

The Sopranos: Coming in at the End

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Abstract

The Sopranos (1999-2007), created by David Chase for HBO, set the tone for what the series of the 21st century would be about: a man’s struggle for power and control over others and himself amid a desolate reality. A self-referential series deconstructing mobster clichés and the role of the modern hero while nostalgically plunging into the depths of the old-time gangster, *The Sopranos* turned its critical focus to the present time of the United States. Introducing the first bad leading man in a television series whose tragic nature challenged the very notions of hero, villain, and television storytelling, this series created a rupture in the hero paradigm. Under a self-reflection that satirically revered the criminal heroes of the past, *The Sopranos* ultimately questioned the perpetuation of a myth - the hero figure, either cowboy or gangster.

Keywords: television storytelling; hero; villain; cowboy; gangster; hero paradigm.

No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *The Sopranos*, 1:05 “College”

By 1999 viewers were already familiar with complex portrayals of Italian-American mobsters in film, such as the Corleone family in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974 and 1990) or the wise guys in Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990).

So, when Tony Soprano made his debut, viewers already had certain expectations about the mob genre. In its inception, this genre was connected to the *film noir*, in existence since the 1930s, but the more modern versions by filmmakers like Scorsese or De Palma bear a more direct influence on the narrative and aesthetics of *The Sopranos*.

The Sopranos (1999-2007), created by David Chase for HBO, a cable company that since became a synonym for quality television, set the tone for what the series of the 21st century would be about: a man's struggle for power and control over others and himself amid a desolate reality. In addition, this series defined the third "Golden Age" of American television, for all the other shows that came after it were modelled after its boldness of subjects, its innovative storytelling, but, most of all, its difficult protagonist. By inviting their "audience to empathize with a character who was traditionally the villain" (Sepinwall 143), *The Sopranos* introduced the first bad leading man to take centre stage in a television series, a sociopath who left the door ajar for a whole gamut of unconventional heroes.

Since the first episode it is obvious that Tony Soprano is an extremely violent man whose methods are justifiable for the ends he wishes to attain. But the opening sequence of *The Sopranos* pilot episode also shows a vulnerable man, well aware of his shortcomings, a New Jersey mobster suffering from panic attacks who consults with a psychiatrist. Tony Soprano is a man who has lost control and is at an existential crossroads, torn between an overbearing past (embodied by his mother Livia and his uncle Junior) and his posterity (his children Meadow and Anthony Jr., as well as his nephew Christopher Moltisanti).

The opening shot of *The Sopranos* shows Tony in the waiting room of a therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Because the new protagonists of the millennium are men obsessed with their identity, the fact that Tony is introduced not as an all-powerful mobster but as a frail human being suffering from panic attacks demonstrates how aware he is of his weaknesses. He realises that something is wrong with his life, not necessarily because he considers himself to be a bad man, but because he feels out of synch with the world: "The morning of the day I got sick, I been thinking. It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came in too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over." (*The Sopranos*, 1:01 "*The Sopranos*") More often than not Tony believes he is a good man caught up in a world where he is expected to perform a certain role. He feels trapped by the legacy

of his immigrant family and what it means to “be a man”. His role model is that of Gary Cooper, “the strong silent type”, the all-American hero, the cowboy.

As stated by Mike Alford, being a hero implies being in the world in a particular way. He argues that the hero stands “at the border of freedom and chaos” (22) and it is his fate to keep the balance between the two, simultaneously in the world and outside of it, permanently on the threshold. One of the epithets of the American hero is the figure of the cowboy, the Westerner. This hero, both real and imagined, lives on the frontier, whether physical or metaphorical, inhabiting the limbo between good and evil. According to Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), the use of violence in the history of the United States led to the belief in a regeneration process that caused the American nation to grow and expand. Violence became a necessary means of mastery over one’s surroundings and over one’s self, allowing the mythic structure of the American West to settle on these foundations. Akin to Joseph Campbell’s monomythic structure (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949), in which the hero journeys into the unknown only to return victorious and master of two worlds, so Slotkin’s regeneration through violence suggests a renewal that accompanies the crossing of frontiers. These frontiers may be physical borders, as in the case of the Western frontier(s), or mythical ones. And it is the overcoming of such obstacles that creates the figure of the hero:

Men alternately setting loose and struggling to cage their wildest natures has always been the great American story, the one found in whatever happens to be the ascendant medium at the time. Our favourite genres - the western; the gangster saga; the lonesome but dogged private eye operating outside the comforts of normal, domestic life; the superhero with his double identities - have all been literalizations of that inner struggle, just as Huckleberry Finn striking out for the territories was, or Ishmael taking to the sea. (Martin 84)

Nonetheless, protagonists such as Tony Soprano never overcome the obstacles set in their course and never truly become heroes, despite their efforts to rationalise their behaviour into believing that they are “doing the right thing”. In the introduction to Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), Robert Parker writes:

Most cultures have at the heart of their national mythology the image of a man with a weapon. A killer of other men. It is, I think, less because such a man can impose his will on others, and more because he can maintain the clarity of himself. In “The Westerner,” Robert Warshaw [sic] writes: What he defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image - in fact his honor. This is what makes him invulnerable. When the

gangster is killed, his whole life is shown to have been a mistake, but the image the Westerner seeks to maintain can be presented as clearly in defeat as in victory: he fights not for advantage and not for the right, but to state what he is, and he must live in a world which permits that. (v)

Violence lies at the heart of the American hero. On his journey, the hero is expected to resort to violence to triumph over the forces of evil, forever justified in the name of family or nation, love, honour or community. The hero crosses the frontier between good and evil for something other than recognition and glory, which ultimately favours his victorious return. But what happens if violence is to be found on both sides of these frontiers and not just on the threshold, where its regenerative powers should take effect? Violence ceases to be merely a means to an end and becomes a way of life.

It is this that distinguishes the hero from the villain. In the face of the isolation that difference can generate the hero gives him or her self over to the world, and in so doing re-enters the world. The villain, on the other hand, deepens the gulf between self and other and sees dominance of the other as the only mode of engagement between themselves and the rest of the world. (Alsford 29)

The villain is recognised by the way he appropriates others through violence. He chooses to use his strength and power to obtain advantage over others. But the hero is able to use those qualities to help others by engaging with the rest of the world through selfless acts deriving from a deep-felt empathy with others. According to Alsford, hero and villain are “aspects of the same tragic character” (124) and it is their individual response to particular situations that determines their true nature, their being in the world.

Therefore, it is curious that Tony Soprano should revere the figure of the cowboy. The “strong silent type” embodied by Gary Cooper represents a nation of gunfighters, conquerors and cowboys, strong men who uphold a code of honour. But Tony is not this type of man. Instead, he is the city gangster, another epithet of the American hero, who lives according to a very different code. As stated by Robert Warshow:

the gangster - though there are real gangsters - is also, and primarily, a creature of the imagination. The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become. (584)

Tony Soprano's Hollywood counterparts, much more than Gary Cooper, are James Cagney as Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931), Edward G. Robinson as Caesar Enrico "Rico" Bandello in *Little Caesar* (1931) or Paul Muni as Antonio "Tony" Camonte in *Scarface* (1932), *film noirs* that make incidental appearances in *The Sopranos*. When joining the Cosa Nostra, mobsters like Tony take an oath which commits them to a code of honour that puts the family (the criminal enterprise which they have joined) above all else.

Tony may admire the "strong, silent," self-determined man embodied by Gary Cooper in Hollywood movies, but he never tries to embody that type. He is driven not by honor or courage, but by greed, pettiness, and fear, which he hides behind a wall of macho bravado, cutting humor, and frequent diatribes directed against those who fail to conform to the mafia code of conduct. (DeFino 145)

Nevertheless, Tony's feeling that he "came in at the end" shows that he knows he has come too late to a way of life that is slowly decaying. The older generation of mobsters that Tony reveres so much, although regarded nostalgically by him and others like Christopher Moltisanti, is portrayed in *The Sopranos* as a dying breed, ending up either demented, like his Uncle Junior, or working with the FBI, like New York boss Carmine Lupertazzi. Tony's admiration for his father's generation is present in the way he tries to groom his nephew Christopher. But because he no longer believes in his own generation's values he worries about what kind of legacy he can pass on. Despite being about the New Jersey mob world, *The Sopranos* is also a self-referential series, deconstructing mobster clichés and the role of the modern hero.

