The Godfather Study Guide

The Godfather by Mario Puzo

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

As soon as it was published in 1969, Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* began setting sales records, becoming the fastest selling book up to its time. Its enormous popularity increased in 1972 when Fran-cis Ford Coppola's movie version was released. The movie won several Academy Awards, including one for Coppola and Puzo's script adaptation of his novel. It is one of the highest-grossing movies of all time and is frequently cited by critics as one of the greatest American movies ever made. It has spawned two highly respected sequels, both co-scripted by Puzo. The novel has consistently stayed in print and has sold over 21 million copies worldwide.

The story revolves around Vito Corleone, a leader of organized crime in the 1940s. He is a man who rules with quiet persuasion, asking those who wish favors from him for their loyalty and dealing mercilessly with those who cross him. When other criminals try to involve his organization in the drug trade, Corleone resists and the shield of power that he has built around his family is threatened. The aged crime lord must defend his family and pass control of his empire to one of his three sons.

This book helped define how the world views organized crime in America, framing the aspects of greed and violence that are inherent in the underworld with an emphasis on family, respect, and honor. The character of Vito Corleone, the Godfather, has been compared to Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield as an archetype, a personality so true to the American experience that, though fictional, he seems familiar to everyone. Far beyond being just another crime novel, *The Godfather* relates to all stories of immigrant families who are trying, over the course of generations, to fit into the mainstream of American life.

Author Biography

It is no coincidence that *The Godfather* turned out to be a bestseller: Mario Puzo, its author, planned from first to last that the book would be popular and make him money. Puzo was born October 15, 1920, to a family of Italian immigrants, and he spent his childhood in the Italian ghetto of New York called Hell's Kitchen. He was a young boy when he decided to be a writer, but he was discouraged in this by the family's impoverished circumstances. His mother aspired for him to work for the railroad, like his father and brother.

The tension between the life of a writer that Puzo wanted to lead and the traditional working class life that his family was steering him toward was broken by America's entry into World War II in 1941. During the war, stationed in Europe, he lived the life of freedom for a while, drinking and gambling and spending money freely on girls. While in the army, he married Erika Lina Broske. He returned to civilian life five years later and settled into a civil service job. He still wrote short stories and published them once in a while.

Puzo's first novel, *The Dark Arena*, was published in 1955, ten years after the war ended. It was a personal story, based on his experiences during the war. The novel gained him some critical acclaim—for example, Maxwell Geismer noted in the *Saturday Review* that "It is a very good novel indeed, and one reads it with the sense of discovery and pleasure that a new talent evokes." Puzo was disappointed to find that critical acclaim did not assure him economic independence: he only made $3,500 for that novel and $3,000 for his next book, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, published in 1964.

Puzo was forty-five years old and owed more than $20,000 to friends and relatives when an editor from G. P. Putnam overheard him telling stories that he had heard throughout his life about the Mafia and offered him an advance of $5,000 for a book about the underworld. The book that Puzo wrote went on to sell more than 21 million copies. Although he did not become rich from *The Godfather*, he used his fame as a springboard to the kind of wealth of which he had always dreamed. His experience in co-writing the movies based on his novel led to a career as a screenwriter, with acclaimed scripts like *Superman* and *Superman II*, *Earthquake*, and *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery*.

His subsequent novels were, like *The Godfather*, designed to make the author rich. They included *Fools Die*, about professional gamblers (one of Puzo's strongest passions in life was high-stakes gambling) and *The Sicilian*, which was based on the true story of a notorious Italian bandit, incorporating several characters from *The Godfather* into its plot. All of Puzo's later books reached the bestseller lists, and all except the posthumously published *Omerta* have been adapted to film. He died of heart failure on July 2, 1999, at the age of 79.

Plot Summary

Book I

The Godfather opens in 1945, at the wedding of Connie Corleone, the only daughter of Vito Cor-leone, the head of the most powerful organized crime family in the United States. During the wedding, Corleone, respectfully referred to as the Don or Godfather, is obliged to meet with people who seek his help. As the novel explains, "by tradition no Sicilian can refuse a request on his daughter's wedding day." One man's daughter was raped, and he asks Don Corleone to punish the rapists; another man needs political support so that his daughter's fiancé will not be deported; another, the Don's actual godson, is a famous singer whose career will fail if he does not get the movie role that a Hollywood producer has refused to him.

The long wedding sequence is used to introduce the main characters. Don Corleone's oldest son, Sonny, is a hot-tempered ladies man; Fredo is a weakwilled drunkard; and his youngest son, Michael, has disappointed his father by staying out of the family business and joining the army. Michael is at the wedding with his girlfriend from college, Kay Adams, who does not know that the family is into organized crime until he tells her some chilling stories about other wedding guests. Other important characters include Tom Hagen, the Corleone family's adopted son, who serves the Godfather as a counselor in criminal activities, and Clemenza and Tessio, the captains in the Corleone army.

As soon as the wedding is over, Don Corleone takes his sons to visit his old friend and counselor, Genco Abbandando, who is dying in the hospital. That same night, Hagen is sent to California to make the movie producer give the required role to his godson, Johnny Fontane. While they are talking, the producer shows Hagen a beautiful race horse that he has bought. He says that he is sorry that he cannot cast Johnny in the movie. The next morning, the producer wakes to find the horse's severed head in his bed, and, realizing the ferocity and stealth of the Corleone crime family, he arranges to cast Johnny.

A meeting is arranged with Virgil Sollozzo, a drug dealer who wants the Corleone family to be partners with him. Don Corleone says that he will not be involved with drugs, but during the meeting Sonny shows interest.

Three months later, an assassination attempt is made on the Don's life. He survives, but while he is in the hospital, another attempt is made. Michael, who is visiting at the time, manages to scare off the assassins. A meeting of family officials determines that Sollozzo the drug dealer will stop at nothing to kill the Don. Michael, who has stayed out of the family business, is the only one who can get close enough to Sollozzo to kill him; he shoots him dead in a restaurant and goes into exile in Italy.

Book II follows Johnny Fontane's life in Hollywood. Taking the advice of the Don, he has left his second wife, who committed adultery, and has established a platonic relationship with his first wife and their two daughters. Tom Hagen comes to California to offer Johnny money to start his own production company.

Book III

Book III starts with Vito Corleone's childhood: as a boy named Vito Andolini in Corleone, Sicily, he was forced to flee to America when a local Mafia chief ordered his entire family killed over an insult. Later, in New York, Clemenza and Tessio taught Vito crime, and he showed his capacity for violence by killing a gangster who tried to rob him. His reputation rose as he did favors for the people in the neighborhood, asking only their friendship in return. His business grew as he imported liquor during Prohibition, helped elect politicians, and established gambling syndicates.

Book IV

The gang war that began when the Don was shot continues, with Sonny leading the Corleone family against the other families of New York. Detectives visit Kay Adams in New Hampshire to ask if she knows Michael's whereabouts. They tell Kay that Michael killed Sollozzo and the police officer that was with him, and they threaten to tell her father, a minister, that she and Michael stayed in hotels together. When they do tell Kay's father, the minister stands up for his daughter.

One day, Connie Corleone's husband, Carlo Rizzi, beats her up. When she calls the family house in Long Island, Sonny hears what happened, and he drives off toward their apartment in Manhattan in a rage. The family's enemies catch him in a trap and kill him in a hale of bullets.

Book V

After the death of Sonny, Don Corleone leaves his sick bed and returns to business. He arranges a summit with the heads of crime families around the country and negotiates an end to the gangland war. The Corleone family loses power and prestige, but the Don insists that the other families allow Michael to return to America in peace. A plan is devised to have another man who is already sentenced to death confess to the murders Michael committed.

Lucy Mancini, whose affair with Sonny began at the wedding of Connie and Carlo, has been sent to Las Vegas after his death. There, she meets Dr. Jules Segal, a brilliant surgeon. They start an affair, and he diagnoses a physical abnormality that prohibits her from having a satisfying sex life. He operates on her to fix the problem.

Book VI

In Sicily, Michael comes to appreciate the culture of his father's people. He falls in love with a local girl, Apollonia, courts her according to ancient Sicilian custom, and marries her. One day, when they are going on a trip, she decides to drive the car. Michael sees his bodyguard sneaking away seconds before the car explodes, killing his bride.

Book VII

Years after she last saw him, Kay Adams calls the Corleone house to find out that Michael has been back home for six months. They meet, renew their relationship, and marry.

In Las Vegas, Dr. Segal is introduced to Johnny Fontane and determines that his weak voice is not caused by years of smoking and drinking, but by warts on his larynx. He performs a very simple operation to remove them and Johnny's singing career is revived.

Michael goes to Las Vegas and offers to buy a casino from Moe Greene, for whom his brother Fredo has been working. He is rejected, and later Moe Greene is murdered. The Don, working in his garden one morning, suffers a massive heart attack and dies. Michael tells Tom Hagen that the head of a rival family will try to kill him, that the person who approaches him with a deal from his rivals will be a traitor. The next day, Tessio calls to arrange a peace meeting.

