

ENG4C-A

15

**“They Can Only
Hang You Once”**

Introduction

This story fits into the “Only one among you” category. As Westlake remarks in his introduction to this section, “All forms of storytelling, whether drama or fiction, limit the multiplicity of possibilities in reality. In daily life the sources of misfortune often seem to be infinite.... In storytelling, the clutter of the world is reduced to a finite number of possibilities.” One of the main reasons why fiction attracts us is that it presents a simplified version of reality that we can easily comprehend.

This is especially important with crime fiction. Crime, as was pointed out in Unit 2, represents a breach in the social and legal order. It threatens us not only because it may directly endanger our lives and our property, but also because it makes us fear that the social order as we understand it may not exist at all. It suggests that *we may not know what is going on*. Crime fiction sets this fear at rest; it implies that, although crime exists, it can be understood. *Things do make sense*.

The way in which “Only one among you” crime fiction simplifies things is to limit the suspects to a manageable number. Often, but not always, this means putting them into some closed-off space; for example, a country house, a train, a boat, a spaceship, an ark, and so on, where nobody can enter and nobody can leave. Then, when the inevitable crime occurs, the clever detective is able to figure it all out.

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- assess ideas, issues, and information
- use evidence to support your opinions
- analyze how society is presented in the story
- analyze the author's use of language and a variety of literary techniques
- use appropriate organization and language for particular assignments
- use critical listening skills to analyze and assess the content of radio news reports
- write a news report suitable for radio broadcast
- revise your work for greater correctness and readability
- extend your vocabulary

“They Can Only Hang You Once”

by Dashiell Hammett (pp. 100–112)

This particular story is an unusual example of “Only one among you” crime stories in a couple of ways. In fact, it only gradually becomes evident what kind of a mystery this is. Hammett’s protagonist, the hardboiled Sam Spade, does not appear, at first glance, to think at all. He doesn’t sit around pondering, like Nero Wolfe—he is so quick to act that he seems to do it almost instinctively. The setting is not closed-off—there are plenty of entrances, exits, and unlocked doors, and violence seems to come from everywhere and nowhere. Yet this *is* an “Only one among you” crime story. The trick to solving the mystery is to realize this.

Now read “They Can Only Hang You Once” in your textbook.



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

38. As usual, you will begin by answering some questions to make sure that you understand the basic story. Give point-form answers, and look back at the story, if you have to.
- What is the first indication that Sam Spade is not being completely straightforward?
 - Why does Wallace Binnett come down to talk to Spade?
 - What question does Spade ask repeatedly after Molly Binnett is shot?
 - Why was Spade hired to call on Uncle Tim?
 - Who helps Ira in his plan to see his uncle secretly?
 - What is the relationship between Molly Binnett and Joyce Court?
 - What motive might Wallace have for murdering his wife?
 - What second motive does Spade suggest, but Wallace deny?

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- i) Where does the bullet enter Jarboe?
 - j) What piece of information prompts Spade to rush up the stairs after Jarboe has been shot?
 - k) What does Jarboe see when he looks through the keyhole?
 - l) How does Tim know that Spade is not on the level when he first arrives?
 - m) Why does Ira show up on the day of the murders?
 - n) Who shoots Tim in the arm?

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

Character

The reason for describing characters in detail in this story is not so much to provide suspicious characters, as to produce a social setting within which Sam Spade can function. However, there are some suspicious characters—Uncle Tim’s description of his assailant fits detective sergeant Polhaus (but this is just a joke), and the contrast between Wallace’s expression of grief over his dead wife and his later admission that they did not get along makes us suspect *him*. You will take a closer look at the nature of the social setting in this story later in the lesson. For now, take a look at the characters as they are presented, remembering that character description usually involves

- physical aspects (age, gender, weight, hair colour, and so on)
- mental aspects (intelligence, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and so on)
- moral aspects (good, bad, or mixed)
- characteristic speech patterns or actions



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)



39. Write character sketches for the following characters, making each sketch about a paragraph long.

- Sam Spade
 - Wallace Binnett
 - Ira Binnett
 - Joyce Court
 - Jarboe
 - Polhaus
 - Dundy
 - Tim Binnett
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Plot

In “Bless This House,” not much happens until the very end (except for people talking to one another), and even when something does happen, the action takes place off-stage. In contrast, there is action galore in “They Can Only Hang You Once”—three gunshots, lots of running up and down the stairs, and a knock on the head. Is there a plot? Plot, you will recall, requires a chain of cause and effect, and in this story, there does not seem to be one. Each event is unexpected, like the sudden strike of a meteorite from outer space. And yet there *is* a tight chain of causality. Spade sees it, and by the end of the story, so do we. Don’t we?

