"Those" magazines were pulp magazines. Named for the untrimmed, rough, wood-pulp paper on which they were printed, pulp magazines were unambiguously "trash," cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read. In their heyday in the 1920s, '30s and '40s, hundreds of pulp titles crowded newsstands, their garish covers competing for the attention of their 10 million regular readers. Although the covers most often featured stylized, brightly colored paintings of scantily clad women and violent men, these seven-by-ten-inch magazines were remarkably unassuming on the inside. Column after column of uncorrected, densely packed print greeted the reader, punctuated only by an occasional pen-and-ink line drawing and a few pages of ads clustered at the front and back. Between 1896 and 1953, a reader could expect to pay from five to twenty-five cents for roughly 130 pages of stories, a great deal of fiction for the money.

The pulps were direct descendants of nineteenth-century dime novels, cheaply produced fiction published by Beadle & Adams, Street & Smith, and other companies that targeted the urban working classes between the 1840s and the 1890s. A few of these titles endured until World War I. The first pulp magazine was Frank Munsey's Argosy, an all-fiction weekly periodical that competed with dime novels for an adult, male audience. When changes in postal regulations made it prohibitively expensive to distribute dime novels through the mail, many of the largest publishers simply repackaged their cheap fiction as pulp magazines, continuing to feature favorite series characters such as Nick Carter and Buffalo Bill. Street & Smith, the largest dime-novel publisher, switched over to pulp format in 1915. The pulp-magazine business boomed between the wars, driven by falling costs and rising literacy levels. Well into the twentieth century, pulp magazines adhered to nineteenth-century publishing practices, eschewing the heavy use of advertising and relying on cheap production costs and newsstand sales to stay in business.

The magazines that our first-time Black Mask reader preferred — those printed on white or "good" paper — were "respectable" magazines such as The Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, and Cosmopolitan. These mass-market magazines, printed on the "slick" paper necessary for high-quality reproduction of images, featured short fiction, articles on a variety of general-interest topics, handsome illustrations, and glossy ads for consumer products. Their high production costs were offset by advertising revenues that made possible relatively modest cover prices.
On Authorship: The Hard-Boiled Writer as Fiction Factory

Pulp fiction earned so little respect largely because the pulps operated with a different notion of authorship from the liberal model prevailing in more "literary" circles. Pulp writers were paid from one to five cents a word for the prose they generated at astonishing rates—an average of 3,000 to 5,000 words per day, although the stars did twice as much.8 Walter Gibson, writing as Maxwell Grant, churned out two 40,000-word novels a month for Street & Smith's pulp The Shadow.9 "You had to keep them coming all the time . . . otherwise you'd starve," claimed veteran pulp writer Richard Sale.10 Pulp writers had little to say about the aesthetics of their fiction, but they reckoned with pride their long hours, speed, and productivity.

Modernist writers of the time operated on the lone artist/creator model, preoccupied with the place of the individual talent in literary tradition.11 Pulp writers, however, were less artists than manufacturers, paid for making a product much as factory workers were.12 "I am a fiction factory," Erle Stanley Gardner wrote to Joseph Thompson Shaw when the latter took over the editorial helm of Black Mask in 1926.13 Gardner was the picture of cooperation with his pulp editors. Explaining that he thought the function of an author was to write fiction that helped sell magazines, he was willing to do endless revisions to get the "merchandise" to his "wholesaler's" specifications.14 Change an ending? Fine. Need to cut? Don't even bother to consult him. Don't like the atmosphere? Send it back with instructions for a rewrite.15 "Let me know what you want and I'll try to manufacture something right to order," he told an editor at Argosy, a Black Mask competitor.16 Gardner's diaries are refreshingly free of the writerly angst one would expect from a more self-consciously literary author, but at the bottom of each day's page he recorded the number of words he'd produced and his total pay.17

Most pulp writers also lacked the elite university training of more "literary" writers, though some pulp-magazine editors and a few writers were graduates of prestigious colleges.18 Editors often saw the pulps as entry-level jobs in the publishing industry—a way to prove themselves before moving on to more lucrative positions with book publishers or mass-market magazines. Those who made their living writing for the pulps, however—a core of several hundred writers responsible for a disproportionately large percentage of the output—did not have this kind
of education. Frank Gruber, a pulp writer, recalled that few of his colleagues had college degrees at all, much less the majors in English or journalism common among writers for mass-market magazines.  

Moreover, the names of authors in the pulps were often owned by the magazine, with many writers using the same name or a single writer having several pseudonyms. Steve Fisher's stories appeared in Street & Smith's Clues and The Shadow under the names Steve Fisher, Stephen Gould, Grant Lane, and William Bogart. If several stories by an author appeared in a single issue, one or more usually appeared under a pen name. In some cases a lone writer wrote an entire issue, using a different name for each story.  

Clearly authorship had a different meaning in the pulps than it did in the slicks or in book publishing. Whereas "respectable" authors were paid for writing a story—a literary work—pulp authors were paid for the quantity of words they produced. Whereas more self-consciously literary writers thought of their work as creative self-expression, pulp writers often did not get or take credit for their work at all. Writing "serious" fiction required broad reading in Western classics; writing pulp fiction required no more education than that of the average man on the street. While slick-paper fiction was framed as unique, creative utterance, pulp fiction was merely a commodity. Recognizing that their notion of authorship was distinct, pulp writers had their own professional organization—the American Fiction Guild—which offered a newsletter with marketing tips and bi-weekly networking lunches in New York to anyone who had sold five stories to pulp magazines.  