Book VIII

On the day that Michael stands as godfather at the baptism of Connie and Carlo's child, all of the family's enemies are murdered. These enemies include Tessio, the bodyguard from Sicily, rival mob bosses Tattaglia and Barzini, and Carlo Rizzi, who admits to having helped enemies trap Sonny. When Connie accuses Michael of being involved in Carlo's death, he lies to her and Kay.

Book IX

The Corleone family is restored to the position of most powerful crime family in America. Kay has converted to Catholicism. She leaves Michael and moves back to New Hampshire. Tom Hagen comes out to tell her that Michael is willing to give her anything she wants to ensure their children's welfare. While there, he explains the pressures Michael lives with as the new Don, how it was his responsibility to kill Carlo and Tessio, as traitors. She ends up returning to him, burying her sorrows by going to daily mass and praying for Michael's soul.

Characters

Kay Adams

Kay is Michael Corleone's college sweetheart, a Protestant girl from New Hampshire whose upbringing is distinctly different from Michael's. At the wedding in the beginning of the novel, Michael tells her stories that only hint at the family business until, when pressed, he openly admits the atrocities committed by Luca Brasi in the family's service. When Michael is forced to leave the country, Kay remains faithful for a long time, expecting him to call, even as months pass. She keeps in touch with his mother for some time but lets the relationship cool. After a year, she calls Mrs. Corleone and finds out that Michael is back in America. When Kay goes to the Corleone house, she and Michael resume their affair and eventually marry. In the end, Kay knows that their relationship is based on lies, and she ends up praying for Michael's soul, the way that his mother did for his father's soul.

Vito Andolini

See Vito Corleone

Luca Brasi

Luca Brasi is the most vicious murderer in the underworld. He is entirely devoted to Don Corleone, although he is the one person in the world that the Godfather fears. When an attempt is made on Don Corleone's life, the members of the family fear that they would not be able to stop Luca from hunting down and killing those responsible. Brasi, however, has been ambushed and killed before the attack on the Don.

Peter Clemenza

Clemenza is one of the Corleone family's two *caporegimes* or captains. He is an old friend of Don Corleone, the person who first brought him into a life of crime in America, enlisting the young Vito Corleone to hide illegal guns and then, later, to help him with robberies. It is very seldom that Clemenza is referred to without any mention that he has grown fat in his old age.

Apollonia Vitelli Corleone

While hiding out in Sicily, Michael falls in love with Appollonia and marries her. Within a few months, she is killed by a car bomb that was meant to kill Michael.

Connie Corleone

The Don's only daughter, his favorite child, tries to hide the fact that her husband beats her, worried that her father or brothers will have him killed. Throughout the novel, Connie does what she can to make her family accept Carlo, and when he is murdered she is devastated.

Costanzia Corleone

See Connie Corleone

Freddie Corleone

See Fredo Corleone

Fredo Corleone

Fredo is Don Corleone's middle son, the one with the weakest personality who is least influential in the family business. He is present when the Don is gunned down in the street, and suffers a nervous breakdown because of it. During the gang war that follows, Fredo is sent to Las Vegas to recover. Working in a casino brings out Fredo's true personality: he goes from being shy and awkward to being a suave ladies' man. Don Corleone disapproves of his constant sexual activity, and of the fact that he allows the casino owner to humiliate him in public, but Fredo's familiarity with Las Vegas's legalized gambling business makes him valuable to the family's plans to relocate in Nevada.

Michael Corleone

Michael is the focus of this novel, the character that undergoes the most severe change. In the beginning, he is distant from the family's organized crime business, having displeased his father, Vito Corleone, by going into the service during World War II. He is a distinguished war hero, but Don Corleone feels that he is wrong to fight on the behalf of strangers, and not for his family. Michael tells his girlfriend Kay of his family's past, but swears to her that he has nothing to do with the family business.

His attitude changes on the night he visits his father, who has been shot down in the street, and finds him alone and in need of protection. His father's enemies have bribed the police to leave Don Corleone unguarded, and it is only through Michael's help that he is not murdered. That night, a corrupt policeman breaks Michael's jaw, leaving him disfigured for years, mirroring the change that occurs in his heart. Soon Michael decides that the only way his father can be protected is if he himself kills the men threatening him.

After becoming a murderer, Michael goes to Italy to hide. In the land of his father, he comes to understand the old traditions in an entirely new way. He experiences some of the magic of the land when he is struck with love at first sight for a local girl whom he marries, but the country's violent history also becomes clear when she is killed in an attack meant for Michael.

After returning to America, Michael aspires to raise the Corleone empire out of organized crime and into legitimate businesses. He does this by planning, with the help of his father, the murders of the heads of the other crime families. The intelligence and strict morality that kept Michael out of organized crime in the beginning are applied to running the Corleone family the way that his father ran it.

Santino Corleone

Santino Corleone, called Sonny by everyone but his father, is the Godfather's firstborn child, and is generally expected to be the one to take over the family business. He is tall and muscular, intelligent, and ruthless enough to run the crime family, but he has a hot temper that takes control of him at times, making him dangerous. In a meeting about a new drug trade, for instance, Sonny blurts out his interest, leading the drug smugglers to attempt murdering Don Vito Corleone so that they can make a deal with Sonny. After a second attempt is made on the Don's life, Sonny impetuously orders murderous raids against members of rival families, driving the whole underworld deeper into a bloody war that has the public up in arms. In the end, Sonny dies because of his hot temper: he races out of the house without the protection of his bodyguards because he is infuriated with Carlo Rizzi, giving his enemies a chance to shoot him down when he is alone.

Sonny Corleone

See Santino Corleone

Don Vito Corleone

Vito Corleone is the novel's title character, the most powerful person in organized crime in America. He arrived in America at age twelve, orphaned after a local Mafia chief in Corleone, Italy had his entire family killed over an argument. Growing up in New York, Vito Corleone witnessed the workings of the local crime syndicate in the early decades of the twentieth century. At twenty he killed a gangster who threatened him, starting a career in crime that expanded with wise decision-making and a calm, quiet demeanor that never allowed for making decisions in haste or anger.

Although he is willing to use criminal means to achieve his goals, Don Corleone owes much of his power to the loyalty he has gained by doing favors for people over the course of many years. He is called by the honorary titles of Godfather and Don by those who respect and fear him. He is old fashioned and straight-laced about personal matters, disdainful of drugs and excessive alcohol consumption, and prudish about sex.

The Godfather is seen by many in the novel as a sort of godly figure, one who has the power to punish the evil, reward the good, and who is willing to enact justice violently when conventional means are not reliable.

The novel establishes Don Corleone's method of operation in his meeting with an undertaker whose daughter has been raped: he will not agree to kill the rapists because, as he later explains to an assistant, "we're not murders"; also, he will not accept money from the undertaker, but only asks his promise for some favor in return sometime in the future. The rapists are later beaten brutally, giving the undertaker a feeling of justice that a supposedly legitimate society denied him.

Don Corleone's style of making people feel personally indebted to him becomes a key factor in the novel's plot: his enemies, realizing that much of the Corleone family's political influence comes from people's feelings about the Don himself, try to kill him in order to take over the Corleone family empire. When he is hospitalized after being shot, his sons are left to determine how he would handle the situation. The family business is in disarray until the Don is well enough to negotiate a peace settlement. When he retires and puts his son Michael in charge, his enemies feel that the Corleone empire will collapse without the charismatic and wise old man in charge.

Johnny Fontane

Johnny Fontane actually is Vito Corleone's godson, and so the Don has a special fondness for him. He is a successful singer at the start of the novel, with girls screaming and fainting when he opens his mouth to sing. When he comes to Connie's wedding, Johnny is desperate. His voice is ruined, but he thinks he could have a good movie career if he could be cast in a new war movie. Don Corleone arranges for him to get the part, and he suggests that Johnny give up his show business lifestyle of drinking and womanizing. Johnny divorces his acrimonious second wife and establishes a good relationship with his children and his first wife. After the war movie is a success, making him a major movie star, the Corleone family invests in a production company that Johnny is to run, and the movies he produces turn out to be financially lucrative.

Later in the novel, Johnny becomes acquainted with Dr. Jules Segal, who is the house physician at the Las Vegas hotel where Fredo Corleone works. Hearing the raspy sound of Johnny's voice, Segal examines him and finds that the problem is relatively minor: he has warts on his vocal chords, which are easily removed. In addition to his film career, Johnny ends up having a successful singing career again.

Paulie Gatto

Paulie is a hood who is supposed to act as Don Corleone's driver. After finding out that Paulie called in sick on the day that assassins tried to kill the Don, Sonny finds out that Paulie has received suspicious phone calls, and so he has Clemenza kill him.

