



## Influence of American Popular Culture in Naipaul's *Bogart*

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### Abstract

“Bogart” is one of the short stories in the collection *Miguel Street* by V. S. Naipaul. The World War II Trinidad and Tobago Caribbean society depicted in these short stories is still grappling with self-identity issues but show a great leaning towards the American Popular Culture in many spheres of their existence and interaction. America is seen as a trend and pacesetter for the world and especially the society of *Miguel Street*, the setting of the stories. This paper seeks to establish and critically evaluate the influence of the American Popular Culture on the Miguel street society and specifically on the story “Bogart”.

Keywords: Bogart, popular culture

## 1.0 Introduction

“Bogart” revolves around the main character who goes by the same name. He suddenly appears in Miguel street searching for a room and quickly ‘installs’ himself and starts playing a game of cards (Naipul 1959 pp.3). Nobody knows where he actually comes from or what his real name is. He is initially given the name Patience because of his ability to play cards from morning to evening when in reality he never likes cards. He is also quiet most of the times. He is later christened ‘Bogart’ though nobody really had an idea of where the name came from or why it was given to him. He wields some power over the other inhabitants of Miguel Street and especially the men folk because they do not really understand him. He disappears and appears severally in the story and each time, he exhibits a new habit. Ultimately however, his past catches up with him and he is arrested on a number of charges but chiefly bigamy- he had a wife from his original place but impregnates another one in many of his sojourns. Throughout the story, there are visible influences of the American popular culture.

## 2.0 Popular Culture

There are diverse perceptions of what is ‘popular’. Raymond Williams (1983) views popular as some low class, unworthy and inferior work that seeks to endear itself to the people by all means. This perception is extrapolated to the way the society seeks to form identities as regards race, gender and class among others. John Storey (2003) further equates popular culture to folk or mass culture of a people. Popular culture to him is like an arena where uniformity is forged. For Marie Gibert (2015), popular culture is basically the material we come across in our everyday life. From the foregoing, whatever it is that we come across in our daily lives, our perceptions of ideas and events as shaped by the currents and desire to belong, identify and be identified by constitute popular culture. Miguel Street is not free of these influences that define popular culture. The main source of these influences in the story “Bogart” is the American Popular Culture and of specific interest is the role of the movie *Casablanca* in the story.

*Casablanca* is a war time American movie that captures a lot about the American experience. It is a war story that depicts the choices one has to make in life as regards love and work. A production of Warner Brothers, it captures the vagaries of war and the plight of refugees. It depicts a senior and respected Army officer Rick Blaine played by Humphrey Bogart, whose past comes calling in the form of his former girlfriend Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) who is now married but seeks to escape to another country. Only Rick can help them but he would be breaking the expected code of officers of his caliber if he helps her. In the course of this unfolding drama, there is much that is revealed about the

American popular culture which can be paralleled to the events and plot in the story “Bogart”.

### 3.0 American Popular Culture in “Bogart”

Diana Crane (1992) offers that a text, and in this instance a movie like *Casablanca*, can only be made popular if the messages fit the discourses that the readers or viewers use to make sense of their experiences. The readers and viewers would look at the movie and see themselves either as they are or as they wish to become some day. While celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the movie, Daniel Brown (2012) refers to *Casablanca* as ‘thoroughly American’. This way, the influence it has on its audience is more of the American popular culture. The name of the main character in the story was a product of the movie:

It was something of a mystery why he was called Bogart; but I suspect that it was Hat who gave him the name. I don’t know if you remember the year the movie *Casablanca* was made. That was the year when Bogart’s fame spread like fire through Port of Spain and hundreds of young men began adopting the hard boiled Bogartian attitude. (p1)

The members of this society easily relate to Humphrey Bogart and even take his name. They see him as an epitome of the American society at that time and so if there is anybody they admire or respect then he should be equated to the main actor of the movie. Bogart in the story is said to be a boring person but whatever he did had a ‘captivating langour’(p1). So captivated was the main character of the story Bogart by Humphrey, the ‘real Bogart’ that he had to dress and be entirely like the actor. We read that from one of his sojourns he comes dressed in a hat and putting his hands in the pocket. He also almost always had a cigarette in his lips and spoke in an American accent just like Bogart of the movies. He behaves like the actors in *Casablanca* who, as observes by Pauline Kael in the *New Yorker* and quoted by Nicholas Barber: ‘... those small roles being played by Hollywood actors faking the accents’. Bogart fakes the accent and is even reminded not to ‘act’ tough by the arresting police sergeant. Bogart is seeking for identity with the character of the movie itself. The whole popular culture is portrayed as fake and quite artificial. The people are actually acting and not being themselves just like in the movies. Hat is also seeking to identify with another actor. He dressed, made his hair and even tried to talk like another actor Rex Harrison. Hat did all he could to strengthen the resemblance. This is a search for identity.

Daniel Brown observes that *Casablanca* was a product of its time and also all times. This means that it has an influence even long after its time settings in which it was produced had elapsed. In line with popular culture, he further noted that the film lacked a moral compass. (Brown, 2012) This influence can even be felt in “Bogart”. On coming back to Miguel Street after being in the Americas, Bogart is changed. He laughs with a twist in his mouth and talks rudely to the ladies.(p4) He loves the bohemian life of partying and spending money on things like liquor and women. After disappearing for some time, he comes to his house and finds Eddoes with a woman in his bed. This is immoral and disrespectful to use another’s house so. It is even surprising how Bogart himself reacts. He just tells Eddoes to move over and he sleeps. Among the accusations he is charged with is running a brothel and smuggling stuff. He also left behind his wife just to show he is a man among us men. (p7) This search for identity and recognition is a by-product of popular culture.

This desire to show that they are men pushes women to the periphery but overworks them leading to among other vices, immorality. Men sit down laying cards. Even when Bogart says he wants to start a tailoring shop, it never works due to lack of commitment. Popo’s wife works hard and even has to sleep with some other men to provide for the household while Popo is busy making ‘a thing without a name.’ This thing Popo is making is reminiscent of the struggle for identity that the characters grapple with. The corporate identity and hegemony is a pointer to popular culture and in this case the American variety.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

There are so many elements of this story that show the influence from the American popular culture. It is easier to relate to Hollywood and the make believe world of the movies when one is debased and alienated like the characters in this story.

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