Pulp writers focused on the labor of writing rather than on genius or inspiration when asked to discuss their work in Black Mask's writers' column. "I wonder how many writers have reached the conclusion that authorship is made up of 90% desire and tenacity, 10% imagination and 0% genius?" wrote one. Another confessed: "I've long ago lost the twin foolish ideas that fiction is done by inspiration and that it isn't work." The authors' columns were full of the painful labor that had produced the text: "nail chewing, anxious pacing, endless redrafting, talking to oneself." Stories were not aesthetic objects in hard-boiled writing culture, but craft work whose links to human labor remained in the forefront. H. P. Lovecraft summed it up: "Frankly the whole thing is hard work."  

Even the advertisements in Black Mask stressed this view of literary and artistic creation. Ads offering training in journalism or drawing emphasized that no special "gift," "talent," or "genius" was necessary. Most of the work in either field, the ads asserted, was done by relative unknowns whose skills were acquired through practice rather than inborn. Black Mask, then, made no distinction between cultural production and any other kind of production, between the realms of art and life. In other words, hard-boiled writing culture refused the distinction that Pierre Bourdieu argues is at the center of the bourgeois worldview. One writer summed up the popular ethos characteristic of hard-boiled writers in the Black Mask column, "Our Readers' Private Corner": "How do I work at my fiction generally? Simply go at it every morning like any man at his work."  

Pulp Audiences: Those Who Move Their Lips When They Read  

Another reason the pulps commanded so little respect was that their readers were widely held to be socially and economically marginal. They were working-class, young, and poorly educated; many were immigrants. Although Harold Hersey, a publisher of pulps, claimed that his readers came from all walks of life, he conceded that the majority were probably office or factory girls, soldiers, sailors, miners, dockworkers, ranchers, and others who worked with their hands. One survey by Popular Publications found that the typical reader of the company's pulps was "a young, married man in a manual job who had limited resources and lived in an industrial town." Hersey reported that the largest volume of sales was in the Midwest.  

Research from the University of Chicago library school in the 1930s confirms this reading pattern. William S. Gray and Ruth Munroe found that 55 percent of the pulp-magazine audience had only a grade school education, 29 percent had a high-school education, 7 percent had some college, and 9 percent had college degrees. According to Douglas Waples's statistics, detective and adventure magazines were read roughly ten times more often by residents of a working-class Chicago neighborhood than by middle-class residents of a St. Louis suburb. In fact, contemporary cultural commentators lamented that workers read little besides pulp magazines.  

A number of pulp magazines between the wars formalized their appeal to working men and women by sporting what amounted to union labels. Street & Smith's The Shadow: A Detective Magazine prominently featured the statement "This magazine produced entirely by union
The Hard-Boiled Writer and the Literary Marketplace

Chapter One

"labor" on its front cover in the early '30s, reassuring workers that their hard-earned cents would not be used to employ scabs. The title page of Clayton's Clues went even further, pleading that its stories had been "published under conditions approved by the Authors' League of America," that the magazines were "manufactured in Union shops by American workmen," and that "each newsseller and agent is insured a fair profit."14 Clayton's bid for consumer goodwill invoked an unstable class alliance—the "producing classes"—that included not only craft workers, laborers, and machine operators but also small-business men, clerks, professionals, and farmers.15

Harold Hersey referred to his pulp readership as "juvenile anywhere from sixteen to sixty," and young readers were widely held to be a significant part of the pulp's audience. Moreover, the workers, immigrants, and poorly educated grown-ups who read the pulps were easily made into metaphoric children by the librarians and journalists who passed judgment on their reading tastes. Pulp publishers repeatedly used such words as "clean" and "wholesome" to describe their fiction, a defense against the ubiquitous charge that the pulps were violent, sensational, and immoral. Editors reported feeling a great deal of moral responsibility for their young readers, and one went so far as to ask Erle Stanley Gardner to change the ending of a story so as not to corrupt Black Mask's adolescent readers.16

Pulp magazines did, in fact, attract readers from other social strata. Black Mask, eager to prove that not all of its readers were socially and economically marginal, published letters from doctors, lawyers, professors, and businessmen. Joseph Thompson Shaw, the editor of Black Mask, distinguished his "regular letter writing readers" from what he called some "darned big men around town"—bankers, professionals, important businessmen—whose approval of Black Mask's stories meant a great deal more to him. Erle Stanley Gardner wrote Shaw about every upscale reader he ran across—a doctor who gave Black Mask to patients who needed cheering up, a "big New York businessman" and his cronies at the golf club.17 Black Mask was much more preoccupied with "class" readers than its competitors ever were, probably because of its position as the "aristocrat of the detective field,"18 the most selective of the mystery pulp.

