

**Mobsters the Ultimate Antihero**

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## Abstract

The mobster and crime genre has been around for a very long time, nearly as long as film itself. While many people like to write off the mobster genre as violent and low brow it doesn't change the fact that it is enduringly popular and ripe for analysis. My particular interest in this subject comes from my love of the genre while under the Covid Quarantine shut down I spent a good chunk of my time re-watching *The Sopranos* by David Chase. During this time I grew curious as to why I loved the show so much and started relating to the characters. Almost all of the characters are people who do illegal things and have a very skewed moral compass. I kind of got obsessed and even went to a screening of *Goodfellas* in a theater over the summer. The lives of these on screen mobsters were just so interesting but also the characters were just so funny. My friends and I were constantly quoting some of the most iconic lines of these movies and shows.

Given this chance I have looked at what the scholars have said about mobsters and what the content had to offer. Through analyzing key scenes in *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola, *GoodFellas* by Martin Scorsese and *The Sopranos* by David Chase, I wanted to answer the question as to what is an antihero? This question was vital as those are who the mobsters are in film and television. It was tough to discern what characteristics make an antihero as they are very complex characters that do not follow a black and white moral compass. This then leads to my other question as to why do we relate to these anti heroes? Through the lens of psychology I wanted to see what made us love and relate to these characters. We see them kill people and even turn their backs on people they once loved but how can we relate to characters that can do such bad things? Through my research I came to the conclusion that in reality, we do not want to be a mobster. Instead we want to garner their power and commend them for taking what they want

which is taboo in one's normal everyday life. Mobsters are also relatable because they embody the attributes of the American dream that we all ultimately strive for at the end of the day: money and power.

### **Mobsters: the Ultimate Antihero**

The antihero character is something that is wildly popular in film and television especially in regards to the gangster/mob genre. By analysing the antihero through the lens of gangster and mob television shows and films these researchers have come up with ideas of what the antihero is, and why we like them and how they can be related to social mobility. Through their analysis they show how the morally ambiguous gangster is one of complexity that needs further analysis.

### **Literature Review**

#### **What is an Anti hero ?**

Defining what exactly makes an antihero is important in understanding why audiences root for them. An antihero is often a villain, but not necessarily so. Antihero's have positive traits and qualities that blur the line between hero and villain. (Canet, 99) While they are not outright "villains" they do something that breaks the "social contract" like lying, committing adultery, or engaging in vices (Canet, 99) The important trait of an antihero is engaging in morally questionable behavior in order to achieve their goal. But the important distinction is what the difference is between an antihero and the straight up villain. Oftentimes the "villain" or antagonist in these stories is someone who is traditionally on the good side but they exhibit negative traits and questionable morals. The antihero is framed as the protagonist, and thus the story most often follows this character's point of view. We see the story through their perspective and are subject to their biases (Carroll, 374). This often makes it easier to show the character as

the lesser evil in most situations(Carroll, 374). This is an important trait for most stories about antiheroes because it is an important way for getting the audience on their side (Carroll, 374). “The antihero does not act against honorable people, but against those who are worthy of punishment; he thus takes the law into his own hands” (Canet,104). This type of vigilante justice that the antihero provides makes the viewer sympathize with them as their actions are morally wrong but their justification for the action is morally just (Canet, 104). In the presence of these figures, it is easier for the audience to side with the antihero (Long,54).

### **Why do we relate to the antihero ?**

Now that we know what an Antihero is, why do we love them so much ? The Affective Disposition Theory essentially states that “whether we like or dislike characters is based on our judgement of the morality of these characters” (Eden, Daalmans & Johnson, 350). This characterization of morality does not apply with morally ambiguous characters because our perceptions of them are not black and white as they have both redeeming and negative traits (Eden, Daalmans & Johnson, 351). “Part of this identification process are also feelings of empathy towards a fictional character and a simulation of his or her cognitions and emotions. One reason why audience members identify with MACs is that they are perceived to be more realistic than purely good or purely bad characters" (Meier & Neubaum, 633) “The antihero’s world is filled of villains and lacking in heroes, and the presence of the former combined with the absence of the latter helps to redeem the antihero, making him morally preferable” (Canet, 104). Since we see antiheroes as realistic it is natural to think that we too are also antiheroes.