Tom Hagen

Soon after the start of the novel, Tom Hagen rises to be the Godfather's *Consigliori* or counselor. Hagen was raised by the Corleone family after Sonny Corleone found him wandering the streets as an orphan and took him home. Raised as one of Vito Corleone's sons (Michael even introduces him as "my brother"), he has been to law school and is a practicing lawyer, even though Don Corleone is his only client. Hagen's high position in the family business is so unusual for a non-Italian that members of the other crime families refer to the Corleones as "the Irish gang." When Sollozzo thinks that he has murdered Don Corleone, he has Hagen kidnapped, and explains that his deal makes sense, convincing Hagen to talk to Sonny about forgetting revenge and accepting the business proposition. Hagen feels self-conscious and doubts his ability to fill in for Genco Abbandando, the Godfather's former *Consigliori*, especially when Sonny is killed during a gangland war, but Don Corleone has complete faith in him. He is relieved of his position only when the family is planning to get out of organized crime and must separate Hagan from any illegal activities.

Lucy Mancini

Lucy starts out as Sonny's mistress and, over the course of the novel, blossoms into a smart businesswoman. Sonny Corleone meets Lucy Mancini when she is the maid of honor at his sister's wedding. At the wedding they start their affair, which continues throughout the gangland wars, with him visiting her while bodyguards are posted in the street outside the door. After his death, she feels that she will never be satisfied by another lover, but when Dr. Jules Segal sleeps with her, he realizes that she has a physical problem that can be fixed by relatively minor surgery. He operates on her, and they later marry.

Captain Mark McCluskey

After Michael foils an attempt to kill his father while he is in the hospital, Captain McCluskey shows up with a legion of police officers and threatens to put Michael in jail of he does not leave immediately. Michael insinuates that McCluskey works for his father's enemy, the Turk, and McCluskey is so insulted that he hits Michael, breaking his jaw. The Corleones soon find out that McCluskey does indeed work for the Turk, that he is hired to be his bodyguard, and that any attempt to kill the Turk would mean killing McCluskey. Killing a New York City Police Captain is an unthinkable crime, one that would cause problems throughout the underworld all over the country. Michael does kill them both, though, leaving some enemies to assume that he has acted out of a foolish need for vengeance against the man that disfigured him.

Albert Neri

When he takes charge of the family business, Michael brings in Albert Neri to be his bodyguard. Neri is unfamiliar to the traditional family loyalists, but he turns out to be a ruthless killer, like Luca Brasi.

Carlo Rizzi

Carlo comes from Nevada, and so he looks down at the old-world ethnics of the Corleone family. After marrying Connie, he is disappointed with the relatively small position the family provides for him. He takes his frustration out on Connie, beating her when she is pregnant and sleeping around with other women. After Sonny dies as he is coming to kill Carlo, his behavior becomes much better, and he is accepted into the family business, only to be murdered later for setting Sonny up.

Connie Rizzi

See Connie Corleone

Dr. Jules Segal

Dr. Segal is the house doctor at the Las Vegas hotel where Fredo Corleone and Lucy Mancini work. He is a brilliant surgeon who became an abortionist because he was discouraged by seeing the people he operated on returning to their destructive lifestyles. When he was run out of New York for being an abortionist, the Corleone family protected him and assigned him to the hotel position. In the novel, he diagnoses the problem with Johnny Fontane's vocal cords and with Lucy Mancini's sex organs, operating to cure them both. At Johnny's recommendation, he supervises the surgery to reconstruct Michael's broken face, making sure that the lead surgeons will not try to cause him harm.

Virgil Sollozzo

Sollozo is a heroin smuggler known as "the Turk." He asks for Don Corleone's help in setting up a major heroin operation in the United States. When the Don refuses to become involved in the drug trade, Sollozzo, thinking that Sonny might be interested if he were in charge of the family business, tries to have the Don executed. When two murder attempts fail, he arranges a meeting with Michael in order to negotiate a peace settlement. At that meeting, Michael kills Sollozzo.

Sal Tessio

Tessio is one of the Corleone family's two *caporegimes*, or captains. Tessio has a division of men in Brooklyn and is kept distant from the family in order to surprise the family's enemies. Of the two *caporegimes*, Tessio is often referred to as the smarter one. Michael takes particular note of Tessio's intelligence at the end of the book when, after Don Corleone's death, he makes a deal with the family's enemies to betray Michael.

Themes

Freedom

At a meeting with the heads of crime families from all over the nation, Don Corleone coins a phrase for the underworld that Puzo says will one day be as famous as the expression "Iron Curtain" that Winston Curchill used to describe the separation between communist and democratic countries. The phrase, *cosa nostra*, means "our land," and the Don uses it to explain that he and his peers are free to live by their own rules, required to follow no laws. It occurs in the sentence, "We will manage our world for ourselves because it is our world, *cosa nostra*." In the same speech, he says, "We are all men who have refused to be fools, who have refused to be puppets dancing on a string pulled by the men on high."

It is a noble sentiment, and certainly one that gains more sympathy from the reader than would be gotten if Don Corleone said that he ran his criminal empire to make money. In this book, money is no object in itself, nor are the things that money can buy. The purpose for amassing wealth is the freedom that wealth brings. In the 1960s, particularly, when this book was published, freedom was a goal that seemed impossible. The government was seen as an obstacle to freedom since laws are written precisely to tell people to behave in certain ways. *The Godfather* takes the extreme view that the rulers of organized crime are and should be free of the rules that bind lesser persons.

God

Throughout this novel, there are indications that Don Vito Corleone is a supernatural force with powers to rival God. The first and most obvious hint of this is his nickname, Godfather, which combines the power of the Almighty with the benevolence of a patriarch. He uses his power like a god would, carefully concerned that his actions are just, that his power is not misused or abused. When Bonasera asks him to kill the men who raped his daughter, for instance, he asks the Godfather for the Old Testament sense of justice—an eye for an eye—which the Godfather is willing to give him, but only when Bonasera bows before him. Then, the Godfather gives a speech about why the justice he dispenses is more powerful and fair than that which is applied by the judicial system. He takes the god like position that justice is his to hand out or hold back, telling Bonasera, "consider this justice a gift from my wife."

The reach of the Corleone family is presented in terms that seem almost mystical. For example, in the real world, it is unlikely that one could enter a

man's house and put the bleeding head of a horse into his bed without his noticing it, but Puzo presents the story of Jack Wolz, the movie producer, as if it is a sign that Don Corleone can have miracles performed whenever he should want to.

In addition to being just and nearly omnipotent, Don Corleone has a strict moral code, which makes him turn down a lucrative drug deal. Tom Hagen even tries unsuccessfully to hide the fact that Sollozzo made money in prostitution, knowing that it will dissuade the Don from the current offer. Sexual infidelity, as practiced by his sons Sonny and Fredo, angers him. He does not obey the Ten Commandments of the Bible, but instead makes his own rules, with his own definition about whether he and his operatives are "murderers" or not.

While most of the people who come into contact with Don Corleone stand in awe of his godlike power, the one who is most awed by him is Genco Abbandando, his *Consigliori*. As his oldest

friend, Genco should be the character most poised to see him as human: instead, he expects the Godfather to have power over death itself. "Godfather," Genco implores him, "stay here with me and help me meet death. Perhaps if He sees you near me, He will be frightened and leave me in peace."

Guilt and Innocence

Even though real-life criminals are responsible for injustice and suffering, readers tend to ignore the fact that the members of the Corleone family are guilty criminals. For one thing, Puzo sets up their opponents in all cases to be even worse persons, guilty in their own way and deserving of the fates that are brought down on their heads. For instance, Jack Wolz, the movie producer, shouts ethnic slurs and has an affair with a pubescent girl; Captain McCluskey actually is a crooked cop mixed up in the rackets, as the newspapers are ordered to portray him, and he also disfigures Michael by shattering his jaw; Fanucci, the first man Vito Corleone kills, is a weak man who pretends to be ferocious. In the moral universe established by the book, the Corleone's and their henchman seem almost obligated to use violence in enacting what can be interpreted as justice on their despicable victims. The actions taken by the idealized crime syndicate in the book are only taken against those who seem to deserve them.

The guilt of the Corleones's victims is often presented from the perspective of the criminals, as when Don Corleone muses on the relative innocence of those who enjoy the vice of gambling. But there are also times when Puzo's narrative helps readers see the ugly, repulsive aspects of those who are to suffer at the hands of the mob. He even has Tom Hagen explain to Kay why

all of the people killed in the massive execution at the end of the book got what they deserved.

Family

Several times in the book, Puzo explains that the order of succession in the crime family is not necessarily hereditary. None of the laws of the organization requires that the person to rule the Corleone family after Vito would have to be Sonny, Fredo, or Michael. The use of the word "family" in the syndicate hierarchy is symbolic. At the same time, though, Puzo presents the Corleones as having the type of family structure that would ensure that the family business would stay with them.

At the beginning of the novel, there is a rift in the family. Fredo and Sonny work for their father, but Michael is trying to keep his distance. He does not approve of the family's involvement in crime, and his father does not approve of the fact that he enlisted to serve during the war. Their differences turn out to be slight, though, when danger arises. Michael runs to his father's side when he is in the hospital, and, when it is determined that there is no other way to protect his father, Michael volunteers to commit murder.