The stigma attached to reading pulp magazines in educated circles could be formidable, however.19 Harold Hersey thought that college men and women did not read pulp magazines, although they might have enjoyed reading them in childhood. "Societification" had set in by the college years, and most "would not be caught dead" with anything as "lowbrow" as a pulp.20 Many of the high-class readers of pulp magazines whom Erle Stanley Gardner occasionally ran across were ashamed of their tastes. They "confessed" to being readers of Black Mask, and admitted that they were often so embarrassed about asking for it at the newsstand that they whispered their request.21

The other format in which hard-boiled detective stories sold well was the paperback, which appeared on the scene in 1939 with the launching of Pocket Books.22 The paperback cost twenty-five cents, little more than a pulp magazine; targeted many of the same readers; and largely replaced the pulps when their market folded in the years after World War II. A 1941 survey of 40,000 readers by Pocket Books confirmed that buyers of paperbacks sounded remarkably like the buyers of pulp magazines. "Locomotive engineers, musicians, mechanics, salesmen, clerks, waitresses, writers, editors, schoolteachers, ranchers, and farmers" were buying two to twenty times more books than they had formerly bought, because Pocket's cheap editions made them affordable.23 Paperbacks closely resembled pulp magazines in other ways. Most readers purchased paperbacks where they purchased their pulp magazines—at newsstands, drugstores, train stations, and bus depots—rather than in bookstores, where regular book-trade customers preferred to shop. Most paperbacks were distributed by periodical distributors, bypassing traditional book-distribution channels entirely.24 Like fiction magazines, paperbacks did not get reviewed in newspapers. Moreover, paperbacks were scandalous for the same reasons pulp magazines were. One historian describes paperbacks as "little more than second-rate trash. Literary flotsam. Schlock turned out to appease a glutonomus mass appetite for sex and sensationalism."25

The pulp-publishing business and the early world of paperbacks overlapped considerably. Many paperback-publishing houses, particularly those specializing in mysteries (Dell, Avon, Popular Library), were started by men who had learned how to sell cheap fiction in the pulp-magazine business.26 Street & Smith owned Chelsea House, a publisher of twenty-five-cent paperback originals. Chelsea House advertised heavily in all the Street & Smith pulps, informing readers that their favorite authors from Detectives Story, Love Story, and Western Story wrote paperbacks, too.

Sometimes the hard-boiled detective fiction in pulp magazines and the hard-boiled fiction in paperbacks were the same fiction. Many hard-
boiled detective novels were minimally edited reprints of serials from pulp magazines. Faves of Raymond Chandler's novels will have a disturbing sense of deja vu when they read his pulp fiction, since the characters, the plots, and whole pages of dialogue in the novels were cannibalized from the pulp fiction he had published in Black Mask and Detective Fiction Weekly. After publishing his first novels, he republished unedited collections of his magazine fiction in book form. Readers of hard-boiled detective stories in pulp magazines or paperbacks included those who were not regular book-trade customers. Perhaps the best argument for an economically and socially marginal audience is the dearth of data available. Mass-market magazines during this period did a great deal of market research about middle-class consumers. That these widely practiced techniques were not applied to pulp magazine audiences suggests that publishers did not believe their incomes were large enough to make them attractive targets for national brand advertising.

Hard-boiled fiction, written by hack writers paid piece rates, may have had particular appeal for working-class readers, whose own worldviews were determined in part by the daily grind of production work. The social situation and personal history of an author profoundly shapes his or her writing, and hard-boiled writers were no exception. The pride in hard work, speed, and productivity that is called for by a life pounding the typewriter for a few cents a word leaves traces in hard-boiled detective stories—traces that readers with comparable experiences and values would have found deeply resonant.46 Because writers' lives and readers' lives were in some ways homogenous, there was a good symbolic fit between the attitudes and values of the white working men who read the pulps and the pulp-fiction forms they appropriated to express and reinforce their worldviews.

A Literature for He-Men

Not only was pulp fiction given what Michael Denning calls "mechanic accents" by its hack writer and marginalized audience, it was aimed emphatically at men. Because of the close collaboration between mass-market magazine publishers and national-brand advertisers, most slicks targeted white, middle-class women as purchasing agents for their families.47 Frank Cruber explained why he disliked slick magazines' stories: "Most of them were terribly effeminate...and I was more at home with the cities, masculine type of story."48 Similarly, Raymond Chandler recalled his discovery of pulp fiction. "Wandering up and down the Pacific Coast in an automobile, I began to read pulp magazines, because they were cheap enough to throw away and because I never had any taste at any time for the kind of thing which is known as women's magazines."49

This characterization of pulps for men and slicks for women is not quite accurate. Some mass-market magazines, most notably The Saturday Evening Post, did target male readers. Moreover, though the vast majority of pulp titles were action and adventure magazines aimed at men, every major pulp publisher had at least one romance pulp for women. The circulations of women's pulps usually topped all the others, so male readers of pulp fiction probably did not outnumber female readers.50 Specialization in the pulp market occurred gradually. The first pulp magazines featured all kinds of fiction, but by the heyday in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, there were about 200 highly specialized pulp titles, dedicated to detective fiction, pirates, boxing, war, football, Westerns, aviation, science fiction, and romance, among other subjects. Pulps were niche-marketed by gender, age, and other demographic characteristics. H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan toyed with the idea of starting a Negro pulp in the 1920s before founding Black Mask, but decided that there was not enough money in the black community to support one.51 A June 1930 trade bulletin that Street & Smith distributed to its newsdealers explained which pulp magazines went with which audience. Detective Story was intended for "men in all walks of life": Zip-North targeted "the up-and-coming young man"; Wild West Weekly was "a young chap's magazine."52 Gender was clearly the most important demographic category: Romances were for women; the countless adventure pulps were for men. Even the catholically named Argosy All-Story assumed a male audience. In the late 1920s it welcomed "stories of nearly any type" as long as they had "strong masculine appeal." "Slushy romances" were, of course, out of the question.53

