

The Big Sleep Liu Yi Hsuan (Shirley Liu)

“The Big Sleep” is a crime novel originally published in 1939 and written by the author Raymond Chandler. Chandler decided to become a detective fiction writer at age 44 after losing his job as an oil company executive during the great depression. I admire his courage that to make such a seemingly impossible career change despite already being middle-aged at the time. His first short story, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot", was published in 1933 in Black Mask, a popular pulp magazine. His “hardboiled” writing style influenced American crime literature, bringing an important revolution to the detective genre. The big sleep even filmed as a movie.

The novel begins with a rich but very ill oil baron named General Sternwood who has two daughters. The older daughter, Vivian, has been married three times and the younger daughter, Carmen, is flirtatious and fond of wearing provocative clothing. It seems apparent that Vivian does not place any importance on her current marriage. Her husband had disappeared one month prior, but she shows a lot more concern for her sick father. Sternwood has recently received a blackmail letter that threatened his daughter Carmen, and as such he hires detective Phillip Marlowe to investigate the incident and the disappearance of Vivian’s husband. Vivian wonders why her father would hire a detective, and what he wishes to discover, seemingly not caring about whether or not her husband is still alive. Marlowe finds out that the person who blackmailed Sternwood’s family is a pornographer named Geiger who runs an illegal smut rental shop under the guise of a rare bookstore. Marlowe follows Geiger home and waits outside, when he suddenly he hears a gunshot and the sound of a woman’s screaming. After Marlowe finally breaks into the house, he sees Geiger has been shot dead and Carmen is lying naked on the floor with a camera set up in front of her.

Since Marlowe is working for Sternwood, he needs to make sure his daughter is safe. He brings Carmen back to her estate and decides to check the crime scene more clearly later on. However, when he returns to the scene, the dead body, camera and all of the naked photos had disappeared. After a lengthy series of twists and turns it is revealed that Carmen murdered Vivian's husband after trying to seduce him but being rejected by him.

Similar to the Maltese Falcon, the large number of characters in this novel made some sections hard for me to follow. While reading, it was hard for me to remember which character was which, and remember everyone's names. The crime itself had no special or alluring elements, and none of the characters had airtight alibis for the detective to unravel. Nevertheless, the novel still maintained somewhat of a sense of mystery. In my opinion, the atmosphere the author paints in this novel is much stronger than the plot itself. Marlowe's cool image and stiff way of dealing with other characters, especially the selfish sisters made for an appealing main character. However, I feel that the way Marlowe dealt with his enemies was too reckless. Instead of avoiding conflict, he always confronted enemies head-on with a tough attitude. This created a tension in the novel that gave me the impression that Marlowe was constantly in danger.