to be alive’ (Lewis 2007: 158), thus, providing a voice. Theorist H Porter Abbott articulates the notion of voice by offering the definition that ‘[v]oice in narration is a question of who it is we ‘hear’ doing the narrating’ (Abbott 2002: 64). Similarly, scholar Laurie Henry notes that ‘voice is synonymous with persona, the characteristics of speech and thought patterns of any first-person narrator’ (Henry 1995: 309). Indeed, while plot and other devices are important to a narrative, critics suggest voice is equally important. For as novelist and critic Johnny Payne argues, voice, more than any other story element, ‘seduces the reader’ (Payne 1995: 1). In considering these principles, by establishing a protagonist whom allows for an examination of his investigative methods; and, his feelings towards other characters, and personal failings – one may initially examine the hard-boiled voice and its writers.

Tough, terse and cynical: the hard-boiled voice

The tough, terse, and cynical voice is synonymous with hard-boiled detective fiction, *noir* crime fiction and *film noir*. Critic Scott Christianson notes that the use of hard-boiled language, a tough talk that is terse, colloquial and usually vulgar (Christianson 1989: 156), is a stylistic influence from the hard-boiled school of writers from the 1930s. As critic and filmmaker Paul Schrader notes, authors such as Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M Cain, Horace McCoy *et al*, ‘created the tough, cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions – romanticism with a protective shell’ (Schrader 1996: 56). These and other writers had their roots in pulp fiction, such as *Black Mask* magazine, or journalism, weaving action-based (and often violent) narratives with fast-paced dialogue, and protagonists living out a ‘narcissistic, defeatist code’ (Schrader 1996: 56). Indeed, such hard-boiled narratives that echo these qualities include *Grifter’s Game* (2004) by Lawrence Block, ‘Case of the Catalogue Clue’ (1948) by Jim Thompson, and James Lee Burke’s *The Neon Rain* (1987). Within these texts, amongst others, the first-person narratives exposes the reader to the protagonist’s thoughts, faults, desires etc, enlivening the text with a troubled or menacing undertone. For example, in Block’s *Grifter’s Game* protagonist Joe Marlin contemplates shooting a known heroin peddler:

I had to shake myself to get rid of the illusion. I had to work hard to remind myself that he wasn’t a nice old man, that the fine old house was held together with needle marks and rubbery veins, that his pretty young bride was the woman I loved. (Block 2004: 124)

In further exploring this menacing undertone, such hard-boiled narratives, do, as critic and novelist Julian Symons notes, has a tendency towards pungent language (Symons 1972: 135), which, in itself, may be deemed to be hollow, caricatured and simplistic. However, such language still does, astutely, convey a sense of a cynical, tough-talking and street-wise persona and diction, typical of the hard-boiled voice (McCann 2010: 42). In other works, however, the use of expletives as an expression of voice is less common. James Sallis’ *The Long-legged Fly* (2012) and *Die a Little* by Megan Abbott (2008), do not rely, or at least, rely less on vulgarities to heighten tension or emotive sensibilities.

In this respect, by dispensing the use of expletives, or at least a reduced number, such hard-boiled writers are able to maintain the tone and sensibility, and thus achieve the same effect.

The hard-boiled voice, as resonated with narratives concerning police detectives, private eyes, and criminal protagonists, is renowned for its use of vernacular, colloquialisms and similes. Chandler in *The Big Sleep* (1939) etc, is arguably the greatest exponent of such linguistic illustrations in the hard-boiled form. For example: '...she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and a shiny as porcelain' (3). And, while Chandler and similar authors, have illustrated their protagonists' voices with such descriptive modes, one writer has arguably augmented and nuanced the hard-boiled voice more than any other. In James Ellroy's *White Jazz* (1993), the voice of the first-person narrator takes a much harder, street-wise tone. Critic Paul Duncan, in an interview with Ellroy, noted that the writer's style had a 'rhythm and cadence of words and speech' (Duncan 2012: 68), Ellroy described his writing style in *White Jazz* (1993) as of a 'frenetic first-person fever dream' with a 'constant staccato be-bop riff style' (Duncan 2012: 68). For example: 'Dinner: club soda, pretzels. Easy eyeball work: Glenda talked, Rock sulked. The reporters ignored him – snore city' (62). In this novel, Ellroy's style of writing offers a far more stripped back and certainly less literary quality than that of Block or Chandler; in that, it demonstrates a truncated, journalistic quality – hitting the reader like machine gun fire.