The gangster story, another grand American narrative, by the time of *The Sopranos* looks in on itself self-referentially, almost parodically. The difference between the cowboy and the gangster is that the latter is a criminal at heart. The good/bad guy qualities of the former make him a hero, someone who needs to be bad in order to survive in the world, but who is pure of heart, inherently good, putting the needs of others above his own. While he fights for mankind in a broader sense, the gangster fights only for himself, which makes him a villain. But, according to Tony, this is the man who made America what it is today. Considering the Westerner conquered the wilderness, the gangster seized the city.

The essence of *The Sopranos* seems to be condensed in a scene where Tony, in therapy with Dr. Melfi, says:

We're soldiers. Soldiers don't go to hell. It's war. Soldiers... they kill other soldiers. We're in a situation where everybody involved knows the stakes. And if you're gonna accept those stakes... you gotta do certain things. It's business, we're soldiers. We follow codes... Orders. (*The Sopranos*, 2:09 "From Where to Eternity")

Tony rationalises his way of life by considering himself a soldier fighting for a good cause in a world he was born into. And since this world abides by very specific rules, he sees himself as an asset in an inescapable but honourable fight. He continues his plea, stating that these were the men who built America:

When America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? Because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make 'em richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers, they needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us. Honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action. We weren't educated like the Americans. But we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks... those other... the JP Morgans, they were crooks and killers too, but that was a business, right? The American way. (*The Sopranos*, 2:09 "From Where to Eternity")

Hence, Tony weaves his lifestyle into the American narrative. If, like the Westerner, he believes he is fighting for a good cause, then, in his mind, that legitimisation is enough to make him a hero.

By nostalgically plunging into the depths of the old-time gangster, into the black and white world of the *film noir*, *The Sopranos* turns its critical focus to the present time of the United States. The disenchanted America of the end of the '90s falls under the scrutiny of a self-reflection that satirically depicts these criminal heroes of the past, such as Al Capone, who unquestionably present attractive narratives (the narrative of the immigrant who fought his way up the ladder of the American Dream until he became a legend), yet are nothing more than the exaltation of the criminal mind.

Tony Soprano *wants to be* like Gary Cooper, but in the end he *is* merely a New Jersey criminal grappling with his frustrations, protecting his family and his interests while pursuing a happiness as fickle as his bouts of anger. The

viewer identifies with him because of how ordinary he is in his existential struggle. “Tony must be different from us in order to satisfy our wishes. But, it might be suggested, our link with Tony is not based on the grounds of what we wish to become, but on the grounds of what we already are.” (Carroll 126) Above all, Tony wants admiration and respect from his peers and will stop at nothing to prove his authority as acting boss. Since the fifth episode of the first season (“College”), the viewer has been engaging in Tony’s psychopathic behaviour after watching him choke a man to death, a man he ran into by accident while visiting colleges with his daughter. The man was Fabian “Febby” Petruccio, who, after becoming an informant for the FBI, entered the witness protection programme. Though he is not a menace anymore, Tony *chooses* not to let him go. Like a hero, he acts on the freedom of his choices, unfettered by moral conventions or social rules, doing what he thinks is right and respecting his code. “We have a pro-attitude toward Tony because he actualizes, albeit fictionally, the sort of abandon we want for ourselves - the capacity to pursue our desires unshackled and, in large measure, unpunished.” (Carroll 125) But because he is motivated solely by revenge, this becomes an act of villainy, and of simply tying the loose ends his lifestyle does not let him leave untied. This is his code of honour, however twisted that sense of honour may be.

