The Prodigal Returns



Forgive me readers, for I have sinned.

The primary directive for bloggers who wish to be well attended: Keep your content fresh. Post frequently so that your legions of followers know they will always find something new every time they check your page.

In this, I have failed. Mea maxim culpa.

But I’m back, better than ever, so fatten up a calf for me and gather round to hear my plans.

First off, you may ask yourself: How can I (the reader) trust this bounder (your inconsistent correspondent) to keep up his end of the bargain, to toil diligently so that I (the reader) might enjoy high quality distractment at my (the reader’s) beck and call. Because instant gratification is the coin of the realm, evidently.

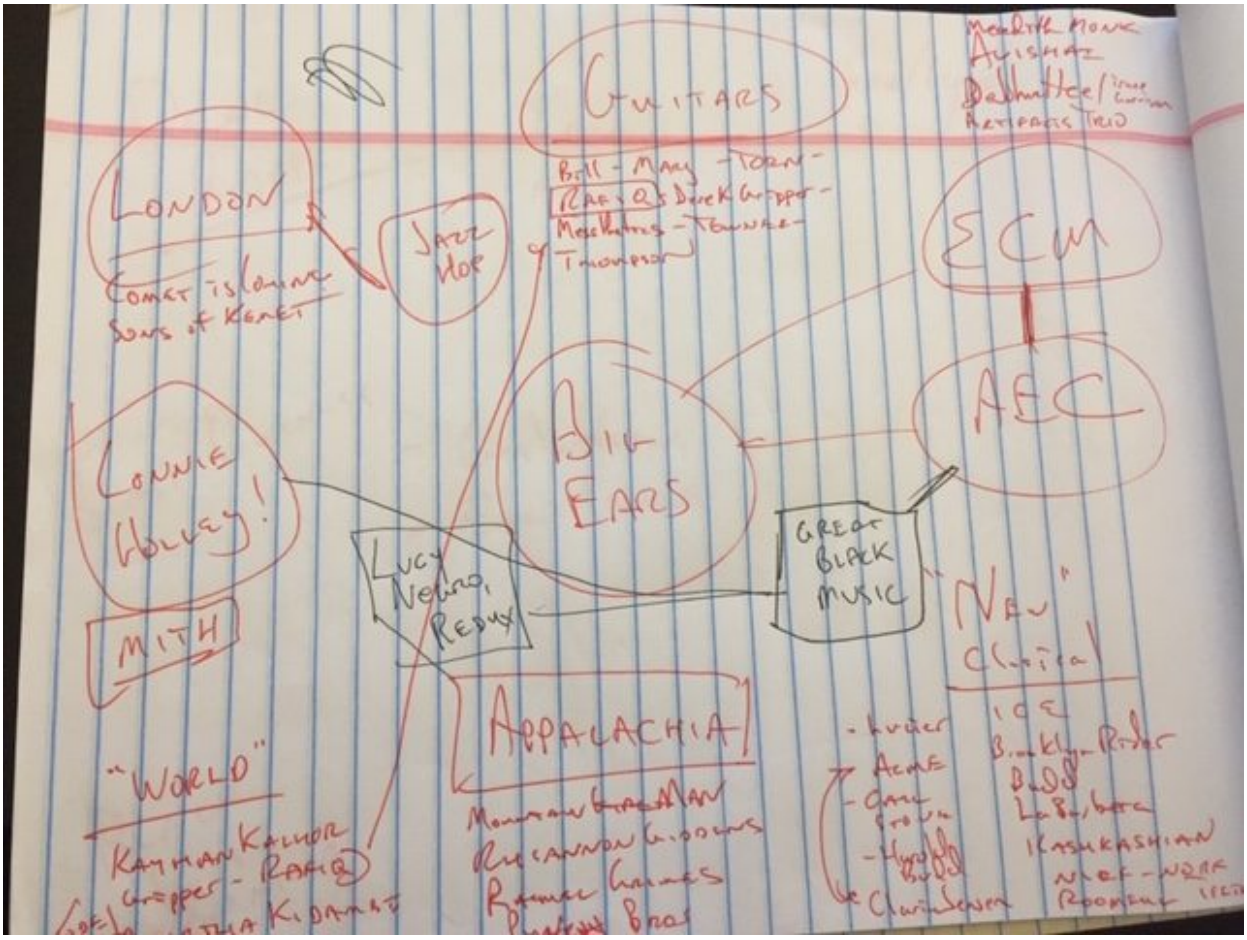
Hey, just trust me, okay?