As in the typical modernist novel, critic Eric Rawson observes that 'personality is conveyed more through dialogue than through action or description' (Rawson 2011: 35). In this respect, Chandler's characters, and similarly for those writers that followed, such as Ross Macdonald, often denote a laconic perceptivity or self-awareness; yet if anyone stopped talking, characters would lack meaning, and the understanding that Marlowe (and the reader) had accumulated would disappear. As Rawson notes, '[s]ilence means the end of knowing. More important perhaps, the action itself is accomplished primarily through talking' (Rawson 2011: 35). Such perceptions, usually of changing or even decaying urban environments, in many instances verge on nihilistic. Indeed, the characters who populate the hard-boiled social environment, as Ogdon observes, are included within its reality; readers recognise and authenticate its veracity as 'hardboiled language becomes a transparent transmitter of documentary evidence' (Ogdon 1992: 75).

As discussed, the hard-boiled tongue is tough, terse, colloquial, and usually vulgar (Christianson 1989: 156), with an 'unsentimental language and attitude' (Ogdon 1992: 74). However in texts such as Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), and Macdonald's *The Name is Archer* (1976) the hard-boiled narrator is also situated within a *noir* world; thus, the reader is exposed to protagonist's brooding sentiments and loner personality, as he negotiates other characters and his own sense of self.

Alienation, loneliness and dread: the *noir* voice

The addition of *noir* sentiment to the hard-boiled formula invariably evokes a sense of a sinister world, or an inevitably problematic atmosphere. As mentioned, Modernist techniques such as interior monologue, as well as themes of despair, disorder and anarchy, and as critic Lee Horsley notes, the 'use of irony, non-linear plots, subjective narration and multiple viewpoints' all help form literary *noir* (Horsley 2009: 3). Indeed, such themes, as well as 'sex and violent death' (Scaggs 2005: 110), provide, as Horsley contends, a 'natural

expression in a popular genre engaged in undermining the essentially optimistic thrust of other popular forms, such as detective and adventure stories' (Horsley 2009: 3). Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *Secret Agent* (1907) and TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) have arguably shaped literary *noir* more than any other. These texts, as Horsley observes go some way towards defining the thematic sensibilities and narrative structures of literary *noir* (Horsley 2009: 4) as found in later works by Chandler, Cornell Woolrich, Cain, Dorothy B Hughes, and Howard Browne, with their perceptions of irony, guilt, vulnerability, non-linear structure, and inconclusive endings.

Indeed, this element allows protagonists to emphasize a sense of their alienation, capturing a feeling that *he* is unable to transcend *his* world. As critic Susanna Lee observes '[s]uch is the contradiction embodied in the hard-boiled: the detective stands both within and outside the contamination of the world around him' (Lee 2003: 44-45). Thus, while works such as *The Big Sleep* (1939), and Howard Browne's *Man in the Dark* (2010) et al display those hard-boiled tropes; they also evoke a *noir* tone or mood, which in their iterations displays a personal feeling of threat, anxiety, and pessimism (Knight 1980: 154; Horsley 2009: 8). Therefore, a *noir* narrator is not the same as a hard-boiled narrator. That is, though there is a sense of suspense, anxiety and guilt (Horsley 2009: 11) prevalent in the *noir* protagonist – through his descriptions and observations as a way of presenting his uncertainty about the world; the protagonist's voice still retains the tough, cynical language and manner of hard-boiled detective fiction. This is illustrated in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934): 'I'm getting up tight now, and I've been thinking about Cora. Do you think she knows I didn't do it? After what we said in the water, you would think she would know it. But that's the awful part, when you monkey with murder' (Cain 1934: 115). Here, this writerly aspect – a conflating of subgenres, provides a blurring of generic conventions within a crime fiction spectrum (Rubin 1999: 93) – from hard-boiled to *noir*. To extrapolate, this conflation of subgenres of hard-boiled and *noir* elicits in a technique that crosses the line from hard-boiled language and vernacular into a *noir* state of psychological distress.

