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1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com

The Maltese Falcon, Itâ??s What Dreams Are Made Of

Description

Reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the annual TCM 31 Days of Oscar.

The Maltese Falcon (1941), directed by John Houston, tells the story of hard-boiled detective, Sam Spade, hired for a missing person case. When his partner is murdered, the stakes are raised. What unfolds is a tale of Spade, his partnerâ??s wife (Gladys George), a stunningly beautiful liar (Mary Astor), two police detectives, and three eccentric criminals. In what could consider an homage to Alfred Hitchcock, Huston uses a McGuffin. In addition, the film is shot by cinematographer, Arthur Edeson, with impeccable attention to detail. The film is based on a novel by Dashiell Hammett. What really makes *The Maltese Falcon* are the characters. All the actors seem to embody their respective characters with an attitude. In retrospect, American society was emerging from the Depression. Men are hardened and society is full of greed. And, as *The Maltese Falcon* shows, murder is not out of the question.

Interestingly, *The Maltese Falcon* was John Hustonâ??s first shot at directing. The film allowed Huston the opportunity to continue making films for the next forty years with the same distinctive style. Bogart would take his performance as Sam Spade and reprise it several times over. The role also elevated Bogart to a starring leading man. Additionally, the film introduced Sydney Greenstreet, the Fat Man, Mr. Gutman. Greenstreet would go on top make several more films with Peter Lorre, including *Casablanca* starring Bogart and Lauren Bacall. *The Maltese Falcon* was nominated for three Oscars; Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Writing, Screenplay.

Some film historians argue *The Maltese Falcon* marks the arrival of film noir. There is a criminal element. The music creates suspense. The use of heavy shadows and low-key lighting define it further. Costuming (Orry Kelly) is befitting with the use of overcoats and fedoras. Undoubtedly, the most telling characteristic is the mise-en-scen. Additionally, when the detectives visit Spade for the first-time, both detectives leave their coats and hats on. Edeson catches the sergeant in a terrific Rembrandt shot as they question Spade about the murder of his partner, Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan). Film noir was staring back into the camera lens.

Both Huston and Hammett are credited with writing the screenplay. The dialogue makes Spade a tough, cynical, and hard character. Much like the unforgettable line from Lauren Bacallâ??s character (â??You know how to whistle, donâ??t you? You just put your lips together and blow,â?• in *To Have and Have Not (1944)*, *The Maltese Falcon* delivers several. Most cinephiles go verbatim with Spadeâ??s opening response to the beautiful liar, Brigid Oâ??Shaunessy, pleading with Spade to help her:

> â??*You wonâ??t need much of anybodyâ??s help. Youâ??re good. Youâ??re very good. Itâ??s chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get in your voice when you say things like â??Be generous, Mr. Spade.â?*•

Spadeâ??s ending response is considered classic as well:

â??Well, if you get a good break, youâ??ll be out [of prison] in twenty years and you can come back to me then. I hope they donâ??t hang you, precious, by that sweet neck. The chances are youâ??ll get off with life. If youâ??re a good girl, youâ??ll be out in twenty years. Iâ??ll be waiting for you. If they hang you, Iâ??ll always remember you.â?•

and, just before the elevator bars close across Oâ??Shaunessyâ??s face, foreshadowing a long prison sentence, the police sergeant asks Spade what the falcon is â??for.â?• Spade responds,

> *â??Itâ??s the stuff dreams are made of.â?•*

A telling ending. Huston had been a writer at Warner Bros, before directing *The Maltese Falcon*. The studio wanted a happy ending. Huston argued against it. There is a lot to unpack in the one hour and forty-minute film. Yes, the characters are an eyeful. And the plot has more than a few twists. Pay attention, itâ??s worth it. Highly recommended.

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Author
hollywoodglee