



THE LONG GOODBYE AND THE THREE SHELLS

(An essay about Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye*)

by Alfred Carol

Résumé

The first time Marlowe meets him, Terry Lennox is in bad shape. He has just divorced Sylvia - a rich woman whom he had married because of her money. He is becoming a drunk with no resources - a lost dog - as his ex-wife says.

Six month later Terry and Sylvia Lennox are married again; he has plenty of money and seems reconciled with life. In this period Marlowe meets Terry several times in a bar where they use to drink gimlets. He gets fond of Terry Lennox.

The new marriage lasts only for a few month though, since Sylvia gets horribly murdered. Terry Lennox, feeling he is in a jam and that the murder will be hung on him, asks Marlowe for help in order to get away to Mexico.

Once in Mexico, Lennox, apparently tracked by the police, commits suicide and leaves a written confession about the murder of his wife.

However, Marlowe smells something odd in the way the facts turn out - he would never believe Terry is a murderer - and keeps stubbornly investigating. Menendez, a gangster, appears, insisting Marlowe quit the case. Menendez, another tough guy named Randy Starr and Terry Lennox were once during the war in a fox-hole, when a mortar shell plopped into the middle but didn't go off immediately. Terry, then, took the shell out of the hole and, while saving the life of the two others, got himself injured in the face when the shell, at last, went off. Terry was finally taken by the "krauts", who took care of him and made him half a new face.

Menendez tells how some years later, when they found Terry again, there was something wrong with his mind that caused him to lead a disturbed sort of life.

From then on, another line develops in the story: Marlowe gets acquainted with the Wades - a troubled couple living in the rich neighborhood of Sylvia's family. Eileen Wade is a very beautiful young woman married to a successful writer; she wants, in fact, to hire Marlowe to help her husband who is drawn into a dangerous drunkenness. Marlowe, not willingly, gets involved in the Wades' problems. The latter, he discovers, had been in a more or less close touch with the Lennoxes.

Marlowe is not fully shielded against Eileen's sex appeal; at one moment he kisses her "hard on the lips" and she "doesn't fight him, doesn't respond either".

Another day, hard pressed by Marlowe's questions, Eileen admits that while a girl she loved a man who died in the war - although the body was never found: "We were very much in love - the wild, mysterious, improbable kind of love that never comes but once" - she describes it.

Also we come to know that this old lover had the same initials (P.M.) as Marlowe; no doubt that in a certain way, and under appropriate circumstances, she takes Marlowe for her lover.

That is certainly what happens the night when, almost naked, in a state of half hallucination, she offers herself to Marlowe, who "was as erotic as an stallion".

As things go on, Marlowe discovers that Terry Lennox was previously known as Paul Marston, and had worn a British army badge. Furthermore, Menendez - the mobster - under heavy stress, completes the picture of Terry Lennox, explaining the commando raid was made by a British outfit in Norway in November, 1942.

Soon after Roger Wade dies in a presumably faked suicide. Marlowe, however, gets evidence against Eileen Wade. It turns out that her true name is Eileen Victoria Simpsell, and that under this name she married Paul Marston in August 1942 - but Paul Marston is also a faked name. In a dramatic meeting Eileen surrenders: of course Paul Marston and Terry Lennox were the same person, and she had seen Paul under his new aspect, but only once; the day after, Paul/Terry disappeared, and later, Sylvia divorced him.

From this moment on she understood they were lost to each other, "it was not quite the same face", "he was married to a whore", in the end, "he was less than nothing" she concludes.

So, when they married again, she decided to kill Sylvia Lennox, because she had led Paul into degradation. Later she killed Roger, her husband, because he was also a Sylvia's lover and he had witnessed the murder.

Discovered, Eileen in turn commits suicide. The case is not totally closed, though; the Terry Lennox line is still open. Marlowe keeps making inquiries, until one morning when an elegant Suramericano visits him:

"Señor Marlowe?" he asks.

"Vengo de parte del Señor Starr de las Vegas, - Habla Usted español?"

The Mexican - Señor Maioranos says the card - a dark haired man, with knife scars both sides of his face, goes through a progressive transformation under the flow of Marlowe's questions; in the end, he turns out to be a new Terry Lennox, with his face reworked by Mexican surgeons.