I swear on my grandchildren…

Besides, there is so much more that I want to write about that nobody wants to pay me to write about that I might as well just start typing and putting it up here for free.

I’m working on a site re-design, because four years is plenty for the same look. But that’s just cosmetics. Expect a great deal more of the music/lit/tv/film content, starting with the annual wall-to-wall cogitations about the 2019 Big Ears Festival. The scope of this year’s festival is making me dizzy. It is not just the challenge of navigating performance schedules<fn>Saturday afternoon’s lineup in particular is a fantod-inducing embarrassment of riches, thanks very much.</fn> that trigger my most extreme option anxiety. Even the (allegedly) simple task of sorting and categorizing the proceedings — something any decent music writer has to be able to do — is an exercise in recursive Venn diagramming and cross-category perplexity that would make a lesser writer quail, if you could find one.



The tidy process of an orderly mind

So get ready for some flailing attempts at exegesis and grand-scheme syncretism. I'll get my head around this thing or collapse trying. From the 50th anniversaries of ECM records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago to the brand new ballet (yep) from Rhinnon Giddens, this festival has got my blood all het up. Don't even get me started on the guitarists on tap.

The blog will also pay more attention to the cultural highlights here in Tallahassee. It still isn't quite NYC, but significant things are happening here and there is a real scarcity of arts coverage in this town. I've noticed several significant events come and go lately with scarce a word of notice, to the point where we only find out about some of these happenings after the fact. I will do what I can to fill the gaps.

The April calendar is chock a block with world-class creative work. It also happens to be Tallahassee's most lovely time of

year: temperate climate, azaleas in bloom, and enough pollen to stun an elephant. Get your travel plans ready.

The Tallahassee Film Festival brings an expanded scope of activity April 5-7. On top of smartly curated films, there will be a Saturday night shindig at The Wilbury featuring Baltimore-based electronics wizard and DJ Dan Deacon, described as “notorious for his wild and spontaneous live shows that meld the vibe of a performance-art happening with his free-thinking permutations on decades of avant-garde music lineage.” More details on this cool fest as the schedule firms up, but it promises to be a big treat.

The weekend of April 12-14, our annual Word of South Festival is gonna be terrific (lineup is under press embargo for now, but trust me…LIT!). Aside from a ticketed concert on Friday night, everything is free. The fest sprawls across Cascades Park in everything from small tents to bigger tents to huge tents to the mainstage amphitheater. Once again, the crew at The Bitter Southerner is programming their own stage for the weekend. They were so well attended last year that they have been moved to the large stage adjacent to The Edison. It’s a smart move. More details on WoS here when the schedule is released.

(I also have a WoS feature landing in Tallahassee Magazine first week of March and a review of last year’s hoolie here on the blog.)

Piling on. Saturday, April 13 – smack dab in the middle of Word of South, finds the sonic blasts of the Nels Cline / Larry Ochs / Gerald Cleaver trio at 5th and Thomas.<fn>5&T is establishing itself as a first rank room for l*istening* to good music. Primarily a venue for touring Outlaw Country and roots rock bands, this booking happened almost by accident, but let’s just genuflect for a moment at good fortune and get our assess out to fill the joint for this one so we can convince management to bring more in this vein.</fn> Cline is one of

the most active and influential guitarists on the scene, or rather, on many scenes, maybe even every scene. Best known as the guitarist for arena rockers Wilco, Cline's curiosity ranges across every style you can imagine and his trickery with electronics and sheer souuuuuund will leave you wondering how/what the hell happened. On this gig, you get to see him up close. I pity the fool who misses this. And I pity lovers of creative music in Tallahassee if we don't fill the room for this one.

