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.