Though such writers retain the hard-boiled tropes, in bridging the shadows of the crime fiction spectrum, they also capture a sense of alienation, loneliness, and dread (Horsley 2009: 71) within the protagonist. In pursuing this notion further, writer Christopher Orr observes that, regardless of how the protagonist narrator and other characters perceive themselves (Orr 2000: 49; Horsley 2009: 69), they are victims of forces beyond their control. This existential position is particularly interesting within the protagonist-narrator's voice, through which feelings of emptiness, loneliness, loss (Porfirio 1996: 81) is heightened to evoke a sense of an alienated voice. Thus, the *noir* world conjures a vision of tension and ambiguity; fed by anxiety, pessimism, nihilism (Porfirio 1996: 81), crime, deceit, and victimisation (Rubin 1999: 91), violence, and ultimately death (Borde & Chaumeton 1996: 19).

The first-person narrative

Given the importance of what critic Carl Malmgren describes as the 'speaking subject' (Malmgren 2001: 106), writers such as Chandler, Cain, Ellroy et al, offer the reader a first-person narrative in their respective protagonists. In this respect, the reader is positioned to 'hear' the voice of the investigator, and 'see' the action through his eyes. The first-person narrator can present a voice of experiential depth – a voice that not only provides an epistemology of being, but also a verisimilitude of individual characterisation and language. In this

sense, by privileging the first-person narrator in hard-boiled detective and *noir* fiction, it offers a degree of ‘monological control’ (Scaggs 2009: 132) to the story that is usually thwarted from a diminished insight, or a lack of local knowledge and capability, as often demonstrated and achieved by the investigator (Willett 1992; Scaggs 2009: 132). Thus while the individuality of the private (I) eye is potent within the frame of the first-person narrative, the PI’s exercise of power through language is limited since the narrative represents the process of making meaning as a struggle (Christianson 1989: 155). This dialogical discourse is further explored through theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia – ‘another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way’ (Bakhtin 1981: 324). In this respect, a combination of existing statements or speech-genres is constructed in the text. In this sense, theorist Andrew Robinson observes that ‘[e]ach novel is constructed from a diversity of styles and voices, assembled into a structured artistic system which arranges difference in a particular way’ (Robinson 2011). Therefore, texts are built by fusing elements of writers’ voices and styles to construct the novel.

Also, a number of writers, though notably Chandler, divides his protagonist’s voice into two personae (McCann 2010: 54; Knight 1988: 81) – an argumentative style in which Marlowe verbally tackles antagonists, ‘displaying his sangfroid while forcing his opponent’s composure to crack’ (McCann 2010: 54); and – an interior monologue allowing Marlowe to describe his observations and experiences to the reader (McCann 2010: 54). Stephen Knight observes that this divided voice ‘creates a double man’ (Knight 1988: 81) and, this double identity is reflected in other ways in Chandler’s novels. Indeed, critics are frequently drawn to the symbolic connotations of the private ‘eye’ term. Critic Bran Nicol observes that the detective is a ‘private ‘I’ (who) is the independent, free individual engaged in an existential quest, or as private ‘eye’, the man who looks boldly at things most of us would not dare to’ (Nicol 2013: 11). Like Marlowe *et al.*, the use of the first-person narration makes him the ideological and narrative centre of the text; indeed, it is a centre that is fundamentally divided by his two distinct voices. As theorist Fredric Jameson notes:

