

CHANDLER'S INFERNO

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) was born in Chicago, moved to London with his mother, was educated at Dulwich College, became a British citizen, worked at the Admiralty, went back to America, enlisted, fought in France, came home, got married, became an alcoholic, lost his job and for a few years scraped a living writing stories for magazines. When he was fifty he wrote a novel about a private eye called Philip Marlowe and, in his depiction of the world Marlowe inhabited, became in the matter of both style and subject matter the only real successor there has ever been to the Italian poet, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

Dante wrote in the Florentine dialect, Chandler in the patois of the streets of Los Angeles. Both used everyday language to evoke powerful feelings and create memorable images. Neither can be easily translated into other languages. Each produced a trilogy, Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell My Lovely* and *The High Window*.

Geography – not just landscape, geography – is important for both. Each author describes geological and meteorological features which define the world his characters inhabit, a world which is subtly different from the world we are familiar with.

Midway along the journey of our life I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills.

Both write extended descriptions in which the physical becomes a powerful metaphor for the spiritual, the objective for the subjective.

I am in the third circle, in the round of rain eternal, cursed, cold, and falling heavy, unchanging beat, unchanging quality. Thick hail and dirty water mixed with snow come down in torrents through the murky air, and the earth is stinking from this soaking rain.

We drove away from Las Olindas through a series of little dank beach towns with shack-like houses built down on the sand close to the rumble of the surf and larger houses built back on the slopes behind. A yellow window shone here and there, but most of the houses were dark. A smell of kelp came in off the water and lay on the fog. The tires sang on the moist concrete of the boulevard. The world was a wet emptiness.

The unreal worlds in which the narrators find themselves are inhabited by equally unreal people whose unreality yet has something familiar about it, reminding us of people we know, even sometimes of ourselves.

... we saw a troop of souls come hurrying toward us beside the bank, and each of them looked us up and down, as some men look at other men, at night, when the moon is new. They strained their eyebrows, squinting hard at us, as an old tailor might at his needle's eye.

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 sharp little predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin too taut lips.

Feelings are described in terms of the physical sensations associated with them.

A heavy clap of thunder! I awoke from the deep sleep that drugged my mind – startled, the way one is when shaken out of sleep. I turned my rested eyes from side to side, already on my

feet and, staring hard, I tried my best to find out where I was...

I moved my head a little, carefully. It hurt, but not more than I expected. I was trussed like a turkey ready for the oven. Handcuffs held my wrists behind me and a rope went from them to my ankles...

Virgil is Dante's guide, leading him from one circle of hell to the next, showing him where to look and telling him who to talk to. Chandler is Marlowe's guide, the invisible author. Marlowe is Dante, the fictional narrator. Chandler is Virgil, the poet. Both authors have two personae.

Marlowe and Dante take us into worlds to which most people are denied access. Each benefits from a physical and moral invulnerability. Both are threatened at times by the inhabitants of their respective underworlds, but neither is in any real danger. A writer who tells his own story lets his readers give their full attention to the other characters, the sinners, the dead, and see in them a reflection of their own lives.

Each narrator is both participant and observer. Each at times finds it difficult to maintain the detachment that is required of him.

The crowds, the countless, different mutilations, had stunned my eyes and left them so confused they wanted to keep looking and to weep, but Virgil said, "What are you staring at? Why do your eyes insist on drowning there below, among those wretched, broken shades?"

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now.

I'm not saying that Chandler set out to write his own *Divine Comedy* or even that Dante was a conscious influence on his writing. Probably the only conscious influence was Erle Stanley Gardner. I'm just saying that, in middle life, drawing on the experience that is common to us all, Raymond Chandler and Dante Alighieri wrote about the same things in remarkably similar ways.

© Neil Rathmell