By the late 1930s, more than fifty detective magazines figured in the mix of the roughly 200 pulps in general circulation. Warner Publications' Black Mask, with a peak circulation of 103,000 in 1930, was the elite of the tough-guy fiction pulps.54 Black Mask mirrored the product specialization taking place in the pulps.55 In the early years, it did not publish detective fiction exclusively, much less only tough-guy detective fiction. Although it began in 1920 with the subtitle "An Illustrated Magazine of Detective, Mystery, Adventure, Romance and Spiritualism," it rapidly
focused on more masculine genres. By 1926 it featured Westerns, detective stories, and general adventure, and by 1927 it was subtitled "The He-Man's Magazine." Westerns figured prominently throughout the 1920s, with cowboy covers outnumbering detective covers in some years. In 1932 Black Mask became a detective magazine. Editorial statements during this period echoed the increasing masculinization of the subtitles. Phil Cody, the second editor of Black Mask, presided over the shift from genteel mysteries to tougher stuff, most notably the work of Dashiell Hammett. In a 1926 editorial, Cody told his readers why circulation was continuing to climb—because "Black Mask gives its readers more real, honest-to-jasper, he-man stuff... than any other magazine." 104 "He-man" is an important term, notable for its redundancy. First, the need for a modifier suggests that "man" no longer signified unambiguous masculinity on its own. Second, it implies the existence of a troublesome category of male people—"she-men"—whose biological sex and performed gender were fundamentally odd. This troublesome figure—the male homosexual—litters the pages of hard-boiled fiction between the wars. In addition, Cody's redundant emphasis on the authenticity of this masculine fare—it is both "real" and "honest"—suggests an undercurrent of anxiety about the integrity of manliness during this period.

Joseph Thompson Shaw, the editor at the helm while Black Mask consolidated its reputation for featuring the best tough-guy mysteries around, published an editorial in 1933 in which he described the ideal Black Mask reader: "He is vigorous-minded, hard... responsive to the thrill of danger, the stirring exhilaration of clean, swift, hard action... [He] knows the song of a bullet. The soft, slithering hiss of a swift-thrown knife, the feel of hard flint, the call of courage." 105 The phallic imagery with which this ideal reader is described makes clear that the reading experience is sexualized.

To the modern reader, the copy in Black Mask does seem anxiously overdone. Black Mask regularly informed readers about the many exploits of its writers as soldiers, airmen, police officers, and outdoorsmen. Offering further evidence that its writers were not she-men, one "Behind the Mask" column listed all the Black Mask writers over six feet tall, a column that greatly irritated the five-foot-eight Erle Stanley Gardner. 106 Black Mask dressed its female editors in the drag of first initials. The first editor, F. M. Osborne, reportedly used sex initials in order "to project a masculine image," because the magazine was targeting men. 107 Fanny Ellsworth, editor of Ranch Romance, a more profitable pulp also owned by Warner, used her initials on the Black Mask masthead after she replaced Joseph Thompson Shaw as editor in 1936. Ellsworth's editorship was an industry scandal. "A shock ran through the publishing world," Frank Grober commented. "A woman at the helm of Black Mask." 108 Grober maintained that Ellsworth did her job well, but commented that "you would have thought she would be more at home with a magazine like Vogue or Harper's." 109

Indeed, Ellsworth felt that the hard-boiled brand of fiction was far too limiting, and she sought to include "a more humanistic" type of story in Black Mask. That female editors were a scandal at Black Mask is noteworthy, because numerous other major detective pulps, which had less investment in the hard-boiled variant, were edited by women, and nobody in the industry seemed particularly bothered. Street & Smith's Detective Story was edited in the 1930s by Daisy Bacon, who also edited Love Story. In the 1940s it was edited by Ruby Miller. Both were listed by their full names on the title page.

Women were also writing hard-boiled stories during this period, although their heroes were usually men and they often wrote under male pseudonyms. 110 Black Mask published several female writers, notably Erika Zastrow and Katherine Brocklebank, while Shaw was editor (1926–1936). However, women writers were seldom featured in interviews or blurbs for the next month's edition, as their male colleagues were. Even at Street & Smith's less hard-boiled Detective Story Magazine, women were more likely to be writing departments such as "What Handwriting Reveals" or filler than to be writing fiction. 111

The women who read Black Mask seem little better accommodated than the women who edited or wrote for it. Roughly a fifth to a quarter of the names listed as Black Mask contest winners or runners-up in the 1930s and '40s belonged to women, yet the existence of these readers was always treated as an anomaly. Most letters from women had headlines that identified them: "From the Ladies," or "A more woman." 112 Moreover, these readers devoted a great many words to apologizing for or explaining their presence in this masculine space. "Is it permissible for a mere woman to express a few comments?" asked one by way of an introduction. "Although I suppose the Black Mask is supposed to be more of a man's magazine, I assure you we women like an occasional thrill in our reading matter also." 113 Another female reader
was even more hesitant about speaking up in this world of tough-talking men: "Although this is not my first letter to Black Mark, being a woman, I hated to express my opinion." 78