Subsequent to the murder, Michael is forced to spend time in the Corleone province of Sicily, the land where his father grew up. He comes to understand his father as a peer, and not just as an imposing authority figure. They have personality traits in common, such as cool heads and impeccable logic.

Critics have said that the true genius of the book is Puzo's way of melding the strong sense of family that pervades Italian families, and most immigrant families, to the structure of an organized crime unit. Everything becomes personal, an act of loyalty or betrayal, when crime partners are thought of as family. Family members become vulnerable when they are involved with crime.

Style

Antagonist

Throughout most of the book, there is no particular antagonist to create dramatic tension in the story. The Corleone family does have enemies who create danger for them, but the circumstances are all small and separate from one another, and so they are taken care of one at a time. The greatest danger in the beginning of the book comes from Virgil Sollozzo, the drug smuggler who tries to kill Don Corleone, but he is killed relatively early. After that, the danger to the family is indistinct. Puzo explains that members of the five families pose a serious threat, and they finally do kill Sonny, but they are given no clear identity.

It is not until the book is nearly two-thirds over that Puzo introduces the enemy, Don Emilio Barzini, at the conference of Dons. Barzini's support of Sollozzo and of the war against the Corleones is not made clear until late in the book. Their lives are fraught with danger, and that danger emanates from Barzini, but readers are not told who it is who has put Don Corleone's life in danger until the novel is nearly over.

An antihero is a main character that lacks the qualities traditionally associated with heroism, but that frustrates the audience's or reader's judgement of him/her with elements of sympathy and mock heroism. Michael Corleone does have quite a few traditional heroic qualities: he is brave, he is loyal, he is willing to face death calmly. He is even referred to several times as a "war hero," and has been pictured in *Life* magazine because of his courage during combat. The novel reverses these aspects of heroism when Michael, the traditional hero, is turned into a murderer and a criminal while still being portrayed as admirable. Readers are expected to empathize with his decision to join the family business, realizing that Michael is putting the safety of his father and all those who work in his operation over the lives of outsiders, and over the security of a crimeless life.

According to traditional morality, a murderer could never be considered a hero. In the 1960s, however, films and literature began to focus on those outside of conventional moral judgement, to make audiences appreciate the stories of those who previous generations might have rejected. In 1966, for example, Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood*, giving the perspective of two amoral mass murders; Warren Beatty's 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde* focused on a pair of desperate criminals; Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* followed a gang of violent outlaws as they made their last stand. It was not a time for heroes, but rather of tearing apart expectations of what a

hero really is and reformulating them to fit the modern world. If a traditional hero could not be a murderer, then Puzo's portrayal of Michael serves to make audiences reexamine what they think of heroism.

Mythology

A mythology is a collection of myths that has been transferred verbally from one generation to the next. Most mythologies are well known in a culture before anyone writes them down. People usually think of such tales as having happened long ago: for instance, the myths that surround King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table constitute a specific mythology. In the case of *The Godfather*, Mario Puzo set out to record the mythology of organized crime as he had heard it while growing up in New York. Many of the stories that he tells are *apocryphal*. That is, they probably are not true, but they sound so likely that people continue to tell them anyway.

For instance, the proposed custom that no Sicilian can refuse any request on the day of his daughter's wedding could not work in real life—what if someone asked the father of the bride for the deed to his house, or to do himself harm? Other stories in the book are the stuff of legend, such as the horse's head in the bed, the message of sending a fish in Luca Brasi's vest, and the massive extermination of the heads of all crime families in one day. These stories, in addition to many smaller tales that fill in the details of the Corleone saga, are based on stories that have been told, and Puzo weaves them all together into one compelling narrative. The irony is that his mythic organized crime family influenced the way that true criminals behaved. After the book and movie became popular, FBI wiretaps captured cases of real-life gangsters using phrases like "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse" or saying that somebody "sleeps with the fishes," phrases that Puzo had made up to imitate the gangsters.

Subplot

Readers of *The Godfather* who are familiar with the movie adaptations are often surprised about the book's long digressions into the lives of Lucy Mancini, Johnny Fontane, and Fontane's friend Nino Valenti. These stories, which take place in Nevada and California, are related to the Corleone family saga only because the characters have been in contact with the Corleones. Lucy moves to Las Vegas because Tom Hagen arranges it, but her medical condition and her affair with Dr. Jules Segal (who was also sent to Las Vegas by the Corleone family) have nothing to do with the main plot about Vito Corleone and Michael; Johnny Fontane's relationship with his exwife Ginny was suggested by the Godfather, but during their scenes together the Corleone family never comes up. Nino's closest connection to the main story is that his singing and film career is due to Johnny, who was

encouraged by Don Corleone to help him. The Corleone saga would go on without any change if these subplots were left out of the novel.

And yet, the fact that they are there can be used to reveal facets of the main plot that might otherwise go unnoticed. When Johnny Fontane stabilizes his family life and ends up a better man for it, readers can see that Don Corleone's emphasis on sober family life really is a prescription for happiness. Nino, on the other hand, is like Sonny, a man who has all that he needs for greatness but ruins it because of his stubborn personality. Lucy in some way exemplifies the life that Michael hopes for them all at the end of the novel. Moving to Nevada, Lucy leaves the world of crime behind her and finds true love to replace the dangerous affair that mystified her in New York. Readers might feel that these subplots are not worth the time they take from the main story, but they do add texture to the central plot line.

Historical Context

Organized Crime

Mario Puzo has said that he wrote *The Godfather* as a compendium of tales about criminals that he heard while growing up in Hell's Kitchen, an Italian section of New York City, along with information that he gleaned from research. Fans of the book often try to guess which real-life incidents served as Puzo's inspirations, but in fact much imagination has gone into transmuting history into fiction.

Like Vito Corleone, many of the most powerful figures in American organized crime at the middle of the twentieth century had made their fortunes during Prohibition, smuggling liquor into the country. In 1920, the production and consumption of alcohol was prohibited by the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. There was still a great need for alcohol, and America had a prospering economy during the 1920s, and so it became a lucrative business to smuggle liquor in from Canada, Mexico, and Cuba. Small-time gangs rose during this period to national prominence. Pressure from the FBI to combat the rise of organized crime in the twenties only eliminated small operators—J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's director, refused to acknowledge widespread syndicate activity until the late 1950s. Government pressure drove the small operators to seek protection under the umbrella of more powerful organizations. In 1933, Prohibition was repealed, in part because of the criminal activities that it caused and in part because the nation had entered an economic depression in the late 1920s and control of a popular substance seemed a silly and wasteful way to spend government resources. Like the fictional Corleone family, the crime organizations put the money they had made into other activities, most notably gambling, extortion, and political influence.

Control of organized crime passed through the ranks of different immigrant groups. In the early decades of the century, mobs were predominantly Irish. During Prohibition, Jewish and Italian immigrants rose to control. After Prohibition, the crime organizations in the New York area were under the control of Italians, and these in turn organized a national syndicate, led by Charles "Lucky" Luciano. The organization of this syndicate was patterned after a centuries-old Sicilian paramilitary organization, the Mafia. Because the Italians were the most powerful group in the post-World War II period, when senate hearings on organized crime were televised, their group came to be associated with crime. This is a narrow impression that was cemented in the public imagination in the 1970s by the widespread popularity of *The Godfather* and its many imitators.

In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, the Nevada legislature passed a resolution allowing legal gambling in the state. After World War II in 1946, notorious gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel built the Flamingo Hotel with the financial backing of the East Coast syndicate. From this first casino came others, and the town grew into one of the nation's most popular vacation resorts in just a few short years. From its inception in the 1940s through the 1970s, Las Vegas was under the control of powerful crime organizations like the ones described in *The Godfather*.

While many of Puzo's details about organized crime are probably based on information readily available from research, there are specific incidents in the book that resemble events in crime history. The shooting of Don Corleone while he stands at a fruit stand is similar to the murder of Frank Scalise in 1957. The Godfather's political power, referred to so often in the book, mirrors the political control wielded by New York mobsters Thomas Lucchese and Frank Costello throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The story of Johnny Fontane being helped by Don Corleone and Luca Brasi to break his contract with bandleader Les Halley is based upon a common rumor that is probably not true, regarding Frank Sinatra's difficulty freeing himself from bandleader Tommy Dorsey when he was a young singer.

The Counterculture

In this novel, the Godfather is angry with his son, Michael, for having joined the Marine Corps during World War II. Puzo explains that arrangements were made for Michael to be exempt from military duty, along with mob operative Paulie Gatto and most of the other young men involved in the Corleone family operation. When the book was published in 1969, the country was enmeshed in the Vietnam conflict, a battle to keep the Russian-backed Communist government of North Vietnam from overcoming South Vietnam. It was a conflict that American soldiers had been involved in since 1961, regarding a political situation that had been unsettled since the 1940s.