Larry Ochs, one of the founders of the Rova Saxophone Quartet, is a beast on tenor and soprano, a thoughtful composer and arranger, and restless seeker of high grade collaborators like Anthony Braxton, Kronos Quartet, John Zorn, and Sam Rivers. Drummer Gerald Cleaver is a veteran of the jazz and free jazz world, often heard alongside creative giants like Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, and Craig Tabor. People, this is a true creative music supergroup. You can listen to and order their first recording, released last month, at the Clean Feed website. <fn>You will be hearing a lot more about Clean Feed here in the coming months, too. It is an insanely prolific and high-quality record label based in Lisbon. Yowsa.</fn> Recommended track: "Shimmer Intend Spark Groove Defend."

What else can I offer to regain your trust and traffic? How about thoughts on the use of moral philosophy as a plot platform in (ostensibly, perhaps) funny television programs? Or maybe the intersection of racial discrimination, education policy, banking practices, and criminal justice reform? Maybe you just want the occasional reading recommendation, or maybe just a recipe for a good soup.

I am not running away from the political, but damn if anything I write about the ongoing atrocities does not seem outdated by new atrocities before I can even hit publish. But campaign season is nigh upon us, a full year before the first caucus or primary, so I'm sure I will find a way to make myself look foolish soon enough.

As always, I love hearing from readers. Complaints, outrage, fawning praise, whatever. Seriously, there’s no money in this here bloggy vineyard, so let me know you are out there.

Unless you aren’t. In that case, carry on.

My Favorite World #33



Amy Shumer is funny as shit. She’s bawdy and profane and smart as a damned tack. And apparently, she’s pissed off the Disney/Lucasfilm monolith with her parody photo shoot of Star Wars icons. That alone is enough to earn her solid hero status.



Hung like a goddam robot.

I wouldn't bother to post about her because she is literally everywhere in the media these days, but a friend the other day declared, "I literally have no idea who this person is." So on the off chance that one of my 7 readers is one of the 13 people in the world who aren't hip to Amy, here goes.

Her "project"<fn>As the lit/art eggheads like to say.</fn> is primarily an exploration of what it means to be a young White woman in the media/world at large, the judgements/assessments of a Woman as an object first and foremost, and then perhaps having some sort of talent or other redeeming quality that might/might not deserve consideration based on whether she is hot/not hot. Also, too, whether a woman has a right to enjoy sex/food/drink to excess and without concern for what anyone else might have to say about it. At a recent awards ceremony, she declared herself well out of fucks to give, but happy to take them as she wishes.

> *"I'm probably like 160 pounds right now and I can catch a dick whenever I want, like, that's the truth. It's not a*

problem!”

She had been introduced by AbFab’s Jennifer Saunders<fn>Another very funny woman who also ran out of spare fucks a long time ago.</fn>, who was a puddle of hysterics by the time it was all done. I’ve also watched Shumer reduce Ellen<fn>No last name necessary!</fn> to speechlessness. She takes no prisoners.

I could recommend any number of clips as exemplars of comedy-meets-art-meets-social-commentary that deserves placement in the imaginary hall of fame occupied by Lenny, Carlin, Pryor, Rock, &c.<fn>And why, oh why, mister pale patriarchal penis person is there not another woman on that list? The problem runs deep, and it damn sure ain’t the fault of funny women like Silverman, Diller, Rivers, Boozler, &c. Mea culpa.</fn> The extended piece on rape culture in a Texas high school football team is pitch perfect; jokes about rape are pretty difficult to pull off without being an asshole, and she nails it. The pastoral luncheon with Tina Fey and Patricia Arquette celebrating Julia Louis Dreyfuss’ “last fuckable day” before she is relegated to cronedom is superb. The trial of Bill Cosby is cruel and spot on. And even better, very funny.<fn>”I believe it was my mentor, the great Bill Cosby, who said, ‘Here, take this.'”</fn>

But for my money, the best thing yet in her work is this episode-length “remake” of *12 Angry Men*. The cast alone is to marvel at; it’s a sign of her clout and the respect she garners that this little show on basic cable could attract Jeff Goldblum, Dennis Quaid, Paul Giamatti,Vincent Kartheiser, Kumail Nanjiani, Chris Gethard, and John Hawkes for a single episode. But the genius is in the execution: a faux shot-by-shot remake, but instead of a murder trial, these men are to determine whether Amy is hot enough to be on television.