Antiheroes can be a reflection of our culture. Tony Soprano, for example can often be seen poking fun at traditional authority and making his own rules (Beale, 19). When we see Tony Soprano we see a “real criminal. I wish I could be that way. I really do.” And at the same

time: “I hope something bad happens to him, because it’s probably wrong to feel that way” (Beale, 19). While we do relate to the antihero we do not want to be them outright, “audiences desire the wish-fulfillment of seeing a protagonist take what he wants, but also need moral superiority over the antihero” (Beale, 19). This seeking of fulfillment from the antihero is one that is common across many sources. Tony follows the outlaw code and follows the mafia's sense of morals and duty which differs from our moral view (Canet, 103). Yet Tony always found a way to justify his skewed moral code by saying that he is like a soldier who follows a specific code and his code which is similar to most anti heroes and people are of “honor, family and loyalty” (Canet,103). Sympathy for the antihero comes from the writers of these mobster films and shows harping on their positive moral traits and on the factors that justify their immoral behavior (Canet, 104).

“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” (Warshow, 131). We as viewers “suspend moral judgements for the sake of the enjoyment of the story” (Canet, 108). It creates a “fictional relief” that the fake context of the mafia film or show relieves the viewers of having to think of the moral implications and consequences of the antiheroes’ actions (Canet,108).

### **Organized Crime as a means for upward social mobility.**

For many, the appeal of the sympathetic gangster archetype is that crime is a means to an end for impoverished groups to raise their position in society. Often represented by marginalized groups such as immigrants, the audience is sympathetic to these gangsters as they identify with their struggle and even draw inspiration from them. Often achieving this upward mobility is

dependent on capitalistic pursuits such as big houses, fancy clothes and expensive cars, these are relatable goals for those living in a consumerist society. If we look at Italian immigrants as an example, we see a comprehensive timeline of how this historically mistreated group of immigrants was portrayed throughout American Cinema. Some of the earliest movies in America were about Italian immigrants who were portrayed as villainous figures such as mobsters or terrorists. These depictions were made to play into the inherent xenophobia of the average American (Cortes, 109). Following the depression there began to be a more nuanced view of the gangsters. Many of them would have an air of sympathy for those who were turned to crime in order to achieve their “American Dream” which was becoming ever more difficult to achieve (Cortes, 110-111). With “The Godfather” came a movie that showed these Italian American criminals with an air of admiration. These were criminals who lived by a code of honor who used crime as a means to uplift their family and community (Cortes, 117). And this idea of using crime as a means for achieving a better life is ever present in the crime drama. Take the BBC show “Peaky Blinders” as an example. The show is about an English gang operating in 1920’s Birmingham England. The main character Thomas Shelby strives to make his family’s illegal betting operation a more legitimate one. He strives to move away from his perceived lower class upbringing. In his pursuit he moves out of the impoverished city into a countryside mansion. Both the move to legitimize his business and the move to a fancier house are attempts to elevate one's position in society (Long, 58,59). The attempt is ultimately unsuccessful as Shelby realizes that changing classes is more difficult than amassing physical wealth. (Long, 61)

We see a similar situation in “The Sopranos” where the show begins with the main character living in an Upper-middle class neighborhood in a “McMansion” (Miller, 208). As a third generation Italian-American, Tony’s life of crime has provided him and his family a lavish

comfortable life (Miller, 208). While more successful than Thomas Shelby of establishing himself into a higher social class, Tony is still somewhat of an outsider to many of his well to do neighbors who make the Soprano family a recurring subject of gossip (Miller,210). Despite this, the Sopranos are more of a success story as illustrated by the Working class homes of the previous generation in many ways displaying the success of Italian Americans in general assimilating into the American culture (Miller, 211).

