

"The Postman Always Rings Twice" Discussion Questions February 28, 2015

1. The beginning of the novel contains very little lead up to Frank and Cora's affair. What purpose do you think their "romance" served in the story? Is their relationship a love story, or is it a story about something else, like desperation and distrust?
2. What did James Cain choose two main characters (Frank and Cora) who have poor grammar?
3. Cats are a recurring motif in "TPART." How does this imagery support the story line? What meanings may the author have intended with this recurring image?
4. George Tuttle, who is a noir expert, defines the genre as:

"In this sub-genre, the protagonist is usually not a detective, but instead either a victim, a suspect, or a perpetrator. He is someone tied directly to the crime, not an outsider called to solve or fix the situation. Other common characteristics . . . are the emphasis on sexual relationships and the use of sex to advance the plot and the self-destructive qualities of the lead characters. This type of fiction also has the lean, direct writing style and the gritty realism commonly associated with hardboiled fiction."

How do you feel "TPART" fits this definition? How does this novel compare to novels by Dashiell Hammett ("The Thin Man," "The Maltese Falcon," etc.) and Raymond Chandler ("The Big Sleep," "The Long Goodbye," etc.)? Were there any other authors, like Steinbeck or Hemingway, that compare to Cain's style?

5. Below are a few theories about the meaning title of the novel. What do you think?
 - The author suggested that the title refers to fate or justice eventually catching up with the perpetrator of a crime, even if they were not punished for the original offence.
 - When the manuscript was being rejected by publishers, a friend told Cain that he mailed his first play and sat by the window waiting for a letter accepting it until he realized that the postman always rang twice. Cain biographer Roy Hoopes supports this story and also mentioned that the title reflects an old English or Irish folk saying about postmen.
 - The title (and novel) may have been inspired by the notorious Ruth Snyder case of the '20s. Ruth Snyder convinced her lover, Judd Gray, to kill her allegedly abusive husband. Snyder also took out a life insurance policy on her husband, but instructed the postman to ring twice when delivering payment notices.