Well does she?

Watch it.

http://www.cc.com/full-episodes/d6vl24/inside-amy-schumer-12-angry-men-inside-amy-schumer-season-3-ep-303

My. Favorite. World.

The Atticus of My Life



In the book of love's own dreams
Where all the print is blood
Where all the pages are my days
And all my lights grow old
– Attics of My Life, by Robert Hunter

THIS POST IS FULL OF SPOILERS:
If you hate spoilers and plan to read *Go Set a Watchman*, skip this post for now.
But please, come back when you're done.

A piece of free advice:
If you have not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* recently, read it before you read
Go Set a Watchman. You'll be glad you did.

I'm one of those peculiar people who take literature too seriously. I've never doubted the power of a good writer to create worlds that are as real as our own and, at the same time, to conjure reflections and echoes of a reality we haven't quite earned yet.

Characters in books become as real to me as my friends and family, my banes and enemies. I grant that this is a sign of deficient mental health, but I hope I'm not the only one who, for example, bursts into tears when Gavroche Thénardier dies on the barricade or when Edgar Derby is executed for pocketing that damned teapot he found in the rubble. I guess most times for most people, characters remain on the page where they belong and don't much interfere in our day to day. Lucky them?

But some characters escape the page and grow larger than life, become icons. Some, like Atticus Finch, become moral exemplars and redeemers of collective wrongdoing. And if there's anything we can't stand, it's for someone to reveal the flawed man behind the myth.<fn>See also, Huxtable, Cliff.</fn>

So let's cut to the chase. Atticus Finch is a standard issue Southern gentleman – a man I recognize well in several of my Deep South forbears – a genteel fellow of manners and decency who also happens to hold racist views that are extreme enough to make the daughter who once idolized her Perfect Father literally throw up when she discovers his true nature.

It's easy to see why so many long-time Harper Lee fans are outraged.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee created *the* Great White Father, the man of infinite patience, rectitude, and sense of fairness who could redeem our (White folks, that is) sense of guilt and

discomfort over racial injustice. In *Go Set a Watchman,* she pulls the curtain back to reveal that Atticus, the Great and Powerful, is just another worn out, cranky uncle forwarding conspiracy emails and ranting about Those People. Once again, hero worship turns out to be a sucker play.

At the end of *Mockingbird*, we were given permission to tut-tut the horror of Tom Robinson's predicament and to feel joy at the progress we've made, pass the chicken please. The white trash Ewells excelled in the Judas role in this passion play, lowly creatures who took welfare and kept their kids out of school and couldn't be bothered to shift for themselves. Our own hands were never dirtied like the coarse and common Ewells. They were the evil in our midst, and if only we *better* whites could follow the shining example of Atticus Finch, the world would be our Nirvana, and hallelujah, pass the gravy, if it's not too much trouble.

Watchman's Chapter 17 is one of the most painful reading experiences I've ever suffered. Even knowing ahead of time that Lee was going to reveal a "dark side" of Atticus, I was unprepared for the casual, genteel, typically Southern bigotry coming out of his mouth. And Lee wrote this exchange with no wiggle room: Atticus is basically a disgusting racist. He laughs at Jean Louise's arguments, he taunts her for her naivete.

There's no turning away: the Great White Father is a son of a bitch. The revelation of Atticus's repellent attitudes hits as hard as if a sequel to the gospels revealed that Jesus and Judas were the same character. Everything you know is wrong.