## **Conclusion**

The antihero is a complex character that needs further examination. These researchers lacked extensive content analysis of the characters of these films and shows. They spoke of what and how these antiheroes arise but they do not truly get to the essence of why we love them. Do we actually love the antihero or do we love their witty banter and how interesting they are? When we look at the antihero why do we feel ashamed to relate to them ? These are all questions I wish to develop further in my own research. I believe the research before left me a good base to look into these topics and conduct my own study of the content of gangster/mafia film and television.

## **Method**

My method for this research is content analysis. Content analysis was the best for my topic because they deal majorly with mobster films and TV shows. Through being able to look at specific scenes and analyzing it has given me ample room to compare what the literature says about Mobsters and their antihero status and what the films and shows have to offer. The purpose of looking at the content via youtube of *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola, *GoodFellas* by Martin Scorsese and *The Sopranos* by David Chase is to see who the mobsters are and how their

characters show the world of being a mobster and how they are anti heroes. I also hope to show how the mobsters are also relatable to the viewers.

## **Results**

### [Don Vito and Michael Corleone talk](#)

In this scene, Michael and Vito Corleone discuss Business and family at the Corleone house. At a certain point, Vito tells Michael “I never wanted this for you.” He is of course referring to Michael becoming Don of the Corleone family. Vito goes on to say that he wanted Michael to become a senator or a governor. Vito wanted Michele to become a well-respected member of the community and a leader, a career in public service that can be well respected. Vito Corleone is a man who is known as a planner who thinks many steps ahead.

It was Vito's intention that his family's business goes from being based in crime to a legitimate one that could gain a higher position in society. This sentiment is mentioned many times in *The Godfather* series as for the business, there is always the desire to shift the Corleone family away from crime to operate nearly completely legal business ventures. Through looking at this scene we see a sense of vulnerability in these men that are supposed to be so strong which is relatable to most viewers. Our families have expectations of us and while the stakes aren't as high as to being head of a mob family it is pressure none the less that we can all relate to. We also can see a sense of morality within Vito that made him a relatable anti hero because he truly wanted Michael and his children to have a better life.

This mirrors the immigrant experience in the country overall. It is because of this drive to create a better life that many poorer immigrants turn to organize crime to make up for the lack of opportunities that are available to them.

### [The Goodfellas \(Intro\) As far as I can remember I always wanted to be a gangster](#)



This opening scene of the movie has the iconic line “As far as I can remember I always wanted to be a gangster” in which the main character Henry talks about his youth and what drove him to the lifestyle of the gangster. Henry explains how gangsters exist outside the law and the conventions of society. Henry watched them as a child admiring how they would hang out late and do what they wanted and only answered to each other. Through money or intimidation they took and did whatever they wanted. These power dynamics are essential to understand why we relate to Henry.

The childhood Henry in many ways represents the audience member. Admiring the gangster drama and how they live vicariously through the characters. The average audience members enjoy the gangster characters because in many ways they want the fantasy of living above the laws and societal restraints. This for many is the appeal of the Mob movie as a power fantasy for those who are frustrated with the mundane lifestyle they live. Young Henry is the audience member as people may know that Gangsters are not “good” people but they are rebels, and their lifestyle is fun. And like Henry, the audience who sees the events of *Goodfellas* will soon learn just how dangerous the lifestyle becomes and how it changes people for the worse. For Henry, he will want to get out, the viewer will begin to root against the gangster characters, as life reveals how bad those people really are.