He had seen Eileen kill Sylvia but it would have been "tough to turn a woman in for a murder - even if she never meant much to you". Lennox appears pretty cynical about the effects of his faked suicide - the murder of Roger; so much, that, when he says "We were pretty good friends once", Marlowe answers bitterly "were we? I forget, that was two other fellows, seems to me". He adds later, "You wouldn't have came at all if I hadn't smoked you out"; to end up, Marlowe says "Terry, you are not here any more. You are long gone. - So long, Señor Maioranos".

I wanted to tell the story of Terry Lennox above, giving the facts in the same order Marlowe delivers them. Of course, the perceptive reader will have noticed how the story has been curtailed, cutting down on the details and characters not pertaining to the main stream. So it is, with most of Roger Wade's problems and with many other lesser characters that stuff the story.

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The story, in chronological order

The next step is to put these facts - Terry Lennox's story - in chronological order, and try to see what comes out of it:

The first time we learn of Terry Lennox is when he is in London during World War II. He has enlisted in a British commando outfit, a tough military unit made of volunteers. He is already having an affair with Eileen Sampsell. He seems nice and tender to her - she remembers him as one of "the kind and gentle ones that get killed". They are very much in love. He marries her in August 1942, under the false name of Paul Marston.

On November 1942 Terry goes for a Commando Operation to a Norwegian island. There one side of his face is smashed by a delayed-action mortar shell, in an heroic action where he saves the life of a couple of tough gamblers. The Germans take him prisoner, and, despite Hitler's orders about killing Commandos, they keep him alive; even better, they repair his damaged face with plastic surgery, in such a skillful way, that only some scars are left.

Terry never goes back to Eileen at the end of the war. He is in New York for a moment - already drinking and leading a disturbed life.

About 1952, he meets Sylvia in Los Angeles and he marries her for her money. Sylvia is a bitchy woman who wants Terry to observe the formal norms of society. She, nevertheless, keeps on having intimate relations with lots of men.

In the meantime - after the war - Eileen, having given up any hope of finding Terry alive, marries Roger Wade - a wealthy news writer.

By chance, the Lennoxes and the Wades come to live in the same rich neighborhood of Los Angeles - Idle Valley - and one day they meet at a party. Eileen and Terry recognize each other but they don't talk. Yet, Eileen - who is still secretly in love with him - undergoes a painful deception.

The next day Terry runs - he leaves his house, falls into drunkenness and gets divorced from Sylvia. It is at this moment - when he is very unhappy - that he makes friends with Marlowe.

Then, after a while, with no other solution, Terry marries Sylvia again, and they start up again the sort of wicked relation they used to have in the past.

Roger Wade happens to be one of Sylvia's uncounted lovers. Eileen suspects her husband, and one night, she surprises them in Sylvia's guest house, far back from the main house. She shoots Sylvia dead and beats her face to a pulp with a statuette.

So, Terry, knowing who the murderer is, feels that he could not avoid the charge of murder without exposing Eileen. So, he goes away to Mexico with Marlowe's help.

In Mexico, with the collaboration of his crooked friends - the ones he had saved in Norway - he organizes a simulated suicide. Free of danger, Terry Endeavours then to forge for him a new Mexican identity by means of plastic surgery - once again - and makes the necessary arrangements in order to become el Señor Maioranos.

Parallel to that, Eileen, while approaching Marlowe, prepares a scene to get rid of her husband. She expects to make his murder look like a suicide.

She actually kills her husband, but Marlowe discovers the plot and exposes her. She has no way out left except to kill herself.

Terry, smoked out by Marlowe's further investigations, comes back - under the personality of Señor Maioranos - to discover his identity before him.

But Marlowe is now disappointed. He can not acknowledge his old feelings for Terry any more. He dismisses him in a sad last goodbye.

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Impersonations

We may now look at the story in a new - and final - way. Let us focus our view on Terry Lennox and try to trace his personality throughout the novel.

In his first apparition he is:

- Paul Marston, a young English man;
- gentle, nice, and kind;
- very much in love with a tender young girl - Eileen - whom he marries.

But also a volunteer in a commando unit where "they don't take you if you are a piece of fluff", and when the occasion arrives, he carries out an heroic action full of physical courage.

After the end of the war, we get a new picture of Terry. He has gone through Nazi hospitals and concentration camps:

- He has "half a new face", white hair;
- He is an American, his name now is Terry Lennox;
- He behaves like a drunkard - he looks like a bum;
- He doesn't love Eileen any more, - he is married to Sylvia, a whore.

Still, there is some kindness left that makes Marlowe love him. Eileen - in contrast - can not stand the vision of her old love in his actual shape.