A few days before GSAW hit the stores, I re-read *Mockingbird* for the first time in years. I was surprised at the extent to which the movie depiction replaced the book itself in my memory.<fn>Like I said: re-read TKAM before you read GSAW.</fn> *Mockingbird* the movie revolves around the trial of

Tom Robinson; everything else that happens travels in orbit around that event. In the book, the trial is critical, but the book as a whole explores the curve of small-town childhood in the South with fondness and wit. (White children, naturally.) As with so many movies/books/tv shows about race, actual black folks are pretty much in the margins.<fn>With the notable and long overdue exception of the movie *Selma,* though it too has its own issues of Great Father drama and hagiography.</fn> And this gets to one of the key problems with *Mockingbird* – on the one hand, it asks us to empathize with the 'poor, poor Negro', even while bestowing upon us a glimmering savior to make us all feel okay again. That nice (hell, impossibly perfect) Atticus washes our sins away.

While theories abound as to *Watchman's* origin, I readily accept that this was an early shot at Lee's Maycomb chronicle; after reading *Watchman*, Lee's editor told her go back and tell the tale from Young Scout's perspective. It took her two years to re-write, and the result was the structurally and stylistically superior *Mockingbird*. The *Watchman* version is clearly unfinished; it lacks the cohesion that extended editing and re-writing would have instilled.<fn>It is also unmistakably the work of Harper Lee. This is no hoax, and it sure as hell is not Capote.</fn> But I can also see how this might have become, later on, an effective sequel. In fact, it takes great effort to read this as anything other than a sequel or amplification of the original: the same characters, 15 years later on the fictional timeline, in a book published 50+ years later. It's of a piece, and it provides an essential corrective element that turns the saga into something other than a happy fairy tale, albeit one where that poor Tom Robinson &c., pass the black eyed peas.

Mockingbird gave us a feel-good fantasy. *Watchman* fills in the blanks and gives us a truth that does not encourage happy mealtime discussion.

Mockingbird is still a great novel. Lee's depictions of the rhythms and rhymes and smells of Southern life are as good as anybody else, Faulkner, O'Connor, Percy, you name your favorite. But Harper Lee is not a great novelist.<fn> For the same reason the John Kennedy Toole and Joseph Heller are not; the body of work is just not there to justify such a judgement.</fn> She spread a dusting of fiction over the people she knew growing up, the place she knew. She had a story worth telling, and perhaps even recognized that the time had come for white southerners to address race in a different way. But she had one good story, told it, and went silent. Wondering whether she could have become a great novelist is no better than a parlor game along the lines of could Wilt Chamberlain outplay Michael Jordan and such.

While *Watchman* is not a great novel by any stretch, it's probably not fair to judge it too harshly given that it never even made it to galleys until its rediscovery. But it is an important piece of work for two key reasons. First off, it sheds light on the author's struggle, the process of taking a work from idea to paper to woodshed to completion. This alone would make GSAW a worthy curiosity for literary scholars and a fun what-if exercise for *Mockingbird* devotees. But more important than this: *Watchman* uses the Freudian/Oedipal device of *kill the father* to allow Jean Louise to become an adult in her own right. And in so doing, Lee strips the mask from a false idol that has captivated her fans for several generations. And that shit comes with some heavy dues.

So first: The similarities between TKAM and GSAW are evident and plenty, with several paragraphs that describe Maycomb life appearing in both without so much as a comma's difference. But the divergences are where we get a glimpse at the evolution of a book that has been read by millions of people over the past half century.

Famously, Tom Robinson is convicted and then killed trying to escape prison; everybody knows that. But in *Watchman*, the

“trial” is dealt with in a paragraph or two, with the throwaway reference that Tom was acquitted.<fn>And a more disturbing suggestion that Atticus fought hard for Tom only to sustain the fiction of equality under the law. More later.</fn> In the retelling, the “trial” transformed from a mere trifle to the centerpiece of one of the nation’s great moral fables.

Then there’s the fiance in GSAW, Henry, who Jean Louise describes as her oldest and dearest friend, a boy who lived across the street at the same time the trial and the adventures with Jem and Dill and Boo played out. This character does not exist in *Mockingbird*. Perhaps even more revealing, Boo Radley does not exist in the *Watchman* universe, and there is no mention of Bob Ewell’s attack on Jem and Scout, the event that provides the bookend beginning/ending of the entire *Mockingbird* narrative.