[t]he narrator’s voice-over works in counterpoint to the things seen, heightening them subjectively through his own reactions to them, through the poetry his comparisons lend them, and letting them fall back again into their sordid, drab reality through the deadpan humour which disavows what it just maintained. (Jameson 1983: 141)

Thus, the first-person narration provides the protagonist a two-sided face to the reader: the experiential/ observational investigator that ascertains clues through knowledge and directly questions characters in a tough, terse manner; and, the reflective/sensitive, self-questioning loner who confides his state of being through problems in solving the case and himself with the reader.

As the reader, along with the protagonist begin to solve the case, the narrative becomes a ‘writerly’ text; in that, as theorist Roland Barthes describes, the ‘writerly’ text ‘is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’ (Barthes 1975: 4). Therefore, hard-boiled detective novels can be identified as a ‘writerly’ text, because as critic John Scaggs notes, they encourage the reader to enter into the production of meaning (Scaggs 2005: 74). Also, the investigator’s limited success is compounded by the first-person narrative of the divided private eye character, which results in a ‘multivalent text’ (Scaggs 2005: 75) that ‘undermines efforts at control and closure’ (Willet 1992). In this respect, the protagonist’s knowledge is not only derived from his

partial understanding, but also from his sense of alienation. Thus, the hard-boiled detective novel, as Scaggs again observes ‘can be identified as a writerly text, whose gaps and fissures encourage the reader to enter into the production of meaning’ (Scaggs 2005: 75). Indeed, the writerly text is plural and diffuse with an abundance of signifiers, weaving codes and fragments of codes, through which the reader derives meaning (Eagleton 2011: 119; Selden & Widdowson 1993: 134).

By constructing a first-person narrative, the author establishes a relationship between the reader and the protagonist, and thus a writerly bond that perhaps allows the reader to share the protagonist’s view. As Malmgren notes, ‘[t]his narrational situation secures the reader’s interest in the detective; first-person narration necessarily entails a degree of identification between reader and protagonist’ (Malmgren 2001: 106-107). Theorist Tzvetan Todorov suggests that the need to preserve the element of mystery/ suspense and to reinforce the link between the narrator/ protagonist and the reader is for hard-boiled-*noir* detective fiction to employ a narrative situation in which ‘the narrative coincides with the action’ (Todorov 1977: 47). Therefore in such texts, the first person is usually narrated, not recounted; and, ‘the act of enunciation is contemporaneous with the unfolding action’ (Malmgren 2001: 107). By applying this approach, the reader is as much a participant in the narrative as the narrator. And so not to spoil the element of mystery, critic John Cawelti observes that, ‘the hard-boiled detective is usually as befuddled as the reader until the end of the story’ (Cawelti 1976: 83). Therefore, the narrative ensures that everything happens in the present of the investigation, which not only adds to the narrative suspense; it also makes the reader concerned about the (ambiguous) fate of the narrating protagonist. Thus for the reader, ‘prospection takes the place of retrospection’ (Todorov 1977: 47); that is, the reader’s investment in the narrative is quite different from that in mystery fiction or classical detective fiction in which the third-person narrator is omniscient and distant from the action. To extrapolate, Todorov explains: ‘whereas curiosity drives the mystery fiction, suspense propels the detective story’ (Todorov quoted in Malmgren 2001: 107). Thus, while curiosity drives the incentive to solve the riddle, the theoretical puzzle in mystery fiction, in hard-boiled detective and *noir* crime fiction, however, the sense of suspense is generated from the protagonist’s entanglement in threatening events (Horsley 2009: 8), along with a journey into his identity.