"Feminine" material fared little better. Shaw spent the late 1920s in hot pursuit of someone to write stories about a female detective. After receiving a number of letters from readers praising one of Erle Stanley Gardner's stories, Shaw decided that Gardner was hit--man--the one with the necessary "feminine touch." The experiment left Shaw sounding decidedly squeamish, however. "I do not want too much femininity," he told Gardner's agent, "rather a masculine treatment of a female character." In Shaw's image of the work, Gardner's regular detective Ed Jenkins would be joined by a young female detective who enters the story as his enemy but warms to him as he chivalrously rescues her again and again. Shaw hoped that this would provide "a touch of feminine interest that would not let down our he-mat readers and would at the same time bring in a swarm of new lovers of both genders." A female detective, then, could penetrate the covers of Black Mark, but only as an incompetent, nearly indistinguishable from the other vulnerable women in need of rescue by a hard-boiled hero. (Gardner declined the assignment, but he did suggest that Black Mark contact Nell Martin, a female pulp writer who might be willing to take on the job.) 79

In 1934, Shaw's editorial strategy for getting the perennially unprofitable Black Mark into the black was to add likable characters, "glamour," and "a touch of romantic appeal" to the he-male regular offerings. An exchange of letters on the topic between Shaw and Gardner ended with Shaw's defensive statement that "This magazine is by no means going to be feminine," and a promise to review his own letters to see what had given Gardner this impression. 80

Black Mark's all-male character was a key part of its appeal. The pulp publisher Harold Hotsey explained it this way: "One is not afflicted in the fiction magazines with an infinite variety of copy relating to female complaints and perplexities. 81 Detectives, Westerns, and adventure pulps were woman-free zones, zones rapidly disappearing from everyday life. As all-male work and leisure spaces dwindled in working-class communities, imagined communities of working-class male readers emerged in part as psychic compensation. 82 Women became voters in 1920, transforming the once all-male world of partisan politics. Between 1920 and 1930, the female wage-labor force increased twice as fast as the adult female population. By 1930, half of all single women and a quarter of all female adults were in the paid workforce. Moreover, these working women were increasingly working side by side with men. The number of women employed in domestic service in private homes ("invisible" working women) declined, while the number of those employed in offices, stores, and other public places increased. 83

Not only were all-male workplaces disappearing, but working-class men and women increasingly spent their leisure time in mixed-sex activities. Between 1980 and 1920 there was a transition in working-class life from the homosocial cultures of the Victorian era to the heterosocial cultures of the modern world. The center of working-class communitiest moved from the non-only workplace, mutual aid, and male bonding were of a piece, to an increasingly mixed-sex world of commercial leisure—the movies, amusement parks, dance halls—where young men and women met and socialized. 84

The loss of formerly all-male sites for work and leisure required a variety of material and ideological compensations. Hard-boiled writing culture functioned as a homosocial imagined community that addressed some of the needs once met on the shop floor, in the voting booth, or in the salon. The male writers of the pulps saw themselves not as artists but as workmen who produced piecework prose for people like themselves. Furthermore, the imagined worlds of hard-boiled fiction are filled with men's spaces—the mean streets (where women, as in turn-of-the-century saloons, do not go unscreened), boxing matches, tobacco shops, bars.

The "Black Mark boys," as those in the industry called them, were not typical white working-class. Male camaraderie runs deep through their letters. Erle Stanley Gardner invited most of the Black Mark crowd, to visit his ranch in California, and many of them came to engage in such manly pursuits as hunting, camping, fishing, horseback riding, golf, and staying up late to argue by the fire. They exchanged gifts at Christmas, sent one another souvenirs from their travels, and mailed dirty limericks back and forth. Shaw set Gardner up with new writers to mentor through correspondence, asked him to visit Hammett when Hammett's health (and productivity) were failing; and asked him for news and his impressions of others in the circle of writers. The annual reunion lunch in New York was well attended, and those who had to miss it asked for a report of it in their letters. Gardner's characterizations of the Black Mark crowd usually invoked team sports. "I've always regarded the Black Mark bunch as part of a
family or a baseball team in which each one had his work to do, and I've tried my hardest to do my share," he told Shaw as they approached a professional parting of the ways in 1929-30. Gardner mourned losing not only the reading public he had so profitably cultivated over the years, but also the fellowship of being part of the magazine's team of regular writers. 'Naturally I hate to lose a magazine I've been with so long,' he wrote, 'I like the personal set-up, and probably won't come to New York again since the personal visits with the Black Mask gang meant a hell of a lot to me.'

Hard-boiled writing culture created an all-male imagined community that included writers, readers, and the he-man heroes of this fiction. For some, reading pulp fiction was also a refusal to read slick magazines, which trafficked in genteele, feminine fare and placed consuming women at the center of American life, where producing men had once reigned.

The Pulp: A Neglected Cultural Hierarchy

Throughout the period between the wars, artisanal, masculine pulp magazines and genteele, feminine slick-paper magazines engaged in a war of words about which publications would represent average Americans— that mass audience left untargeted by elite publications such as Atlantic Monthly. The slicks dripped with disdain for their sensational brethren. For example, a 1933 Vanity Fair article entitled "The Pulp: day dreams for the masses" maligned pulp writers as ignorant hacks, denigrated pulp readers as marginal literates, and deemed these magazines "gaudy, blatant, banal," representative of "the incursion of the Machine Age into the art of tale-telling." The article was so critical that Shaw took up his pen to defend his pulp in a subsequent editorial column. Although his primary concern was the quality of Black Mask fiction and the professionalism of its writers, he gave in a few digs at what he viewed as the average Vanity Fair reader— "the society matron who considers it smart to have on her table the so-called class magazine with its illustrations regardless of its text." Pulp fiction, so the story went, was good enough to sell itself without the pretty pictures and expensive advertisements necessary to make slick-paper fiction appealing to its status-seeking, effeminate audience.