And of course, there is Jean Louise’s discovery and outrage that the Father and her fiance are, if not card carriers, at the very least fellow travellers of the White Citizens Councils who made damned well and sure that Jim Crow remained the law of the land and kept Those People from getting above their station. Not to be outdone, Jean Louise reveals herself to be a states rights fanatic of the first degree, and declared herself angry and outraged that the Supreme Court would force people to do the right thing when they would certainly get around to it in their own good time and why are they rushing things so. Between the two of them, you have the complete package of racial oppression. And they’re both so damned reasonable about it.

The heart of *Watchman*‘s ultimate importance lies in that last disparity between what might be viewed as the canon of TKAM and the heresy of GSA, lies in Harper Lee’s forcing us to squarely face the myth of the Great Father, to see the truth of the complexity and the ugliness and duplicity, and to, well basically, grow the fuck up. Look, she says – you worshipped

this False Idol, you used him to absolve your sins, and you've been a dupe the whole time. And by the way, your stand-in Scout ain't all that either, what with her love of states rights and eventual acceptance of *the way things are*.<fn>To be sure, the ending of the book feels hurried and undeveloped, something I feel would have been addressed in re-write/editing. But Lee said publish it warts and all, so this is the text we have to unpack, to use a term that I hate but why not at this point, my god, the world is in tatters and the Great Father is dead. Cut me some slack.</fn>

Lee created *the* Perfect Father, the man who could resolve any argument, cure any scratch or scrape. And Gregory Peck made that character flesh. Go ahead, try to imagine any other actor of the past 100 years in that role. None of them will stick. One stupid internet poll after another has put Atticus near the top of the "perfect father" sweepstakes. People name their children after Atticus. He's a goddamned monument.

And this is exactly where *Watchman* delivers the blow that makes it an important contribution to this corner of the literary world: Lee shows us that our Savior is a fraud, tells us to wake up and be adults in our own right. Lee shows us the essential error of putting our faith in mythical heroes and asks us to stand on our own. Sure, it's tough when we discover that the pleasing fairy tales of our childhoods are fictions that cover up a more complex and disappointing set of truths. Step up and deal.

Watchman comes along at a particularly fraught moment in our 400 year struggle with the wages of America's original sin. Any pretense to having arrived at a post-racial moment withers with the first serious investigation. No matter how "good" we whites think ourselves, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on how far we've come<fn> Guilty as charged. Mea culpa.</fn> – the fact remains that we live in a segregated society, and it is primarily White America's obligation to ensure that the structural changes

necessary to allow this issue to reach resolution are squarely in our own laps. (Like it or not, Blacks have no obligation to *make things better*; we shit this bed and it's ours to clean.) Unlike TKAM, *Watchman* does not offer any bromides to make that pill any less bitter. In fact, by making Atticus' noble defense of Tom Robinson an act of expedience rather than principle, Lee drives home a disturbing and cynical point: good deeds may not quite be what they appear. Even your own, so stay awake and question, question, question.

Another heartbreaker in *Watchman:* Jean Louise pays a visit to Calpurnia, the Negro woman who essentially raised her and Jem. In TKAM, Calpurnia was for all intents the only Mother Jem and Scout knew. Now long since retired and removed from the White world, Calpurnia barely acknowledges Jean Louise, and certainly display no affection. Jean Louise is deeply hurt, but also outraged: how dare she not remember me, how dare she turn her back on how good we were to her, how we treated her *as though* she were just like family, etc. Jean Louise has not found the maturity to accept her own complicity in racial oppression. It's too much for her to take. In this, she is the perfect representation of too many "enlightened" whites on the question of race, with our plaintive whines of "can't they see how much we/I have done for them already?", largely blind to the overwhelming privilege we claim as our birthright without even recognizing it even exists.