#### [The Sopranos: The Strong Silent Type.](#)

This is a scene from the pilot of *The Sopranos* which takes place during one of Tony’s therapy sessions with Dr. Melphy. These therapy sessions were one of the most iconic literary devices in the show as they allowed for an exploration of the main character’s psyche. It is also a unique way of creating dialogue that allows for character development in real time. This scene in particular is interesting because it recalls a lot about Tony Soprano in the way how he views society and himself. Talking about Gary Cooper as the “Strong Silent Type” refers to an old

school way of writing a hero. He does what he has to do without expressing his thoughts and feelings. This is a sentiment that Tony admires and believes describes him. This Strong Silent type is also a characteristic of the antihero. The antihero in popular culture is usually a character who is mysterious and brooding which are qualities that make them alluring to both the audience and the other characters around them. These characters from other media can include Don Draper of *Mad Men*, Micheal Corleone of *The Godfather*, or Thomas Shelby of *Peaky Blinders*. To the cinematic world around them these characters seem calm, collected, and confident. However the viewer and when the plot demands it, other characters see the other side of these characters as they act out or deal with internal trauma. Sometimes this garners sympathy and readability, and sometimes it sours the view the audience has if the actions are more reprehensible or pathetic.

What's ironic is that Tony and *The Sopranos* is that he is what happened to "The Strong Silent type." Characters like Tony Soprano and the other anti heroes are what replaced that strong silent type because audiences became bored with the standard black and white narrative. The popularity of nuanced characters took over the popularity of black and white characters. Throughout "The Soprano" there are many of these therapy sessions and often they serve to humanize Tony. Tony is of course a violent criminal with many toxic traits, but he is also a man who appears to care about his family and had a difficult childhood (Canet, 103). Tony's relationship with his family is one of the most important aspects of who he is. He attempts to be a good father to his children but is often frustrated with them. It is this struggle that we can sympathize with him. If the show was simply about a violent criminal and murderer, but it's the glimpses into his life and personal struggle that makes a character that is traditionally a villain, into an antihero. But we, as an audience need to see this personal strife and fears. The antihero

cannot be the “Strong Silent type” because then the audience will not receive any context as to why they do the things they do. If Tony did talk about his families and the frustrations they bring, then the viewer will not find him as relatable.

It is the interactions with his other family members that really create sympathy for Tony. Tony's relationship with his mother was toxic at best, the audience see this many times throughout the series. Livia Soprano is a pessimistic, manipulative, and angry person. Tony is constantly trying to be a good son to his mother but she never appreciates it. She is rude and manipulative to the family around her putting people against each other. At a certain point she even inadvertently convinces Tony's uncle to put a hit out on him. However She herself is somewhat of a victim because of Tony's father Johnny. Threw flashbacks and conversation the viewer sees just what kind of a person Tony's father was. A gangster himself Johnny set a poor example for his son who followed in his footsteps. Johnny cheated on his wife and didn't really hide his criminal activity from his son. With such an example, it's no surprise that Tony turned out the way he did and most importantly why the audience can cut Tony some slack when judging him for his actions.

#### [The Sopranos 4.07 - "You take the phony appraisals to HUD"](#)

In the Sopranos S04, ep,7, Tony and his crew devise a real estate scam with a bogus urban development project. What's important about this scene is who Tony is conspiring with, a recurring character Assemblyman Zellman who is an elected public official and Murice Tiffen, a black activist. This kind of scam is Tony's life and something completely in line with his character, however the other two men are supposed to be community leaders who are supposed to help their community, instead they are engaging in a shady scam to rip the city off for money that is supposed to be allocated for programs to help the poor. This type of dynamic is important

for stories with authors as characters like Zellman and Tiffen are corrupt when they are supposed to be good, therefore betraying principles and violating any kind of honor. When the supposed “Good Guys” are bad, then it is much easier to support the antihero because they are at least being consistent and tend to at least follow their own principles. An important factor in the anti-hero story is the environment he operates in has no real heroes, instead there are only other villains (Canet,103).