Tony’s violent criminal acts are simple demonstrations of power in a world already bursting at the seams with violence. He was brought up in the world of organised crime; this is all he knows, so he must resort to violence in order to survive. Survival, in this sense, does not always mean that he must fight for his life, but also that, to keep his legacy alive, who he is, he must live up to the image of the gangster. What is at stake in *The Sopranos* and what Tony is fighting for, to a certain extent, is the perpetuation of a myth - the hero figure, either cowboy or gangster.

As the series progresses, there seem to be two Tonys, not always cohabiting peacefully with one another. There is Tony Soprano the Mafia boss and Tony Soprano the family man. The issue of dualism is another hallmark of recent television series. Their protagonists, while acting out on antisocial behaviour impulses, reveal the duality of their personalities. The two Tonys

must balance their relationship with the distinct worlds of the two different families: the Mafia and the actual family. Alternating between the two and unable to choose who he truly wants to be, Tony Soprano becomes not a master of two worlds, like the hero in Campbell's definition, but a mirrored image of himself, someone who has succumbed to the energy of his dark side. Committing to his inner demons, he wears a two-faced mask to travel between both worlds, allowing him to be both a loving father and a ruthless criminal.

The Sopranos ends on a bittersweet note in its last episode "Made in America" with an abrupt cut to black as Tony looks up from the table of the diner where his family is about to eat.

The build-up of tension is extraordinary. We expect either brutal violence or some sort of cathartic breakthrough, but are given neither. After eight years of rich storylines and complex characters the likes of which television had not seen before, *The Sopranos* ended with a shrug rather than a bang. . . . After all, the show had been confounding viewer expectations from the start: undercutting character sympathy with deliberate acts of cruelty; killing off beloved characters; rarely tying up loose ends; and generally treating its moral compass like the spinner in a game of Twister. (DeFino 98-99)

Furthermore, the ending of *The Sopranos* is a comment on the nature of change. Tony's character does not change. After he has been shot (during his dream-induced state in the hospital in season six he kept asking "Who am I? Where am I going?"), Tony states that he will appreciate life more, for each day is a gift, but instead life goes on in a "business as usual" fashion. He fails to change because such is the nature of tragic characters. "Every day is a gift, but does it have to be a pair of socks?" (*The Sopranos*, 6:09 "The Ride"), Tony says. His permanent dissatisfaction proves that he will never be complete, no matter how frustrated he feels, how lost, how miserable, his utter self-involvement and consequent psychopathic behaviour will always be the cause of his undoing.

Tony Soprano's understanding of his place in the world and consequent disenchantment is what makes him a tragic character. Despite his pride, or perhaps because of it, the consciousness of his role as a soldier prepares him

for war. Nevertheless, this is a war without victors. Everyone loses and everyone dies. What then is the place of the hero? Is there still a good fight to be fought? Tony's search for meaning turns out to be a pointless pursuit. His tragic flaw is his own vulnerability, also that which makes him human. His undoing is brought about by holes in his armour. Not because such holes reveal his weaknesses, but because they fail to make him change. In the absence of change, there are no lessons learnt, no boons shared, no balance restored. The hero protagonist has failed to cross the threshold and back, remaining tragically in between. Lost, adrift, cut off from the world, he is painfully alone and beyond the redemption he sought.

To those who do not descend from the bloodline of a Founding Father, to those who no longer believe that a conversation of ideas and energy and honesty can save the world, to those cut adrift from orthodox values and traditional notions of virtue, there is no continuity, no tradition, no great future, only some money stuffed in a mattress, the odd pleasure where it can be found, and a commitment to live "like there's no tomorrow, because there isn't one". (DeFino 159)

Like Sisyphus, Tony Soprano's fate is a continuous struggle towards a fruitless end. Knowing that he will have to push the rock up the hill for all eternity only to have it roll back down every single day is the only future he can aspire to. What still makes him human is the hope, however vain, that one day the rock will settle on top of the hill.

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