In the end, I find myself at this: despite the fact that *Mockingbird* is likely to remain the preferred version of Lee's Maycomb tales, it is dishonest to ignore the details of *Watchman* in our overall view of what Maycomb means in its literary context. Memories are imperfect, and stories told over time shift and morph to reflect new experiences, changed attitudes, or something as simple as wish fulfillment. When Lee wrote *Watchman*, she told a story of a young woman's disillusionment about her once revered father; when she rewrote the story from the young Scout perspective, she

transformed Atticus into the perfect father, the perfect man.

This is not necessarily a contradiction. But the fuller portrait that emerges from the combined tellings – even though it is a real heartbreaker – brings us closer to an understanding that is probably more useful and true in the long run: we are none of us perfect – even/especially the people you've placed on a pedestal – and you can bet there's a dark side to your own character that needs serious work, some whining cling to privilege that we mostly don't even see. And there is no Great Father who can fix everything for us; it all depends on our own imperfect efforts. It is surely impossible to bear, to go on without our Great Father; but the alternative – giving up and throwing in the towel – is even worse.

I'm not sure Harper Lee intended anything of the sort. It may be that she truly felt the story delivered in *Mockingbird* is the "way it is", and I've no doubt many will hold to that reading. But I'll hold to this one: Harper Lee knew what was in the earlier manuscript, and she allowed its publication as a favor to us all. *Watchman* delivers a harsh but necessary message: Give up the fantasy and face the world as it is. Shit's too damned serious for anything else.

Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #2: Don Draper

and the Flitcraft Parable



MAD MEN & MALTESE FALCON SPOILER ALERT!!!

Dashiell Hammett was one hell of a writer, wrongly denigrated as a “genre” scribbler.<fn>As were/are PK Dick, Raymond Chandler, Walter Mosley, &c.</fn> His most famous work likely is *The Maltese Falcon*, which is itself probably better remembered as a great movie starring Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Sidney Greenstreet, and Mary Astor and directed by John Huston.



The stuff dreams are made of

But one of the great passages of the book never made it into the movie. It’s become known as the Flitcraft Parable, a

little story Sam Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy to pass the time while they await the arrival of the oily Joel Cairo.

Flitcraft was a successful Tacoma banker, family man, well-respected man about town doing the best things so conservatively. And one day, on his way to lunch, he passed a construction site.

> *A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn't touch him, though a piece of the sidewalk was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek. He felt like somebody has taken the lid off life and let him look at the works."*

Awakened by this near-death episode, Flitcraft kept walking<fn>"He went like that," Spade said, "like a fist when you open your hand."</fn>, leaving work behind like Don Draper fleeing a Miller Lite meeting, just chucked it all and took to the road, wandering and drifting and looking for whatever. And then he finally settled in Spokane, just a few hundred miles away from his first family where he became a successful car dealer, family man, well-respected man about town doing the best things so conservatively. And pace Don, under a new name.<fn>The name? Charles Pierce! I am slain.</fn>

> *He wasn't sorry for what he had done. It seemed reasonable enough to him. I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling."*

It's not as though he forgot the falling beam, the sense of the thin line between life and death. He just got used to it.

So about Don/Dick. All along he has told himself that the

things that came before, no matter how traumatic, don't matter, that all he needs to do is move ahead, determined. Recall when Peggy gave birth to a son that she would never know, Don told her in the hospital, "Peggy, listen to me, get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened."

It's been pretty easy to see how untrue that's been for Peggy, and how, as a life strategy, it's been pretty much disastrous for Don. Even in this final episode, he's trying that line out on Anna Draper's niece, Stephanie. But where Peggy tried so desperately to live Don's advice, Stephanie was having none of it, and she soon left our 'hero' stranded in the Esalen simulacrum to face his past alone.

And face it he did. There was no near-death experience here a la Flitcraft. Instead, it was Don/Dick coming face to face with himself, or his many selves, and seeing pretty clearly how badly he'd screwed the pooch.