Most of the "respectable" classes shared Vanity Fair's view of the pulps, assuming that "we" never read such things, although the lower classes might. A 1933 study of reading habits of residents of a Queens, New York, neighborhood elicited all sorts of scorn for the pulps from the patrons of the public library. Very few reported reading pulp magazines, but many took the opportunity to write comments in the margin of their survey: "This trash has no place in the public library" and "God forbid." Researchers in library schools of the period inevitably lamented the preponderance of pulp magazines in the reading their research subjects did, and identified the improvement of their literary tastes as a major policy goal.

Black Mask's positioning as a vis-à-vis slick-paper magazines was actually a lot more complex than Shaw's editorial implied. Although full of sneering disdain for handsomely illustrated "class" magazines read by society women, Black Mask endlessly rehashed the successes of its writers who had been discovered by the slicks. According to this model of cultural value, texts can be ranked according to a single measure of aesthetic value. There were good stories and there were bad stories. The authorities who decided questions of cultural value occupied the most privileged positions in the publishing industry with slick magazines and major newspapers. As a consequence, proving the excellence of Black Mask fiction involved arguing that it was indistinguishable from slick-paper fiction. This was Shaw's strategy. When The Saturday Evening Post accepted a story by Frederick Nebel, a Black Mask regular, an entire "Behind the Mask" writer's column commemorated the event: "This accomplishment puts upon Fred Nebel the hallmark of approval and receptableness of the smooth paper brethren and 'sisters' and further confirms what we have always maintained, that he is among the very best in the field." Another column marked the storming of the slick-paper gates by Erle Stanley Gardner, Frederick Nebel, and Dashiel Hammett, who had been published in Liberty, Collier's, and Redbook, respectively. "Behind the Mask" continued to feature highbrow praise for Black Mask writers throughout the '30s and '40s. Many columns were little more than catalogs of the slick-magazine, book, film, stage, screen, and radio credits accumulated by its writers.

Shaw accepted the slicks/pulp hierarchy that shaped the social infrastructure of publishing. The existence of a pulp magazine that featured high-quality fiction did not challenge the cultural devaluation of the pulps; it merely gave Black Mask honorary slick-paper status. The publishing world largely followed Shaw's lead on this. Even some of the slicks' indictments of the worthless fiction in which pulp magazines trafficked designed to cite Black Mask as the exception.
It's clear from this passage that Gardner's aesthetics were a great deal more pluralistic and conditional than Shaw's. Gardner maintained that slick-paper fiction and pulp fiction were two different and incommensurable things. If one wanted "art" fiction, one bought The Post or Collier's; if one wanted action, adventure, and escape, one purchased pulp fiction. Neither was better; they were just useful for different purposes. Moreover, Gardner thought that trying to sell "art" fiction like Hammett's to people who were seeking pulp-fiction pleasures was a recipe for commercial disaster. "You have lost the sales viewpoint and gone arty," Gardner accused the executives at Warner Publications, arguing that Black Mask's failure to turn a profit was linked to Shaw's preference for Hammett's more "literary" fiction over his own "plain honest-to-God wood pulp" writing, which ranked higher in reader-preference polls. Some readers of the pulps shared Gardner's disgust with the assumed superiorities of the slicks. In a letter appearing in Clues in 1938, one reader asked: "Am I supposed to think because a writer appears sometimes in Collier's, or Post, or the Bar, Grill, and Tavern Weekly that he is any better than my old friends who have been writing for me for years, and whom I enjoy? To heck with that. Don't go highbrow. Give us lots of shooting duels and other peril." The vast majority of hard-boiled fiction in the '20s, '30s, and '40s never did go highbrow. As a consequence, few modern readers have heard of Carroll John Daly, Paul Cain, Dwight W. Babcock, Norbert Davis, Lester Dent, William Brandon, Roger Dorothy, Theodore Tinsley, or other writers who remained hacks, paid by the word. A few writers did achieve tenacious highbrow respectability. Dashiel Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Frederick Nebel, and George Harmon Coxe were published in expensive hardcover editions in Alfred Fleck's Borozi line of mysteries. Hammett's The Maltese Falcon was published in a 1934 Modern Library edition, the first detective novel to be featured in the prestigious series of modern literary classics. But even Hammett and Chandler were unable to transcend their pulp past completely. Hard-boiled fiction remained uneasily situated in the cultural hierarchy. As a result, many reviewers in the '30s and '40s took up the problem of hard-boiled fiction's "respectability" in their reviews. Some critics merely recognized the dual or triple positioning of the books. Others hailed Hammett's "darling of brows both high and low." Other reviewers felt the need to reassure the highbrows about the appropriateness of this fiction: "To be caught with a Raymond Chandler whodunit in hand is a fate no
highbrow reader need dread.” Some critics, however, seem to have preferred that their reading of this fiction be a little more disreputable. "Now that Dashiel Hammett is beginning to be taken seriously by the highbrows, my first enthusiasm for him is beginning to cool a little." Part of the appeal for highbrows was clearly slumming—a being a tourist on the wrong side of the cultural tracks, with all the forbidden pleasures such transgression promised. Even the few pulp writers who were accorded some measure of literary legitimacy were granted it because of their lowbrow origins. The appeal of this fiction for educated readers was, in part, that it came out of worlds that did not include people like them.