In hard-boiled detective and *noir* crime fiction and *film noir*, the protagonist and (usually) his voice perform a crucial role – requiring identification between the reader and the protagonist, and encouraging the reader’s regard for the protagonist’s fate (Malmgren 2001: 107-108). This echoes critics Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward’s summation that ‘the most consistent aspect of *film noir*, apart from its visual style, is its protagonists’ (Silver & Ward 1992: 3), and could similarly imply that in such literary texts the creation of the protagonist is paramount. As Horsley asserts, two things should be brought into focus:

[t]he first is the representation of the protagonist’s subjectivity – his perceptions (both accurate and deluded), his state of mind, his desires, obsessions and anxieties; the second is the nature of the roles assumed by the protagonist, that is, the extent to which he functions as victim, transgressor or investigator.
(Horsley 2009: 8)

Therefore the protagonist’s subjectivity is not only determined by his (occasionally fractured) state of mind; and, his (occasionally) transgressive nature as an investigator, but also his role of victim of (occasionally his own) circumstance, and of society.

As a technique, the first-person narration also provides a *focalization* – a lens through which the reader sees what the narrator observes ‘in characters and events in the narrative’ (Abbott 2002: 66). Indeed, while much of hard-boiled detective fiction is devoted to action, more is still devoted to accounts of others. As Ogdon observes, ‘[w]hat we, as readers, ‘see’ in the hardboiled story is always filtered through the detective’s perception’ (Ogdon 1992: 74). As mentioned, the reader is positioned to ‘hear’ the voice of the protagonist, and ‘see’ the action through his eyes. Interestingly, it was *Black Mask* magazine writer and hard-boiled detective fiction pioneer Carroll John Daly who ‘emphasized his hero’s insubordinate character by making him a first-person narrator who addresses the reader in sardonic vernacular’ (McCann 2010: 45). Horsley notes that, the *noir* (and often hard-boiled) narrative frequently focuses through the mind of a confused or disingenuous character, who ‘calls into question his judgements; and, foregrounds the difficulties of interpreting a mendacious society’ (Horsley 2009: 9). Also, while McCann notes that ‘[t]he detective, who speaks the vernacular of the working-class city, is also its champion’ (McCann 2010: 47), PI protagonists such as Spade, Marlowe, Archer, etc., are presented as neither refined nor working class, but educated, and urbane. Indeed, with his urbane manner, Archer, for example is often placed between informality – associated with post-WW2 Los Angeles and streetwise toughness – and refinement its city’s upper-middle class milieu; he is a man capable of being in many spaces, but belonging to none. In this respect, writer Orson Scott Card observes, the narrator’s voice is created through his attitude and implied past, letting speech reflect his education and diction in syntax and word choice (Card 1988: 143). This is arguably achieved through a blurring of moral, legal, and social order, that the private eye moves and works. Indeed as critic Frank Krutnik notes, the private eye ‘operates as a mediator between the criminal underworld and the world of the respectable society; he can move freely between these two worlds, without really being part of either’ (Krutnik 1991: 39). Therefore, the reader is kept close to the mind of the protagonist who is immersed in the action, as well as struggling to make sense of what is happening.

Conclusion

The issue of voice may be considered to be one of the most challenging facets of a novel, and an integral aspect of the narrative. In crime fiction, the protagonist and his voice is one of distinction, particularly within hard-boiled detective fiction and *noir* subgenres.

In examining both scholarly and literary works, the element of voice not only demarcates an author from his contemporaries, but defines the writer’s protagonist within the genre canon. Though such analysis articulates how tone, diction, colloquialism and syntax, is evoked within the narrator’s world, it also illustrates how these devices are expressed within the protagonist to create a sense of authenticity. Thus, while plot, characters, and setting are also instrumental in the narrative, voice brings a sense of verisimilitude and truth to the fiction the author employs. Therefore, this paper has attempted to not only discuss the nature of voice within the hard-boiled detective and *noir* fiction subgenres, but also demonstrate how they both bridge the position of the protagonist through his subjectivity as the narrator-investigator; and, the nature of the hard-boiled voice within a *noir* world.

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