> *I messed everything up. I'm not the man you think I am… I broke all my vows. I scandalized my child. I took another man's name. And made nothing of it.*

And despite it being completely true, Peggy tries to prop up her crumbled hero the way he did years earlier. With a lie.<fn>Note that Peggy's late redemption in the show followed upon her confiding in Stan about the child she gave up. Facing the truth, and not changing much as a result…but just enough to make space for her and Stan to finally get together.</fn>

And then Don, in what may have been the hardest realization of all – that Peggy had been a true and devoted friend for years, a fact he had often not appreciated in the least – Don barely gets out this last comment:

> *I only called because I realized I never said goodbye to you."*

This is not Don having a brush with death. This is a man experiencing internal annihilation. This is his Flitcraft moment.

But soon after, we see this:



Serenity Now!

Don has stayed at EsalenWorld long enough to find his bliss. His moment with the invisible man in group therapy was the falling beam. He is truly a changed man. This is perhaps the most human and humane moment we've seen from Don in the entire series.



We just want to be loved. Is that so wrong?

But like Flitcraft, he'll be back to the same old same thing soon enough.

There's been some Internet squabbling about what the quick cut from blissful Don to this Coke ad meant. My take is that Don truly *has* changed, that he has had an insight into his nature and the ways he's fucked everything up, and that he is on his way to forgiving and accepting himself in a way he never has before, and resolving to do better from here on. *And that his experience sitting cross-legged on the ocean cliffs has given him the insight he needed to create one of the most legendary advertisements ever.* And please note: I do not view his little grin as a moment where he cynically realizes that he can convert this moment of personal growth into a great ad. At that moment, he's just grooving with the moment. And later, when he appropriates that genuine moment for an inherently *inauthentic* commercial moment, he likely has no inkling of the inherent cynicism of the conversion. It's just who he is.<fn>Refer to the parable of the monkey and the scorpion

crossing the river. Nature!</fn>

So what?

One of the ongoing themes of *Mad Men* has revolved around the question of "Can people ever change?" And I think the show has come squarely down on the same answer Hammett offered in the Flitcraft parable: Absolutely. Sort of.

I'd go with this. As with Flitcraft, Don experienced a true, honest, gut-wrencher of a life-altering experience, and I'm willing to accept that he has changed, maybe even for the better; maybe not. And that, like Flitcraft, he gets used to the after-effects of his epiphany, and slowly resumes the life he knows: ad man, probably re-married somewhere near where he once lived, subtly altered, somehow, but still the same Don/Dick as ever. The only difference now is that he is willing to admit – to himself, to others – his failings, and to remember them. And rather than deny the past – the identity theft, the affairs, &c. – he acknowledges it and accepts it as part of himself, and then gradually gets used to the beams not falling any more.

Because I think that's how it works for most of us.<fn>I accept that there are people who radically alter their lives and habits and everything about themselves, either as a response to experience or as an act of pure will. If you are one of these, I suspect you are one in a (b)(m)illion. The rest of us muddle ahead as best we can.</fn> We experience these *moments*, these transformative events, and swear that we will never forget the lesson learned, the way we feel, the glimpse of truth. And we mean it, absolutely, but over time, the comfortable rhythms resume, and we are still pretty much who we were before.

Changed? Yeah, you bet, just as everything we experience makes an impression on our psychology, our exchange with and understanding of our world. But are we any different? I'm not

so sure.

To borrow from another Bogart moment, I’m not sure any of this blathering amounts to a hill of beans in this crazy world. I believe that the stories we read in books and on the screen and stage and on the electric picture radio box matter because, at best, they reflect something back our way that helps us understand ourselves more clearly, or maybe to understand other people differently. That our effort to *read* the stories tills fertile ground for that urge we (some of us!) have to know ourselves better, and to, perhaps, find a way to incrementally change over time, perhaps even for the better.

My thought? Mistrust the epiphany! It’s too grand. But the little glimmers of a-ha? Gather them like a squirrel gathers nuts.

Or not. Not for nothing, after Spade relates the Flitcraft story, femme fatale and murderess Brigid is utterly unimpressed. “How perfectly fascinating,” she says, eager to turn the conversation back to her favorite subject: herself.

Some people just don’t do self-reflection. And sometimes, I envy them. But not often.