Hard-boiled detective fiction navigated the hierarchy of cultural value in complex and contradictory ways. It emerged from the trashy literary underworld of pulp magazines, but Black Mask, which put hard-boiled stories on the map, was a pulp with pretensions. Although most of its writers languished in relative anonymity, cultural authorities subsequently claimed a few of them for highly reputable publishing houses and mass-market magazines. Although the majority of readers who encountered it in pulp magazines and cheap paperbacks were probably from the producing classes, significant numbers of scholars subsequently became enthusiastic readers. Hard-boiled fiction took on different meanings as the structures that its writers, readers, and publishers inhabited shifted. Changes in the conditions of production and the class of targeted readers remade these texts, whose language often remained unchanged as it moved from format to format. Hard-boiled detective stories can reward both self-consciously literary readings of highly educated scholars and the modes of popular reading that interest me. For this reason, the genre itself is alternately dismissed as trash and celebrated as an overlooked wing of modernism.35

**Chandler’s Vindication of Hard-Boiled Writing Culture**

Perhaps the richest document in the war of words between the pulps and the slicks was Raymond Chandler’s self-serving historiography of the detective story, "The Simple Art of Murder," published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944. In it, he argued for greater realism in detective fiction, differentiated his own brand of "realistic" detective fiction from the classical English mystery that preceded it, and canonized Dashiel Hammett as the key figure of the hard-boiled school. This was Chandler’s attempt to claim a share of the market from the genteel British ladies whose books and slick-magazine stories had dominated the detective-fiction marketplace. In the process, however, he radically undermined his own claims about gender, national, and class identities by acknowledging their basis in performance or masquerade.

The first section of Chandler’s essay revolved around the specter of novels of lasting merit being left to grow dusty on the shelf while "old ladies" push and shove to get at mysteries entitled "The Triple Patinae Murder Case or Inspector Pinchbottle to the Rescue" (3). Most such novels were written by members of the London Detection Club, the organization of English mystery writers that set the rules for writing detective fiction in the years after World War I. "They just kept churning out the same ridiculous stuff year after year: nosy spinsters, fusty old aristocrats bumping one another off in eminently civilized and grossly improbable ways, doddering doins from Scotland Yard who take 300 pages to solve a case that the Los Angeles police would have wrapped up in half an hour." Chandler had nothing but disdain for silly novels of this sort. He saved much of his best inventive for Agatha Christie's Murder on the Oriente Express, in which, it turns out, all the people in a sleeper car took turns stabbing the victim. "This is the type that is guaranteed to knock the keenest mind for a loop," Chandler wrote. "Only a halfwit could guess its structure." (9). He indicted Dorothy Sayers not only for her grossly improbable novels but for her critical writings on mystery. Chandler called Sayers’ introduction to the first *Omnibus of Crime* anthology an "essay in critical folly" because it failed to acknowledge that classical detective fiction of the kind she wrote was an "arid formula" that no longer contained much interest or originality (12).

Although he spent most of the essay heaping ridicule on the best-selling giants of the British golden age (1920–1937), Chandler insisted that the English had no monopoly on outrageous plots; he chose British examples because critics still favored English mysteries and because "the Americans, even the creator of Philip Vance, only make the Junior Varsity" (10). The differences between dreary British fiction and dreary American fiction were largely cosmetic for Chandler: The silliness took place in Miami hotels rather than Elizabethan gardens, and the characters drank frozen daiquiris rather than port (10).

This bad fiction was everywhere. Chandler estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of all mystery fiction sold was based on the same old arid Detection Club formula. It appeared in "the big shiny magazines,"
handcuff illustrated, and paying the deference to virgin love and the right kind of lusty goods" every week of the year (10). He was correct; classical detective fiction achieved its popular success in the United States in the pages of slicks such as Collier's, McClure's, Cosmopolitan, and The Saturday Evening Post. The immense popularity of serialized Sherlock Holmes stories in Collier's from 1903 to 1905 motivated other slick-paper magazines to run similar stories.38

Having daintied slick-magazine fiction, Chandler turned to the world of pulp magazines, where hard-boiled fiction had first appeared. As Chandler put it in the most quoted passage of the essay, Dashiell Hammett "gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought diesel pistols, curare and tropical fish" (14). What's more, Hammett did all this with "style." This style, Chandler maintained, putting Hammett in the distinguished company of Walt Whitman, Yeevolve Dreiser, and Ernest Hemingway, was "the American language" (15). Good detective fiction, then—the realistic type—was "American." Chandler did concede that the "American language" in which good detective fiction was written was not exclusively American anymore. Tough-talking Australians, for example, might have qualified for citizenship on Chandler's terms.

The coinage of Hammett was not the end of the story. The old ladies from the opening of the essay reared their graying heads again when Chandler tried to defend Hammett from those who claimed that he did not write detective stories at all—merely tough novels with a little mystery thrown in their rear.39 Chandler characterized such critics as "the fussed old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages—who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms..." (16). Like the remarkably fluid national categories, the gender categories show a lot of flux. The enemies (of either sex) were women—perhaps best embodied by Dorothy Sayers, the theorist of the bungle. The bad "British" fiction of ridiculous plots and impossible gentility was feminine (whether women wrote it or not), and the good "American" fiction was masculine by virtue of being set in the streets of an inherently corrupt world.