To U.S. government strategists, it was imperative to stop the spread of communism in southeast Asia, and an American defeat would be too humiliating to accept. Therefore, the war escalated with each passing year. To many citizens, especially those on college campuses, American citizens were dying in order to win a pointless war in an unimportant, far-off country. The antiwar movement grew throughout the mid-1960s, with war protests covered almost daily in the media as celebrities and musicians spoke out against the military. Military-aged young men were encouraged to burn their draft registration cards and to sneak across the border into Canada, where the armed services could not get them.

Even though the youth of the country might have agreed with the Godfather on the subject of military service, there were also changes in the culture that would have shocked him. In the novel, he refuses to become involved in the drug trade, and in fact is shot for his resistance to it. In 1969, drug use ran rampant: marijuana was accepted as a casual recreation, and LSD was recommended by some as a consciousness-raising experience. As Harvard professor Timothy Leary advised in his 1965 book *The Psychedelic Reader*, "turn on, tune in, drop out." 1969 was also a high point for the sexual revolution. For the previous generation, sexual relations outside of marriage did happen, but they were socially frowned upon. In the 1960s, though, sexuality became more open. Women protested for equal rights, and homosexuals protested to show their resistance to persecution. The "straight-laced" values held by Don Corleone were giving way to radical new ways of thought throughout American society, while old-fashioned readers who bought *The Godfather* in 1969 could see the gentleman gangster of its title as a protector of traditional morality.

Critical Overview

Early reviews of the book acknowledged its potential for popular success while at the same time praising Puzo for his understanding of the Mafia culture. Pete Axthelm wrote in *Newsweek*,

> This is a big, turbulent, highly entertaining novel with ingredients that should assure its place on the bestseller lists: ample sex, a veritable orgy of bloodshed in many exotic forms, and several characters titillatingly reminiscent of real-life public figures.

In the *Nation*, Fred J. Cook called it a "brawling, irresistible tale" that "brings the reality [of Mafia life] home more vividly and realistically than the drier stuff of fact ever can." Cook went on to write that the book's "sexual scenes, plots and counterplots, murder and gore . . . might have made it a work of cheap sensationalism, but *The Godfather* is deeply embedded in reality, and this sense of reality pervades the torrent of unending action."

As time passed, and the novel racked up record sales figures, reviewers began to de-emphasize Puzo's grasp of the nuances of the Mafia culture, especially when he publicly admitted that the book was based on no firsthand experience, that he had imagined the organized crime hierarchy and the attitudes taken by Vito Corleone and his family from research materials he had read. By 1972, when the motion picture version was released, the book was still selling briskly, with five million paperback copies and a million hardcovers sold (eventually, total sales of the book would reach the twenty-one million mark).

While Puzo's public comments made it difficult for other writers to cast him as a Mafia expert, they also made it difficult to approach *The Godfather* as a serious piece of literature. In an article titled "The Making of *The Godfather*," published in his 1972 collection *The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions*, Puzo lamented that he did not really write the novel as well as he could have:

> [*The Godfather*] got much better reviews than I expected. I wished like hell I'd written it better. I like the book. It has energy and I lucked out by creating a central character that was popularly accepted as genuinely mythic. But I wrote below my gifts in that book.

With the author himself admitting that his book is not a very fine accomplishment, it becomes difficult for reviewers to praise it. Many reviewers since the early seventies have quoted Puzo's regrets about the quality of *The Godfather*, and have gone on to examine it as a publishing phenomenon, speculating about what that says about American culture.

Like Puzo, most reviewers have pinned the source of the book's overwhelming popularity on the character of the Godfather himself, Vito Corleone. Barton Midwood examined this in his review in *Esquire*, in which he discussed an educated friend who could not put the book down specifically because, as he explained, " 'this Godfather character is really fantastic.' " On his friend's recommendation, Midwood explained, he read the book himself: "As I had suspected, it is bad. . . . The prose has a moronic sound, and the whole affair is calculated to prey on the uglier prejudices and pathetic longings of an impotent public. The character of the Godfather is, however, as Wilson says, 'fantastic.' "

Other late reviewers, responding to the book after it had been out for a while and accepted by the public, showed interest in the fact that millions of presumably law-abiding citizens were drawn to the life story of an arch criminal. John C. Cawelti, questioning what the book's popularity says about American culture for the intellectual magazine *boundary 2*, examined Puzo's use of the metaphoric "family" to talk about social order. Cawelti's article granted that Puzo was skillful, and that he "brilliantly" developed the idea of family in his book. "[O]ne doesn't need much prescience to predict that this book will be a major turning point in the evolution of popular literature," Cawelti wrote in 1975, not even a decade after the book's publication, "perhaps comparable to the significance of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, certainly as important as Ian Fleming's James Bond." The longer the book has been around, the more likely reviewers have been to accept Puzo as a skilled artisan, just as the early reviewers did.

There has been, however, one more school of thought on the subject. None of Puzo's later novels reached either the popular success that *The Godfather* reached or the artistic success that reviewers often implied that he was capable of, leaving some later reviewers to conclude that Puzo was, in fact, an untalented writer who just happened to do one thing right once. This view was clearly explained by Allen Barra in a 2000 article for the online magazine *Salon*. Reviewing Puzo's last book, *Omerta*, which was published posthumously, Barra failed to recognize talent in any of the author's novels. "Somehow, a myth grew that he was a serious novelist who turned to writing commercial crap because his early books didn't sell," Barra wrote. He continues saying:

This is classic self-delusion. Puzo's first two novels . . . weren't that good. In fact, they weren't as good as *The Godfather*, which itself would be unread today if people didn't go to it looking for a deeper relationship with the movie.

While Barra's comments may not be true, they do reflect the disappointment of the literary community that Mario Puzo never supported his reputation by writing anything else as powerful or engaging as *The Godfather*.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and composition at Oakton Community College in Illinois. In the following essay, Kelly argues that, in spite of its popularity and technical achievements, irregularities in point of view make Puzo's novel weak.

Mario Puzo's 1969 crime epic *The Godfather* was hugely popular, shattering the sales records of its time. In addition to the number of books put into circulation, it created a trend in novels about organized crime, packing the paperback book racks at airports and drugstores with imitators, each using a copycat book design and using the word "father," "family," or "honor" in its title. But, beyond its popular success, it is not clear whether *The Godfather* succeeds as literature.

Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive—something can be popular and still be artistically worthwhile—but it is very seldom that a writer can achieve one without sacrificing the other. Books that attract millions of readers tend to have fans who see something of themselves in them. These fans are willing to see great merit even when it is not present, like parents who cannot concede that their perfectly nice children lack talent. On the other hand, artistic snobbery is real and powerful in building and destroying literary reputations: most artists starve, so the novels that do make money are automatically suspected of being hollow imitations of the real thing.

Making it even more difficult to judge the worth of Puzo's book is the fact that it was adapted to a movie that pleased everybody, critics as well as audiences. In the American Film Institute's list of top movies ever made, it comes in at number three, after *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*; it is number 121 in the list of all-time box-office grosses, and has been a consistent seller in video and DVD releases. As a result, literary critics have a tendency to think that the novel's continued success is less a result of its own merit, and rather a case of riding on the movie's coattails. One critic even guessed that because the movie's director Francis Ford Coppola co-wrote the screenplay with Puzo and the movie contained the book's best lines, the good parts of the book were actually Coppola's writing, even though the book was published and selling millions of copies before the two ever met. The book and the film of *The Godfather* will always be linked and the film will always be considered the greater artistic achievement. Coming in second in a field of two makes it difficult to judge Puzo's novel fairly.

The most accurate way to describe *The Godfather* artistically as a novel would be to say that it is quite good for a sensationalistic potboiler that was churned out to make money, and that it is quite weak as a serious document of the time it examines or the intricacies of human nature. Its virtues are

many: its shortcomings are few, but they are serious enough to hold the book back from true greatness.

Puzo's finest achievement, the one that kept millions of readers turning each page, was his gift for giving each character more personality than just what the book's plot requires of them. His characters have depth: to use a publicist's phrase, they "jump off the page." The smaller, minor characters in any novel are bound to be stereotypes, but Puzo gives all, down to the least significant, some aspect that contradicts their stereotype, hinting at a full, breathing person passing through the story. Kay's father, for instance, only appears in the book for a few pages. He is a New England minister who is approached by the police about his daughter's involvement with organized crime and sexual relations with a suspected murderer. A less intelligent book would have made him act according to type, blowing up with anger or curling with hidden rage. Puzo has him behave with unexpected gentleness toward his daughter and firmness toward the police, giving readers a sharp little surprise without violating what little we know about this man. From the baker who is delighted with his little part of a Mafia wedding to Neri, the family-oriented hit man, the characters have a human touch that takes them beyond just being tools of the plot.

