The Lady in the Lake

Raymond Chandler

Chapters 1–2
Marlowe tries to interview Mrs. Kingsley’s lover, a man named Lavery, but he arouses the suspicions of a neighbor named Dr. Almore, and he is warned off by a detective named Degarmo. Then, at Kingsley’s house in the mountains, Marlowe and caretaker Bill Chess find the body of a woman in the lake. The woman’s face is unrecognizable, but Marlowe begins to suspect that it is the body of Chess’s wife, Muriel.

Chapter 3
Marlowe pieces together the past of a woman named Mildred Haviland, who was once married to Degarmo. The woman was also Dr. Almore’s nurse after his wife died, and later on, she married Bill Chess and changed her name to Muriel. Marlowe wonders if she is really the lady in the lake.

Chapters 4–8
When he notices a woman leaving Lavery’s house and finds Lavery dead, Marlowe begins to doubt that Muriel is the lady in the lake. As he takes money to Kingsley’s wife, the same woman appears, and Marlowe guesses what happened. However, someone else has also figured out the mystery—someone who can’t afford to let the truth come out. Before he can get at the truth, Marlowe finds himself in danger.

Background and themes
“Whodunits”: The first detective stories were published in the mid-nineteenth century, but they didn’t become popular until the 1890s when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created the private detective Sherlock Holmes. In the Sherlock Holmes stories—and in those of Agatha Christie and other writers who modeled their series after Doyle’s—the detective is an unusual character who resolves the crime like a puzzle, and as a result, these kinds of detective stories were given the name “whodunits” (derived from the question, “Who did it?”).

Realistic mysteries: However, Chandler found these types of stories unrealistic, so he set out to create a new kind of mystery novel in which the crimes are committed by “the kind of people who commit them in real life.” In Chandler’s detective stories, the murders are committed with guns, not unusual poisons, and they are solved by professionals, not amateurs. It isn’t especially important who commits the crimes; indeed, they aren’t always the work of the same person. For Chandler, the importance lies in how the characters react to each other and how
Marlowe eventually pieces the truth together in spite of threats to his own personal safety.

**Los Angeles:** It was much easier to find a realistic background for a murder mystery in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s than in England. For example, in Los Angeles, guns were easily obtainable, and as a result of the laws that had been passed against alcohol in the 1920s, gangsters had begun to sell alcohol illegally. When the laws were finally lifted, the gangsters moved into the business of drugs. However, it wasn’t just gangsters who were involved in criminal activities. The city also bred crooked doctors and corrupt policemen. In *The Lady in the Lake*, Dr. Almore and Degarmo are examples of Chandler’s realistic criminals.

**First person perspective:** Like all the Marlowe novels, *The Lady in the Lake* is told in the first person, which helps readers to identify with the hero. As Marlowe gradually uncovers layers of corruption, and as new crimes take place, readers follow the course of events alongside the narrator. Like Marlowe, they are forced to change their minds until they reach the same conclusions and ultimately solve the mystery. When the Hollywood actor Robert Montgomery made a film version of *The Lady in the Lake* in 1947 (starring himself as Marlowe), he carried this idea so far that he made the camera follow Marlowe’s eyes so that the character was only seen by the audience in a mirror. Chandler didn’t like the technique, describing the film as a “cheap Hollywood trick.” It is likely that Chandler was annoyed because he felt that he had written better screenplays himself, and because Marlowe represented his own values and attitudes towards life.

**The likeable private eye:** Marlowe is still one of the world’s most famous private eyes (private detectives), and fans argue that he is more interesting than the many imitations. He is honest, loyal, brave and single-minded in his pursuit of the truth. More importantly, readers can identify with him because he isn’t a saint. He likes an occasional drink, and pretty girls. In addition, he has a sense of humor, which is often directed at himself.

**Discussion activities**

**Chapters 1–2, pages 1–11**

**Before reading**

1. **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *Do you think that this is a good cover for the book? Why or why not? What do you like about the cover? Why do you like it? What don’t you like about the cover? Why don’t you like it?***

2. **Pair work:** Photocopy the pictures in the book—make enough copies so that each pair of students has a copy of every picture in the book. Cut off the captions at the bottom of the pages and then give the pictures and the captions to the pairs. Get them to match the pictures with the captions.