At the conclusion of his essay, Chandler argued that Paramount, "realistic" as he might have been, had neglected another important aspect of art—a quality that Chandler called "redemption." It is worth quoting at length: "But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor... He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" (18). Chandler's detective-hero is a lot of things, but above all he is a man. By sheer force of repetition, Chandler hammers home that "art," at least of the detective-fiction sort, was not about silly British ladies or folks who read the slick, shiny women's magazines, but about heroic American men like those who read or wrote for the pulp.

Chandler wrote about hard-boiled fiction in the same heavily gendered terms as Black Mask's editors. He repeated the pulp/slicks dichotomy that was a critical part of publishing's infrastructure. He implicitly referred to social class in his ridicule of ancestral estates and his celebration of the mean streets. But he linked the otherwise familiar gender- and class-boundary work with issues of nationalism.39 This harnessing of Americanism, masculinity, and literary quality characterized many of Chandler's contemporaries, who were engaged in founding the discipline of American Studies in the 1940s and 1950s. The "Americanness" that these critics claimed, constituted literary excellence was inevitably embodied in a man, a rugged individual who struggled to maintain his autonomy in the face of an entrapping society and a wilderness to be conquered, both cast in unmistakably feminine terms.40 The cynical heroes of hard-boiled fiction—perpetually beset by one or more femmes fatales—are cut from the same cloth as the more canonical literary heroes of American literature.

Although Chandler framed this as an essay about the aesthetics of crime fiction, his primary concern was professional rivalry with the real women of the London Detection Club. The best-selling and most critically acclaimed British mystery authors of the 1920s and '30s were disproportionately women—Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Josephine Tey, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Patricia Wentworth, and Gladys Mitchell, to name a few. Though there were some successful male authors of classical detective fiction between the wars, women were so prominent that the occupation of mystery writing could seem as "feminine" as teaching or nursing. Moreover, classical English detective fiction, murderers aside, trafficked in remarkably feminine conventions—emotion, private life, domestic spaces. Hard-boiled texts defined themselves against feminized, classical English fiction and addressed
being determined not by nature but by a propensity to write grossly improbable fiction featuring inevitably silly detectives, then some men (S. S. Van Dine) are clearly "women" and (theoretically at least) some women are really "men." What Chandler did in this essay was to redefine gender and national identities in terms of performance. Identity had less to do with biology and more to do with performing certain behaviors and costuming oneself in certain ways.

Raymond Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder" makes what Judith Butler calls "gender trouble." What good is a binary model of gender if some of the men are women, some of the women are men, and switching from one gender to the other is as easy as moving one's murders from ancestral estates to the wrong side of the tracks? The virulence of Chandler's attack on the "old ladies" of the London Detection Club is a measure of his anxiety about the slipperiness of the boundary he draws between men and women. This gender dynamic—emphatically returning women to their appropriate, traditional place while simultaneously calling into question the categories on which such a nostalgic politics is based—is characteristic of hard-boiled fiction between the wars, a point to which I return in Chapter 3.

Chandler's essay suggests that the war of words between the pulps and the slicks over which would represent ordinary Americans was both economic and psychic. Chandler wanted his books to sell as well as Dorothy Sayers's and Agatha Christie's. The popular world of pulp publishing was locked in a struggle for readers with the emergent world of mass-market magazines that were much more attractive and affordable, thanks to national-brand advertising. Chandler's emphasis on "realism," however, suggests that this debate was also about competing visions of the real. Amy Kaplan identifies realism as a site of struggle over how to represent a world grown increasingly unrepresentable because of rapid social change, increasing class differences, and the emergence of competing forms of mass culture. If this is the case, then slick-paper magazines and the classical detective fiction offered a version of reality that placed women, women's ways of knowing, and the consumption in which middle-class women engaged at the center. Pulp magazines and the hard-boiled fiction they marketed placed the disappearing aristocratic world of men in the position of privilege. The war of words between the pulps and the slicks was part of a larger debate over the ways in which mass consumption would change how ordinary people experienced the world. This debate was carried out through the
overlapping and mutually constitutive idioms of gender, class, and nation. Moreover, the heat of the rhetoric—the pains to which the pulps and the slicks went to distinguish themselves from each other—is evidence of just how difficult it was to tell artisinal, American men from genteel. Anglophile women in a consumer culture where identities were increasingly constructed through performance.

The Adman on the Shop Floor
Workers, Consumer Culture, and the Pulps

Pulpwood magazines offer two methods of escape from reality: one, by their fiction—that magic carpet that carries the reader off to parts unknown; the other, by their advertising of comparatively inexpensive means to keep the reader physically and mentally fit so that he can take the hero's part in any romantic adventure he reads about, or dreams of having himself.

Advertising pages are as much a part of the magazine as those devoted to stories: parallel lines spoken by two sets of people with but a single thought. . . .
Harold Henes, Pulpwood Editor (1937)

rack! His fist landed squarely behind the bully's ear and down the fell in a heap. Quick as a flash, he turned to face the other hold-up man who, with a fist closed, was right on top of him.

Another thud and another limp form lay on the ground.

Quivering with tense excitement, he stood over the two prostrate figures waiting for them to get up, but they did not move. Both were knocked cold. "A fight scene from one of the many hard-boiled crime stories printed in Black Mask in the 1920s and 1930s? It certainly sounds like it. But this pugilistic passage comes not from Black Mask's fiction but from its ad pages. It was offered as proof not of the hard-