At the next level of characterization Puzo has the three Corleone boys. Independently, none is able to blossom beyond a flat characterization, but it is Puzo's luck or genius to have them all packaged together as a group. Sonny nearly reaches the depths of a vaudevillian comic character with his hot-blooded Mediterranean passions: swarthy, oversexed, and impetuous, he seems more like the sort of character that would be created by someone who had never met a real live Italian. Michael, of course, is the diametric opposite. He is never spontaneous or passionate: when after years he is reunited with the woman he loves, he suggests physical intimacy with, "We might as well go in the bedroom." Readers often wonder why Puzo took the time to create the third son, Fredo, who does little in the book but suffer a nervous breakdown and then turn into a womanizer who lets another gangster slap him around. His presence serves to mute the extremes of the other sons: rather than focusing on how, compared to each other, Michael and Sonny are almost unbelievably absolutes, readers focus on how the two sides contrast with the soft, amoral center.

The greatest creation of Mario Puzo's writing career is, without question, the character of Don Vito Corleone. He is all things to all people. He is a law-giver, an old-world moralist, a devout family man who loves his children and goes out of his way to help neighbors, asking only friendship in return; but, he is also a murderer and the criminal mastermind who controls everyone's lives to some unseen extent. Sentimentalists can love him as much as paranoids can fear him.

Over and above his memorable characters, Puzo also distinguishes himself with his superb sense of narrative structure, often underrated. *The Godfather* is not episodic, following just one crisis after another in the life of the Corleone family, but instead it follows a solid, direct line from Vito Corleone at his peak to the events that bring Michael into the family business to Michael's final triumph. This story is fed out slowly, though, so that readers do not even see it taking form at first. The main conflict, which is the gang war started by Sollozzo, does not show up until the long wedding has introduced the characters and the episode with Jack Woltz and the horse's head has established the family's omnipotence. Then, it is introduced subtlety, as just another piece of crime business, with little indication that the meeting with Sollozzo will change the Corleone family forever. Puzo holds back Michael's importance to the plot even longer: before he ends up helping his father avoid assassins, a quarter of the way through the book, it would be difficult to guess that Michael would end up the story's main character. This pacing lets Puzo unleash powerful plot twists throughout the whole book that readers note, only after they have occurred, were inevitable all along.

Though the pacing is masterful and the characters are convincing representations, neither is achieved completely through skill. Puzo uses shortcuts that help him in the short term—tricks that the casual reader will not recognize but which, in the long run, damage the novel's literary worth.

For instance, he makes the Godfather a respectable, honorable, lovable character only by going to preposterous extremes to shade the world in which he lives. Not only does the book refuse to question whether running a crime syndicate might be wrong, it will not even admit that there could be cases where the Don's actions are anything less than angelic. The characters who oppose the Corleones suffer, but they deserve what they get, due to their moral weaknesses: this goes from the Tattaglias, who are involved in "bad" crimes such as drugs and prostitution instead of the Corleones's gambling, extortion, and influence peddling, to Johnny Fontane's first wife, who has not only violated the sanctity of marriage by luring him into divorce but is in addition a foul-mouthed tramp.

The Corleones's friends are shown to be just as innocent as their enemies are despicable. They include: Lucy Mancini, the concubine with a heart of gold; Jules Segal, an unerring and compassionate surgeon driven to abortions when he can not stand delivering terrible medical news to uncaring patients; and the widow Columbo, whom young Vito Corleone rescues from eviction. Puzo is able to make these characters contemptible or sympathetic, according to their place in the Don's universe, only by using verbal tricks—loaded language, such as when he describes Don Fanucci as "white, broad [and] smelly" just before Vito shoots him. Casual readers accept the idea that there is no moral complexity among the Corleones's

friends and enemies. Attentive readers know that they are being sold an unlikely version of reality.

Technically, Puzo's greatest weakness is in his inability to hold a consistent point of view. The point of view changes every few pages: the action in a scene with Don Corleone and Tom Hagen might be from the Don's point of view, but then the narrative stays with Tom when he leaves and tracks his thoughts. This is acceptable, but it waters down the book's overall effect. Readers are not able to experience the action through any one character's eyes, so they cannot truly feel the effects of the action as they would with a unified narrative. With the point of view floating around like this, the emphasis is on the action and events, not the characters, whom readers come to know only superficially.

There is a way to stay in one character's point of view and convey another character's unspoken thoughts, by having the main character interpret what is going on in the other's head. Puzo does this frequently. For instance, when Kay phones Michael's mother, "Mrs. Corleone's voice came impatiently over the phone." Two paragraphs later, "Mrs. Corleone's voice came briskly over the phone." The narrative remains in Kay's point of view, but readers still know how Mrs. Corleone feels.

Puzo stretches this technique to its limits at times. For example, he has Johnny interpret Jules's thoughts: "Jules stood up. His usual cool was gone, Johnny Fontane noticed with satisfaction." Later in the scene, though, Puzo uses one character's looks to give background information that is in the minds of *two* characters: "Lucy and Jules looked at each other. From everything they had learned and knew about Johnny Fontane it seemed impossible that he would take a girl from a close friend like Nino." Johnny's thoughts are interpreted by Jules and Lucy simultaneously. Later that scene shifts to Johnny's point of view again. The information is conveyed, but Puzo sacrifices artistic consistency in order to let readers know what everyone thinks about everything.

It takes time to develop a consistent point of view, to introduce information into a novel in ways that could be experienced by just one character at a time. Mario Puzo apparently knew how to do this, but did not take the time. It also takes time and patience to face up to the fact that one's sympathetic characters can be acceptable to audiences in spite of their moral shortcomings, rather than simply ignoring the moral complexity of life. Puzo wrote *The Godfather* with the specific interest of creating a best seller and making money, and that he did: any variation on the formula might have hurt sales. But he also was quoted as saying that he wished he had written it better, and there is little doubt that he could have. The flaws in the novel are unnecessary, technical ones, but ones that keep it from greatness.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Godfather*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Gardaphe discusses the impact of The Godfather, *and considers what would happen in a case of reverse assimilation.*

The Godfather is Mario Puzo's third novel. His earlier novels represent his attempts to fulfill a dream of becoming an artist and escaping the ghetto world in which he was born. Like Fante, di Donato, and Mangione, Puzo's early encounter with such writers as Dostoevsky in his local library strengthened his belief in art and enabled him to "understand what was really happening to me and the people around me." It was not art, however, but war that finally enabled Puzo to escape his environment "without guilt." Out of his experiences in Europe during and after the Second World War he crafted his first novel, *The Dark Arena* (1955); ten years later he returned to his life experiences growing up in New York's Little Italy to create *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965). In *The Dark Arena*, the protagonist, Walter Mosca (in Italian, *mosca* means "fly"), returns home from serving with the American occupation army in Germany. Unable to take up where he left off before the war, Mosca returns to Germany as a civilian employee of the occupation government and resumes his life as a black marketeer. While the novel received some good reviews, Puzo was disappointed that it did not make much money. *The Fortunate Pilgrim* received similar notices and brought Puzo even less financial reward. Because of the poor sales of his earlier works, no publisher would advance him the money he needed to write a third novel. Twenty thousand dollars in debt, he began to look for a way out. "I was forty-five years old," he writes, "and tired of being an artist."

With the publication of *The Godfather* in 1969, Mario Puzo was immediately promoted to celebrity status. Not since the publication of Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* had an American author of Italian descent been thrust into the national spotlight on such a grand scale. The timing of *The Godfather*'s publication had much to do with its rapid climb to number one and its sixty-seven-week stay on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The novel came off the press in the middle of the ethnic revival period of the 1960s. It also followed nationally televised congressional hearings on organized crime and the publication of Peter Maas's nonfiction bestseller *The Valachi Papers*, in which mobster-turned-informer Joe Valachi describes his activities inside organized crime.

The Godfather has done more to create a national consciousness of the Italian American experience than any work of fiction or nonfiction published before or since. It certainly was the first novel that Italian Americans as a group reacted to, either positively or negatively, perhaps because it appeared at a time when Italian Americans were just beginning to emerge as an identifiable cultural and political entity. Even though this book is

much more a work of fiction than any of the earlier, more autobiographical novels written by Italian Americans, it created an identity crisis for Italian Americans throughout the nation. Antidefamation groups denounced Puzo for creating a bad image of Italians in America; young Italian American boys formed "Godfather" clubs; and real mafiosi claimed that Puzo knew what he was writing about. For a while, Puzo wrote a number of essays on the subject of Italian America which appeared in major national magazines. These essays, while often undermining the image of Italians that he created in *The Godfather* and his later novel *The Sicilian*, are also quite critical of the Italian American's behavior in American society.

The effect of this one novel was tremendous. Since its publication, and especially since its film adaptations in the early 1970s, Italian American novelists have been writing in *The Godfather*'s shadow, and Puzo has become a recluse. Though sociologists and literary scholars may forever debate the value of Puzo's work, most would agree that he has left a permanent imprint on the American cultural scene through his representation of *Italianita* and his creation of a mythic filter through which Italian American culture would henceforth be read.