Here, briefly, are the main incidents in the story:

- a) Spade arrives and is announced.
- b) Joyce rushes down with news that Uncle Tim has done something outrageous.

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- c) A scream and a gunshot are heard—Molly has been killed.
 - d) Ira Binnett arrives.
 - e) Spade finds Jarboe at the keyhole and has a look himself.
 - f) Spade learns from Joyce that Uncle Tim had sent for Ira, which had upset her.
 - g) Spade tells Uncle Tim that Jarboe was peeping.
 - h) The doorbell rings.
 - i) Jarboe is shot, and the lights go out.
 - j) Uncle Tim is shot in the arm.
 - k) Spade runs upstairs and is hit on the head.

All the talking and the arrival of the police have been left out because the police, as usual in these stories, are ineffectual.

As previously mentioned, this is only more or less a tight chain of cause and effect. Event f), where Spade confirms that Ira has been sent for, is not really necessary, and no adequate explanation (beyond the cliché “What the butler saw”) is ever given for Jarboe’s keyhole-peeping. Everything else, though, works.



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

40. Now go through the events just listed and explain each of them in terms of cause and effect.
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Setting

The physical setting here is designed to be confusing—a big house, with several doors to the outside and several passages inside. In a slower-moving story, the writer might have made it more confusing still, with lots of complicated and irrelevant detail. Here, there are just enough details to convince us that the place is real. These are given mainly on page 103, after which there is hardly any description at all.

The social setting is also rudimentary. Beyond establishing the basic features of the main characters, as you did in Support Question 39, little is done in the story to establish relationships between them. No one seems to *like* anyone else, with the possible exception of Wallace and Joyce (and even they seem more co-conspirators than friends). Wallace and Ira do not speak to one another at all. Apart from Spade, Wallace is the only one who speaks to Uncle Tim, and he does that only once—to call him a liar. Dundy and Polhaus hardly do any better. Most of the talk is between Spade and someone else, and even that is restricted to exchanges of information.



Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

41. The question for you now is the same as in the last lesson: *Why* is the physical and social setting like this? Think about the story as a whole, and explain why this treatment of the physical and social setting is appropriate. Write a paragraph.
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Theme

You should not need to be reminded any more that the theme is the general idea behind a story; the lesson that the reader is likely to take away with him or her. What do you think might be the theme of this quietly ferocious story?



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

42. State a theme for the story (using a single sentence), and then explain how it is appropriate.
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Style

In keeping with the savagery of the story, the style is minimalist—with short, direct sentences and lots of sentence fragments. Here is Spade, for instance, taking command after Molly has been shot: “Police, emergency hospital—phone.” When sentences are not short (and a story containing nothing but short sentences would be unbearable), they are lengthened by linking short sentences with simple *ands* or *buts*. The few subordinate clauses almost all use “when.” The result is an unrelenting sequence of this, and then this, and then that:

At the end of the hallway was a rear staircase. He descended two flights and went through a pantry into the kitchen. He saw nobody. The kitchen door was shut but, when he tried it, not locked. He crossed a narrow back yard to a gate that was shut, not locked. He opened the gate. There was nobody in the narrow alley behind it.

He sighed, shut the gate, and returned to the house.

Hammett's style has been compared to Ernest Hemingway's, and their aim is similar—to strip things to the bone; to get to the fundamentals. They mistrust words as expressions of ideas; as far as possible, they use words just to denote things. No philosophical reflections or imaginings of alternate possibilities are included. What is, is.



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

43. Try to imitate this style while writing a short, short story of not more than 300 words. Obviously, there will have to be action, and the action will have to be interesting in itself, because you will not be dressing it up. Jump right into it, and get to the climax in a hurry.

Manipulating the Reader

The intention of a bare, minimalist style is to convince the reader that he or she is not being manipulated at all. Of course, this is a hoax—*every* writer is manipulative. *Which* facts are we shown, and how are they arranged? Hammett is good at subtle manipulation. For example, Polhaus is big and relaxed, Dundy small and tense. Spade is medium-sized and neither always tense nor always relaxed. He thus occupies a middle ground, and the reader is led to feel that Spade is not too much or not too little, but j-u-u-s-t right.