These “villains” as they relate to the antihero need to be more despicable and vile than the audience can be in complete support of the antihero triumphing over them. The Soprano’s tends to bring in new antagonists to Tony with each season. These antagonists are characters like Richie Aprile who is overly violent and unreasonable and attempts to make a move to kill and replace Tony (Carroll,374). Threw these actions alone, it is hard to argue that Riche is much worse than Tony, however we see Richie reject his son for being gay, and hit the woman he was dating, Tony’s sister Janice. Then the character of Ralphie Cifaretto who is a true sociopath. His character is introduced as the boyfriend of Rosalie April, a grieving widow and mother. Ralphie's character is always undermining Tony and giving bad advice to Jackie, the son of Rosalie. Ralphie actually orders Jackie killed, the son of the woman he is romantically involved with and then will actually cheat on her while she is grieving. Ralphie is one of the most vile characters in the show. He will later in the series beat a pregnant (possibly with his child) woman he was dating to death, and kill a race horse he owned. The last of which causes Tony to finally kill Ralphie. Ralphie being such a particularly vile counterpart the viewer actually revels in Tony killing him, Tony is an instrument of divine justice (Canet,107).

A clear example of this is again in “*Peaky Blinders*” where the villain for much of the show is inspector Chester Cambell who is put on the case of the Shelby crime family.

Traditionally the hardboiled detective role is filled out in crime dramas where there is a clear line of who is good and who is evil. We have seen Thomas Shelby do questionable things up to this point, however Thomas still maintains a code of ethics. Inspector Campbell on the other hand is morally reprehensible in his actions, even his own character admitting to doing misdeeds and “Crossing the Line.” While the “Hard-Boiled Detective narrative is a classic foil of the gangster character, the detective is usually someone the audience can get behind because he is a paragon of virtue and upholding the law, someone who might have a hardline approach but is ultimately good and maintains a code of ethics (Long, 54).

And so the audience can effectively root for the detective over the criminal. But in Campbell's case, we have a character whose definition of “getting the job done” goes much further than many can stomach and his actions are often reprehensible. It is mentioned that Campbell made his reputation in Northern Ireland working against IRA terrorists, which could better justify his actions as terrorists would be assumed to lack the moral high ground that Shelby might have. In the context of the show, Campbell is now operating in Birmingham against a local crime family who have deep ties with their community as they all come from this working class upbringing. The Shelbys have a certain “Robin hood” role in this regard as they do attempt to help and give back to their community. Campbell may as well be seen as a foreign invader who harasses and endangers the community (Long, 55).

Campbell's character is at its most vile when he actually rapes a member of the Shelby family, Polly who in many ways serves as the family's Matriarch and in many ways the moral compass of the other characters. Rape is in many ways the ultimate evil and is a disgusting and irredeemable action. Even an action such as murder, an action protagonist Thomas Shelby has engaged in, is more redeemable as long as it follows a sort of code (Long, 55-56). Because of

Cambell being a more despicable “villain” and committing this most heinous act, the viewer has an even stronger reason to root for the comparatively moral Thomas Shelby can now be a tool of vengeance towards Cambell because the viewer wants to see evil punished (Canet, 104).

But in the same way that we route for these antiheroes for maintaining a certain code with their misdeeds, we also wish to see them punished when they cross the line themselves. As Canet said “Once Sympathy towards the antihero is established, the next step is to bring it into question” (Canet, 104). There is a very clear point for this with Tony Soprano, and this is in episode 18, season 6. Tony actually kills his nephew Christopher. Tony was going down a bad path before this, and there was a turn for his character earlier than this where Tony begins a downward spiral. But this is the moment that there was no coming back for Tony. By the Time of the finale, there were people who wanted Tony to get his just deserts because not only has Tony killed a man who he considered like a son, he also broke the very code of the Mafia where you cannot just kill a “made guy.”