In "The Authority of the Signifier: Barthes and Puzo's *The Godfather*," Christian Messenger reads *The Godfather* through Roland Barthes's essay "Myth Today" for the purpose of determining the role that myth plays in the production of popular culture. Messenger points out that while the Corleone family "appeared to be a protofamily for our collapsing time," it also set up a false dichotomy between good murderers and bad murderers. Messenger reads Puzo's symbolizing as signifiers of a mythic language that result from artificially naturalizing history, a process that Barthes says is the function of myth. Messenger's reading of key scenes in the novel makes clear "the dialectal flow between naturalizing and historicizing" that Puzo's narrative obscures. *The Godfather* portrays the Mafia as a natural force in the Sicilian world from which Vito Corleone comes, a world he attempts to recreate in his new home in America. In this world the Don and his family are portrayed as the "good guys," and the American establishment with which they struggle—the institutions of law and business—are set up as the "bad guys." Messenger suggests that the key question asked by the novel is raised by Jack Woltz and Kay Adams: "What if everyone acted that way?" This question can guide us through a reading of the novel as an exercise in the portrayal of reverse assimilation. In other words, in this novel Puzo presents the question that in effect is the real Italian American dream: What if America assimilated to our ways? Before setting up this approach to reading *The Godfather*, let me first point to some of the aspects of the novel that can be connected to more traditional Western myths.

The Don's system of belief is based on the idea that each man has but one destiny. The Don's own destiny was determined when he killed Fanucci, the

thug who extorted money from local merchants and demanded tribute from any criminal activity that took place in his neighborhood. When Fanucci demands a percentage of Vito's and his partners' crime, Vito decides to kill him. "It was from this experience came his oft repeated belief that every man has but one destiny. On that night he could have paid Fanucci the tribute and have become again a grocery clerk.... But destiny had decided that he was to become a Don and had brought Fanucci *to* him to set him on his destined path." Similarly, each of the Don's sons is seen as having his destiny determined by a single incident. Santino (Sonny), the oldest son, is destined to follow his father's ways, not only because of birth but, according to the Don, because he witnessed his father's shooting of Fanucci. Michael Corleone's destiny is revealed the night he shoots Sollozzo and the police captain. Fredo's position outside the inner workings of the family business is determined by his inability to defend his father during the assassination attempt.

Puzo borrows a figure from ancient mythology to describe the Don's children. Daughter Connie has a "Cupid-bow mouth." Sonny is described as having the face "of a gross Cupid." His large penis signifies his Dionysian behavior, which interferes with his ability to concentrate on the family business. Ruled by his emotions, Sonny is unable to become a good don. Fredo has "the same Cupid head of the family" and lacks "that animal force, so necessary for a leader of men." Predictably, Michael is the only child not described in terms of Cupid.

Throughout the novel the Don is characterized as a god or demigod who can negotiate affairs between humans and the supernatural. This is underscored by the hospital scene in which Genco Abbandando lies on his deathbed crying out, "Godfather, Godfather . . . save me from death. . . . Godfather, cure me, you have the power." The Don replies that he does not have such powers, but if he did, he should "be more merciful than God." Genco then appeals to the Don to stay with him as he faces death: "Perhaps if He sees you near me He will be frightened and leave me in peace. Or perhaps you can say a word, pull a few strings, eh?" When he is not being a god, Don Corleone is portrayed as a heroic figure who is able to struggle with the gods. Puzo characterizes Don Corleone as a rarity, a man of will, a man among "men who refused the dominion of other men. There was no force, no mortal man who could bend them to their will unless they wished it. They were men who guarded their free will with wiles and murder."

In the Don's speech to the heads of the other crime families after the murder of Sonny, he attempts to make peace through an appeal to the American Dream, but the whole speech is an example of *bella figura*, a public posturing designed to shield his true plans and to present the illusion that he is willing to assimilate to the American ways of doing illegal business:

> Let me say that we must always look to our interests. We are all men who have refused to be fools, who have refused to be puppets dancing on a string pulled by the men on high. We have been fortunate here in this country. Already most of our children have found a better life. Some of you have sons who are professors, scientists, musicians, and you are fortunate. Perhaps your grandchildren will become the new *pezzonovanti*. None of us here want to see our children follow in our footsteps, it's too hard a life.

The Don uses his power to make friends who will strengthen his position. His competitor, Sol-lozzo, is driven by the opportunity to make money through the high profits of drug manufacturing and distribution; however, he lacks a key ingredient for insuring the venture's success—the Don's friends in high places. This is the clash between the Old World sense of power bringing wealth and the New World's sense of wealth bringing power. Thus, when the Don pledges not to seek revenge for Santino's murder and to support drug trafficking, he does so because he sees that the only way to keep his family intact is to ensure Michael's safe return from Sicily. After this speech, the Don returns home and announces his semiretirement and his plans to stay home and work in his garden. But he can do this only because he knows that Michael will take over the business and enact the Corleone family's revenge.

Ironically, Michael, the son destined to take over the Don's power, is the one closest to total assimilation into American life. At the outset of the novel, Michael breaks the code of *omertà* by letting Kay Adams in on the history of his father's business. During his sister's wedding reception Michael tells stories about the more colorful wedding guests, like Luca Brasi. He explains to Kay what is going on at the meetings held inside his father's study and interprets the ambiguities she, an outsider, is unable to read. Later, on the night that his father is shot, Michael leaves Kay and returns to the family house, and "for the first time since it had all started he felt a furious anger rising in him, a cold hatred for his father's enemies." This fury drives Michael back into the family fold and leads him to avenge his father's shooting.

Up to this point, Michael has been as innocent as the women in the Corleone clan. He has been kept out of the family business and has had a hero's upbringing, the American equivalent of an aristocrat's education, with knightly training in the marines through which he achieves heroism during the war. His military service is part of his attempt to Americanize himself: It represents loyalty to a power that is not Sicilian and rebellion against his father's wishes, as the Don realizes: "He performs those

miracles for strangers." Michael's murder of Sollozzo and the police captain takes place under the fated circumstances of an Orestes. His ancestral culture's code demands vengeance for his father's blood, and Michael acts accordingly.

After the murder, Michael flees to Sicily, that otherworldly ground of his being and his subconscious—a locus for so much of Western mythology. There he meets the characters who embody the new condition of his soul, which is physically manifest in his disfigured face. He learns the history of Sicilian culture and the role the Mafia has played in it through Dr. Taza: "He came to understand his father's character and his destiny . . . to understand men like Luca Brasi, the ruthless *caporegime* Clemenza, his mother's resignation and acceptance of her role. For in Sicily he saw what they would have been if they had chosen *not* to struggle against their fate." His bodyguards, like mythological dogs, defend him against the wolves (strangers outside the circles of family and friends) through their use of *lupara*, or "wolf guns." He meets Apollonia, his anima—the pure, good, noble, and beautiful, full of pietàs and innocence. This all takes place in the pastoral setting so thickly described by Puzo during the couple's first meeting and throughout their brief marriage. When Apollonia dies, the victim of a car bomb intended for Michael, it is because he is set on the course that kills the innocence and dirties the moral cleanliness inside himself. She dies in his place as the part of himself that his own actions kill. Her very name and physical appearance signify the *chiaroscuro* contrast, the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy that the new Michael has become. Their relationship is typical of the male/female social dichotomy in Sicilian culture in which the woman holds the good, the man shoulders the evil. As Don Corleone earlier reminded his godson Johnny Fontane, women "are not competent in this world, though certainly they will be saints in heaven while we men burn in hell."

While the typical successful hero in traditional myth returns from the otherworld strengthened and complete, Michael returns to America with nothing but a memory of the values represented by Apollonia. Instead of becoming a savior of American society as a fully realized human being, he returns and grows stronger as a monster; a hero in his family's society, he becomes a villain in American society. Unlike Orestes, he never receives the deus ex machina-like compassion of an intervening Athena to save him according to traditional myths. The education Michael receives during his exile in Sicily enables him to take command of his father's kingdom and ruthlessly rule it in the Old World manner.

While there is much in this novel that lends itself to interpretation through traditional myth analysis, Puzo also develops something that transcends the archetype approach. What Puzo has contributed to Italian American culture is a myth of the assimilation of America into Italian culture. Vito Corleone's

goal is to render powerless the forces that attempt to control him. And he does this by recreating the Old World in the midst of the New.

Many people read *The Godfather* as an allegory of a decadent America in the postwar period. But the novel can just as well be read as the struggle to protect a family and preserve it, no matter the cost, in a hostile environment. If the family is to be preserved, assimilation into American culture must be avoided, and this can be done only if the exact opposite happens; that is, if America assimilates into the culture of the Don and his family. Thus, the novel can be read as proposing the following question: What would happen if an Italian had the power to make America conform to his or her way of seeing/being in the world? In order for this to occur, the Italian would need to create an alternative world within the world, a world that competes with the American world, one that offers a viable alternative. It is inevitable that when these two worlds come into conflict with each other, the subsequent tension often erupts into violence.