**After reading**

3. **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Student A is Marlowe and Student B is each of the following characters (he or she should be one character at a time): Mr. Kingsley, the redhead with blue eyes, Lavery, Degarmo, Bill Chess and Jim Patton. Marlowe should ask each of the characters questions about the case. The characters should answer Marlowe’s questions as fully as possible. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play their conversations in front of the class.

4. **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 10. *How do you think Bill Chess is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think he is thinking about? Why do you think this? How do you think Jim Patton is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think he is thinking about? Why do you think this? How do you think the other people in the picture are feeling? Why do you think this?***

5. **Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapters 1 or 2. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and show their picture to the rest of the class. They should explain why they have drawn the character the way that they have drawn him or her.

**Chapters 3–4, pages 11–19**

**Before reading**

6. **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Marlowe in Chapters 3 and 4.

7. **Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 3 is called *Al to Mildred*. *Who do you think Al is? Who do you think Mildred is? What do you think Al gives to Mildred? Why do you think this? Why do you think Al gives the thing to Mildred? Why do you think this? What do you think will happen after Al gives the thing to Mildred? Why do you think this?***

**After reading**

8. **Check:** Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Marlowe in Chapters 3 and 4. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

9. **Write:** Put students into pairs and get them to write a sentence to describe what happens in Chapters 3 and another sentence to describe what happens in Chapter 4. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read their sentences to the rest of the class. Finally, take a vote to find out which pair wrote the best sentences.
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10 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of a scene from Chapter 3 or Chapter 4. Then put them into pairs and get them to exchange their pictures. They should try to guess which chapter their partner’s picture is from. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and describe their partner’s picture to their classmates.

11 Role play: Put students into groups of four.
Each group should write three questions that they would like to ask each of the following characters: Mrs. Kingsley, Dr. Almore, Mildred Haviland and Degarmo. Then get the groups to work with another group. The first group should ask the second group the twelve questions that they wrote earlier (three per character). The second group should tell the truth when they answer the questions. When the first group has finished asking their questions, the second group should ask the first group the twelve questions that they wrote earlier.

Chapters 5–6, pages 19–30
Before reading
12 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to think about why Chapter 6 is called Room 618. Where do you think Room 618 is located? Why do you think the room is called “Room 618”? How do you think the room is important to the story? Why do you think this? What do you think will happen in Room 618? Why do you think this?

13 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 25. What is Mr. Kingsley doing in the picture? What do you think is in the brown envelope he is giving to Marlowe? Why do you think he is giving it to Marlowe? Why do you think this?

After reading
14 Discuss: Put students into groups of three and get them to think about who murdered the following characters in the story and why: the lady in the lake, Mrs. Almore and Lavery. One student from each group should write down the group’s ideas on a piece of paper. When they have finished, the groups should present their ideas to the rest of the class.

Chapters 7–8, pages 30–40
Before reading
15 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Marlowe and the other characters in Chapters 7 and 8.

After reading
16 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Marlowe and the other characters in Chapters 7 and 8. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

17 Write: Put students into pairs and get them to look at the pictures in Chapters 8 and 9. Then get them to write a new caption for each of the pictures to describe what the characters are thinking. When they have finished, the pairs should read their new captions out loud to the rest of the class.

18 Pair work: Put students into pairs and give each student a piece of paper with the title of Chapter 7 or Chapter 8 written on it. The students should take turns explaining the title of his or her chapter and describing what the chapter is about.

19 Discuss: Put students into groups of four and tell them that they are going to make a film of The Lady in the Lake. Then get them to discuss the following questions:
Which actor do you think should play the part of Marlowe? Why do you think this?
Which actor do you think should play the part of Degarmo? Why do you think this?
Which actor do you think should play the part of Jim Patton? Why do you think this?
Which actor do you think should play the part of Mildred Haviland? Why do you think this?