Nevertheless - once again - when he gets in a difficult situation, he finds the means and the skills in order to get rid of the danger.

Finally, in his last apparition, Terry:

- has his face reworked by plastic surgery, black hair;
- he's a good looking Mexican, el Señor Maioranos - he speaks Spanish with no accent!
- he has money and good clothes;
- he's elegant and polite.

He looks tough and cynical, he dismisses Eileen's love. Marlowe is disquieted by Terry's new countenance. "You are a moral defeatist" - he says to him, in a last attempt to size his personality. Anyway, he is deceived. He would not see Terry any more.

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The three shells

We have gone together, through a process of unpeeling the Chandler's original narrative, and we have found what looks like a set of three shells, one under the other. It is as if each one of the shells had been wrought with a different picture of the same story. As usual in this kind of device we can not look at the innermost picture without discovering and somehow "working over" the more external ones.

With the view now we have of Chandler's narrative - with the materials accumulated, with the work thus done - we are able to consider Poe's theories on writing - his Philosophy of Composition - in relation to the **Long Goodbye**. We may even go beyond Poe's explicit doctrine and investigate correlations on deeper levels - in the kernel of the two works.

It will be useful to summarize - for the readers not familiar with Poe's theories - the principles of his Philosophy of composition:

- Conceive a single effect
- Unity of effect
- Organize all your literary resources for this effect.

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1st Shell: A detective story

The first shell is a rather conventional detective story: At the beginning a woman gets murdered. A detective undertakes the task of finding the murderer. He discovers the mystery and it turns out that the murderer is not the main suspect.

If, according to Poe, we try to identify the effect, we have our choice in the critics commentaries: "terrific", "tough", "tense", "lively", "thrilling", "hard boiled".

Of all that we can choose, "tough thrilling" is the best adapted definition for Chandler's effects in this novel; "Tough" is the urban setting - Los Angeles in the middle of the century - "Tough" are the characters: Gangsters, hoodlums, gamblers, crooked policemen, bums, drunkards, corrupted doctors; and "tough" are the situations - Marlowe worked over by a nazi-like policeman, a chief of police worked over in turn in cold blood, by mobsters. Chandler uses a mixture of Los Angeles filthy underground types and upper class people as Poe uses Gothic ambiances and extra-sensitive characters: the former as a ground for tough thrilling effect, the latter as envelope for his horror. The oppressive atmosphere - typical of Chandler - is complemented by his rather unusual references to what he calls the system: "Big money is big power and big power gets used wrong. It's the system. Maybe it's the best we can get, but still ain't any Ivory soap deal", his opinions about cops " The cops, they never tell you why they are doing anything. That way you don't find out they don't know themselves" and American democracy described by a millionaire "We live in what is called democracy, rule by the majority of the people. A fine ideal if it could be made to work. The people elect but the party machines nominate, and the party machines to be effective must spend a great deal of money. Somebody has to give it to them, and that somebody whether it be an individual, a financial group, a trade union or what have you, expect some consideration in return."

However, going further into functional parallels between Poe and Chandler we should notice how the previous considerations along with dialogues of an extreme concision - questions and answers fly with the sharpness of a series of smashes in a tennis game - contributes to a sentiment of disquiet in the reader. Poe does this by his painstaking descriptions of incredible rooms or houses or whatever enclosed spaces (Usher, the room of Rowena in "Ligeia", The cask of amontillado, etc.) he placed his characters in.

To finish, let's say that - in Chandler - the thrill also comes from the structure of the narrative: flash-backs, suspense, overlapping points of view and everything that gets the reader confused, not knowing exactly where he is, or what is going to happen next.

I hope at this point, as I conclude this part of the analysis, I have made you realize that, even on the surface of the external shell, there are some original devices attached to the basic detective story of the "Long Goodbye"

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2nd Shell: A romantic love story

"Chandler wrote like a slumming angel and invested the sun-blinded streets of Los Angeles with a romantic presence" said Ross McDonald. Little attention has been paid to the romantic aspect in Chandler's novels. Yet, in the chronological résumé the elements of a romantic love story show up without the shadow of a doubt: Soon after

their marriage, two lovers are separated by the war. The girl keeps waiting with a secret hope, but her lover lets her down - he sells himself to a rich whore - and when they meet again, there is but one thing for her to do: kill herself and her old lover's corrupted partner.