Also, though most of the words are neutral, some are not, with the result that those that are not jump out at you; for example, words like “satan’s,” “ghastly,” “heartly,” and, at the end of the story, “pleasantly.” These strongly connotative words make a strong impact *because* there are so few of them.

When Do You Know?

Think it over. At what point in the story *could* you know?



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

44. Identify a point in the story at which you have enough information to figure out that Uncle Tim did it all, and explain how you know.
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Radio and the Art of Listening

One of the first places where you hear about crime is on the radio. Sometimes, there is only a snippet of information; names and other details of the victims are withheld until the police have investigated or notified the next of kin. Other times, you are given the full story, with all the grim details spelled out in an in-depth report. Radio broadcast companies, like other media, are in business, and an important focus of their business is to attract listeners so that advertisers will pay to have their messages aired. As you read earlier in Unit 2, crime sells. People will tune in again and again for details about a breaking crime news story. Ultimately, what they want to hear is the complete story, and eventually, that is what they get.

Listen to some news broadcasts, paying particular attention to the reports of crimes. Listen for the language used, the tone of voice of the reporter, the facts that are emphasised, and the order in which details are presented. Try listening to different stations for reports of the same crimes. Are there differences in the way in which any of the factors just listed are presented? News reports are directed to particular audiences, in the same way

as written reports, movies, advertising, and all other media forms are.

Some of the features you may notice are the following ones.

- The language may be informal or formal, depending on the broadcaster's style. This means that it could sound conversational or it could sound instructional or speech-like.
- The tone of voice may be neutral and objective, or it may be emotional, expressing incredulity, disgust, sorrow, or even anger. This will have a manipulative effect on the listener.
- In more complete news reports, the facts are as precise as possible. Details like the characters' heights, appearance, and ages, as well as the setting, social implications, and motives are all woven into the report.
- Usually the victim is mentioned first, in a report that involves violent personal injury. In all cases, the first thing mentioned is the detail that is expected to hook the listener, so it will be shocking, exciting, emotional, valuable, or something else that people find particularly interesting.
- Sentences are varied and rather long, to make the report flow smoothly and sound interesting.
- Vocabulary is straightforward and familiar. If there are technical words, they are usually explained.



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

45. Look again at the story “The Affair of the Twisted Scarf” (pp. 239–284), which you read in Lesson 13. Examine particularly the information given in the lesson about characters, setting, and plot. Write an in-depth news report of the crime, including the fact that the suspect has been arrested. Choose whether you will use formal or informal language, and be consistent in your use of it. Try for a neutral, objective tone when describing the victim and the criminal. Include all details that make the story clear and interesting; you can add your own details, as long as they are consistent with what is in the story. Begin with a fact that will hook the listener. When you have finished writing, read your news report aloud, as a reporter would. Time yourself, and try for at least a minute of news in your report.
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Key Question



Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

15. Choose the murder case described in either “The Leopold Locked Room” or “They Can Only Hang You Once.” Write an in-depth news report of the crime, suitable to be broadcast on the radio, including the information that the suspect has been arrested. Choose whether you will use formal or informal language, and be consistent in your use of it. Try for a neutral, objective tone when describing the victim and the criminal. Include all details that make the story clear and interesting; you can add your own details, as long as they are consistent with what is in the story. Begin with a fact that will hook the listener. When you have finished writing, read your news report aloud, as a reporter would. Time yourself, and try for at least a minute of news in your report. Send in the written version of your broadcast news report. **(50 marks)**

Your broadcast news report will be marked according to the following Marking Guide.

Marking Guide (50 marks)**Style (25 marks)**

- Begins with a fact that gets the listener's attention **(3 marks)**
- Uses formal or informal language consistently **(5 marks)**
- Uses language and content appropriate to a diverse radio audience **(3 marks)**
- Presents information logically and clearly **(5 marks)**
- Maintains a neutral and objective tone when describing the victim and the criminal **(3 marks)**
- Report sounds as though it could be a radio reporter speaking **(3 marks)**
- Uses an appropriate concluding sentence to end the broadcast report **(3 marks)**

Content (25 marks)

- Details from story are presented accurately **(5 marks)**
- All relevant details from story are included **(5 marks)**
- Additional details are consistent with those in story **(5 marks)**
- Content is clear and interesting **(7 marks)**
- There is at least a minute of news in report **(3 marks)**

This is the last lesson in Unit 3. When you are finished, do the Evaluation work in your Course Journal or e-Journal for Unit 3. Follow any other instructions you have received from ILC about submitting your journal, then send it to ILC. A teacher will mark your work, and ILC will send it back to you as soon as possible.