### **Discussion**

Exploring the topic of Mobsters and adding to this conversation made me more aware of how complex the crime genre really is. It's very easy to write off the genre as low brow and criticize it for only being male dominated. Through analysis we can see that this is not really true. These mobster characters like Henry, Vito and Tony are all extremely complex, they are not really villains, in a traditional sense, they are anti heroes. These anti heroes are constantly dealing with impossible situations that mirror the struggles so many people face in their own lives. Just because these characters are often criminals does not mean one cannot identify with them? This paper really gets down into how these characters are so carefully crafted as to elicit the audience to empathize and even root for them. When we pull back the curtains of all the

violence and illegal activity these mobsters are just men who are trying to make it in an impossible world.

This does not negate the fact that these men do horrible things in the films and shows. In no way should we look at a mobster like Tony Soprano and think to ourselves “wow I really want to be like Tony.” Tony is not the greatest person as he lies, he murders and he cheats his way through life. But people can admire him because, while he does do all those horrible things he also never really had much choice due to his upbringing. We also see his struggles with his family and while he is not the best father or husband, we can relate to the struggles that family life brings. Tony is cognitively aware that his situation is not normal and that he is a “bad” person but he maintains some semblance of principles and a code of honor. His relationship with Dr. Melfi exemplifies this because she is a woman that he respects and is willing to be vulnerable with. Tony suffers in being a mobster because of his vulnerability that he constantly tries to hide. Vulnerability is something that we can all relate to as it is something many of us struggle with as well. It is hard to bear your soul out to the world and it is not secret that we all close ourselves off. Especially being a man you are taught not to express your emotions and bottle it down so it is refreshing to see a man like Tony on screen that is representative of a man being vulnerable but also harnesses so much power. It is only when we see him begin to break his code, treat his friends and family progressively worse that the audience and the characters around him lose their empathy for him and just wish to see him punished.

In terms of defining success in America, money is everything. We see money and automatically think that is the only measure of success. We can see that all of these mobsters have material success. They have the money, the cars and the lavish home but what do they get left with? At the end because these mobsters were so in love with the idea of the American

dream, wealth was the only thing that mattered and they would get it through any means necessary. Whether those means involved murder or any other illegal activity any normal person wouldn't even conceive of. In the end their loyalty to the mob and all that stuff didn't matter because they were either killed or put in jail for short term success. Greed is a central theme in all these movies and shows and there's a reason why. Money does not equate to happiness and no matter how much you have it is never enough to stop what you are doing. For example in *GoodFellas* Henry is seduced by the idea of being a gangster because of the power and freedom it entails. As he gets older, he begins to see how hollow and messed up the criminal world is. He is absorbed into it and his lust for money leads him further into the drug trade and cocaine addiction. When he ends up getting caught, his former friends begin cutting ties or even begin to plan his murder. When he finally makes a deal with the cops and gets put into witness protection. He betrays the most sacred code of not snitching. When it is all over and he and his family are safe in witness protection, It is not the money or the drugs that Henry misses, but it's the freedom and an idea of being above the law and society. He laments that he is just a nobody now who lives in a boring suburb. He is actually left with a life similar to the actual audience member of the movie. This further pushes the narrative of why the viewer likes these movies, it's a sense of escape from the mundane. Henry's punishment isn't death like most criminal characters get, it's normalcy.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately mobster film and Television shows are not going anywhere and there will be more shows and films to analyze. I am excited to see how the mobster genre evolves the antihero further and really shows us why we love them so much. Through this analysis we have seen what



an antihero is, why we relate to them and how they exemplify how we see success in America. These themes are ones that I was happy to analyze.

Furthermore we can see that power dynamics, moral complexity and success are why we relate to mobsters as anti heroes so much. Through looking so deeply into *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola, *GoodFellas* by Martin Scorsese and *The Sopranos* by David Chase it exemplified how much of these anti heroes are just human beings and ultimately are at some point or another fighting against social norms within their mobster identity and their American identity. This identity clash is also what makes the mobsters relatable as we all deal with multiple sides of ourselves with external influences. The power that these mobsters hold as anti heroes really change them and ultimately we all tend to crave a sense of power and when we see these mobsters

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