Everything is there for a romantic plot: exceptional situations, uncontrolled love, exaggerated subjectivity, extraordinary hazards. Of course, she - Eileen - is the romantic heroine, living on the expectation of a revival of an ancient love, while he forgets her and fails to meet her expectations. This is not an unknown pattern to the amateurs of romantic literature. It is common in N. Hawthorne, specially noticeable in his chef-d'oeuvre "Rapaccini's daughter". As for Poe, many of his tales were constructed under the form of a romantic love story: Morella, Ligeia, Eleonora, etc.

It is not a coincidence if writers who wrote for effect rely, in fact, on romantic stories. Romantic stories deal with rather abstract or symbolic elements; characters define themselves by moral issues related to other characters - fidelity and faithfulness are the main issues of that sort. Psychological analysis is not a concern of the romantic writer, much less the influence of the social surroundings upon the characters' behavior. It is clear that romanticism does not have a didactic end as far as social issues are concerned. Instead, Romantic writers concentrate on elaborating - with literary devices - the effects related to the symbols they deal with.

We suggest that this way of reasoning could be generally represented by the following scheme:

Effect----->Romantic Literature---->Moral issues
then come back in the other direction,
Didactics <---Realism<-----Psychological analysis

Even though - as we have seen - Chandler describes a highly realistic ambiance, the main characters - Eileen, Terry - don't belong to it. Their motivations are not money or power - as they are for the other characters - but rather love and fidelity. Los Angeles is for them a great landscape where they go in and out, where they eventually live; it is a stage where they play a part. Yet, their true personality lies far beyond that, embedded in a love story that develops out of real time and real places.

The Terry-Eileen relationship is, as we said, a classic love story. However, hidden in the folds of the novel I dare to discover a more subtle love story involving Terry and Marlowe. Let's give here only a couple of hints and further develop this aspect later:

"You bought a lot of me, Terry, for a smile and a nod and a wave of a hand and a few quick drinks in a quiet bar. It was nice while it lasted" says Marlowe in the last scene, and for Terry "There was suddenly a glint of tears in his eyes"; which look very much like love talking and love acting - a typical "scène d'amour".

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3rd Shell: An inquest for identity

"He was the empty shell of the man I loved" says Eileen; and Marlowe at the end: "It's just that you are not here any more, you are long gone". Terry is never what he is expected to be. Then the question arises: Who is Terry Lennox?. This question is the next to the last step of the present analysis. Marlowe runs after the answer to this question through all the novel. He comes up with the several impersonations we have already listed. Nothing is fixed in Terry: black and white hairs, the face worked on

again and again by surgeons; loving Eileen then not loving her; American, British, Mexican and at the end - not mentioned before - he confesses to have really be born in Montreal - but, who knows? A drunkard, a tough Commando, a delicate friend, and so on, and so on. There is no easy way to make a synthesis of all these contradictory characteristics. We have to recognize that, even though Marlowe discovers the murderer, he fails in his main quest. Terry Lennox remains for him an elusive ghost.

"Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me?", "Why should I doubt it" - E. A. Poe: Ligeia -

The question of identity is the kernel of many of Poe's works. It's the question of borders between existing things, starting with human beings - Ligeia, Morella - but extending also to animals - The black cat - and objects - The Fall of the House of Usher -, that haunts many Poe's tales. Some times it is as though beings that usually are separate entities started merging at a given moment, other times one personality splits into several (William Wilson).

In the case of Chandler's Lennox we have to go one step further and ask a new question: Why is Marlowe so interested in Terry Lennox till the end? Here many readers might feel I am going to walk on dangerous ground. Yet, I think it legitimate to consider Lennox a distorted mirror reflecting Marlowe's own image, and in this case Marlowe could be pursuing - trying to find - his own personality (it would not be difficult for the readers to find similarities between Marlowe and Lennox by themselves). That in turn will explain why Marlowe is so interested in going to the end of his personal inquest, and then is so sad about the results.

The unfinished theory of the Terry-Marlowe love story, also finds a satisfactory solution: Since, if my guess is true, Marlowe is in fact - through Lennox - in love with a part of himself; he conforms to a human rule according to which every love involves an important quantity of selfishness.

The conclusion can now be drawn: As the novel is written in first person, Marlowe is Chandler. The writer is doing what so many writers have been doing before him, embarking a quest for his own personality - and for this reason the novel has a troubling intimate touch - But he fails!

"The character of my beloved, made his way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown" E. A. Poe: Ligeia.

THE END

Sarrià 15 de Maig del 1987
revised 7-5-90