The world that Don Vito Corleone replicates in America is built on the solid foundations of a centuries-old social order in which fate or destiny, more often than not through birth, determined the life an individual would lead. In the feudalistic system of Sicily and southern Italy, the peasant could not hope to aspire to a better life by challenging the forces that controlled his life. As a result, attention was focused on what could be controlled, the family unit. This is the reason so many Italians immigrated to America. The world into which they came had been built on the myth that through freedom, people can become whatever they want if only they work hard enough. This puritanical work ethic and the built-in reward system did not require the family to stick together, and often it led to the breakup of the nuclear family.

The Don's Old World notion of a work ethic requires that the family stick together, and any attempt by an individual to leave threatens the livelihood of the entire family. In fact, if a family is to survive with its Old World values intact, it must work against assimilation and strive to have its surrounding environment conform to the family's way of life. Thus, the central conflict of this novel is how to keep the family together for its own good in a land where people no longer depend on the family unit for survival. This conflict is introduced through the opening vignettes in the Don's office. Amerigo Bonasera's family was harmed through the American youth who beat up his daughter, Johnny Fontane lives a mockery of a marriage to a Hollywood star, and to protect his family's honor the baker Nazorine must find a way for his helper, Enzo, a prisoner of war about to be deported, to marry his daughter. All three men have found success by adapting to the American way of life, but when the New World system fails them, when the nuclear family has been threatened or attacked, they return to the Old World through Don Corleone, just as villagers returned to the castle for protection from

invasion during feudal times. In return for his assistance, Don Vito requires "that you, *you yourself* proclaim your friendship"; in other words, that you conform to his way of life. In this way Corleone not only perpetuates the Old World system but also further insulates and protects his own family. In many ways, Don Corleone is like the king of feudal times who offers protection to those whose problems he has helped to create. His consigliore, Tom Hagen, realizes this: "It was a pattern he was to see often, the Don helping those in misfortune whose misfortune he had partly created. Not perhaps out of cunning or planning but because of his variety of interests or perhaps because of the nature of the universe, the interlinking of good and evil, natural of itself." The Don, because he is the center of the world he has re-created in America, is like God who makes all things, good and evil, and is the force that is cursed as it is praised by those who live under his dominion. And so, Bonasera, Nazorine, Fontane, and most of the novel's other characters are monologic, all pieces in the puzzle Puzo produces, which reveals the power of Old World culture to maintain itself in a New World environment. Don Corleone is more concerned with maintaining *l'ordine della famiglia* and expanding its power than with increasing his profits; that is what he transfers to his son Michael, who has become Old World through his exile in Sicily. Michael achieves what Sonny and Fredo cannot because they lack the experience of life in the land of Mafia origins, an experience that would have balanced their beings. The Don does what he believes is necessary for men's families to thrive. He leads his godson, Johnny Fontane, back to taking care of his family and his friends through Nino. He will ensure through an act of Congress that Nazorine finds a good husband for his daughter. And his men will enact the vengeance that Amerigo Bonasera needs in order to return honor to himself and his family.

There are numerous examples of the Don's ability to make America and Americans assimilate to his ways. Tom Hagen, a German American orphan brought into the Don's home, is raised as one of his own, educated in the American system all the way through law school. Given this opportunity to become a successful American, Hagen opts instead to complete his assimilation into the Don's world. " 'I would work for you like your sons,' Hagen said, meaning with complete loyalty, with complete acceptance of the Don's parental divinity." Later on, the Don remarks, "Even though you're not a Sicilian, I made you one." Yet, in spite of Hagen's near-native knowledge of Sicilian ways—he is the one able to read the Sicilian sign of the fish wrapped in Luca Brasi's bloodstained vest and is appointed acting consigliore on Genco's death—and because he is not of Sicilian blood, not "born to the ways of *omertà*," he is relegated to marginal status when Michael takes over. Tom breaks the code of *omertà* at the end of the novel when he explains to Kay why Michael had to kill Connie's husband, Carlo. It is as though Vito Corleone is a Midas whose very touch turns people into Sicilians. In spite of the power that the movie producer Jack Woltz has gained in the American system, he too must assimilate to the Don's world,

he must give in to the Don's wish that his godson Johnny Fontane get the role that revives his film career and his loyalty to the family. It is Don Vito whose subtle machinations remind Johnny of how he neglected his responsibilities to help his boyhood friend and *paesano* Nino. The Don provides Johnny with the means to succeed, and ironically it also becomes the means by which Nino is destroyed.

The character who best illustrates this reverse assimilation hypothesis is Kay Adams. Kay, who can trace her ancestral lineage to the *Mayflower*, embodies all that is American, and her assimilation into the Corleone family is the strongest evidence of reverse assimilation. When Michael brings her to his sister's wedding, he does so to "show his own future wife to them, the washed-out rag of an American girl." He sits with her "at a table in the extreme corner of the garden to proclaim his chosen alienation from father and family." When the Corleones meet her they are unimpressed: "She was too thin, too fair, her face was too sharply intelligent for a woman, her manner too free for a maiden. Her name, too, was outlandish to their ears. . . . If she had told them that her family had settled in America two hundred years ago and her name was a common one, they would have shrugged." No matter how much he loves and trusts Kay, Michael realizes that she is an outsider when he sees her after his father has been gunned down. Michael does tell her enough about his father to give her the opportunity to back out of the relationship, but she does not. Even when she finds out from Michael's mother that what she had heard about Michael is true, she still holds on to the hope that she will see Michael again. Two years go by and Kay finds work teaching grade school, and she decides one day to call Mrs. Corleone. While talking to her, Kay finds out that Michael has been back in the country for six months. She becomes angry with Michael, his mother, and "all foreigners—Italians who didn't have the common courtesy to keep up a decent show of friendship even if a love affair was over," yet still accepts Mama Corleone's invitation to visit her at the Corleone home. During their reconciliation, Kay tells Michael he could have trusted her, that she would have "practiced the New England *omertà*. Yankees are pretty closemouthed too, you know." Kay accepts Michael's proposal for a Sicilian marriage, one in which she would be his wife but not "a partner in life," after he confides to her that the family will be legitimate within five years and after he provides her with a "final explanation" of his father's business philosophy.

The next we hear of Kay is when Michael is returning home from Las Vegas. We learn that they had been married in a quiet New England ceremony and that Michael was "surprised at how well Kay got along with his parents and the other people living on the mall." She is described as "a good, old-style Italian wife" who gets pregnant "right away." At the birth of her second child, Kay comes to understand that she is "on her way to becoming a Sicilian" after she realizes that the story Connie tells her about Carlo's fuss

over the right baptismal gift must be transmitted to Michael. Kay leaves Michael when she realizes that he did have his own brother-in-law murdered. Then, against her own better judgment, she accepts Tom Hagen's explanation and returns to Michael and converts to Catholicism, something that does not please Michael, who wants "the children to be Protestant, it was more American." Nevertheless, she is converted to his world and accepts the role of the woman subservient to man. Ironically, the conversion takes place because of her interaction with Tom Hagen, who both breaks the code of *omertà* and treats her as an equal. The final scene of the novel finds Kay at Mass, praying, like Mama Corleone, for the "soul of Michael Corleone." And so, Don Con Corleone's bid to control his world has had its greatest impact. He has been able, through his son, to convert an American *Mayflower* Protestant princess into a proper Sicilian mother.

Through the marriage of Michael to Kay, Puzo represents the ideal, albeit mythical, synthesis of Italian and American cultures. No matter how much Michael expresses his desires to be legitimate and American on the surface, under his skin he is true to the Sicilian world of his father, and he recreates that world for the next generation. Thus, Puzo forges in fiction what is impossible to create in reality. The key to this novel's success lies in Puzo's ability to make readers envy and even fear the mystery and the power inside the *Italianità* that he represents through the Corleone family.

Source: Fred L. Gardaphe, "The Middle Mythic Mode: Godfathers as Heroes, Variations on a Figure," in *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*, Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 86-118.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Ferraro discusses the "business of family" in The Godfather*, and the godfather figure as a cultural icon.*

In his 1969 blockbuster The Godfather, Mario Puzo presented an image of the Mafia that has become commonplace in American popular culture. Since that time, we have taken for granted that the Mafia operates as a consortium of illegitimate businesses, structured along family lines, with a familial patriarch or "godfather" as the chief executive officer of each syndicate. Puzo's version of the Mafia fuses into one icon the realms of family and economy, of Southern Italian ethnicity and big-time American capitalism, of blood and the marketplace. "Blood" refers to the violence of organized crime. "Blood" also refers to the familial clan and its extension through the symbolic system of the *compare*, or "co-godparenthood." In *The Godfather*, the representation of the Mafia fuses ethnic tribalism with the all-American pursuit of wealth and power. Since its publication, we have regarded this business of family in *The Godfather*, as a figment of Puzo's opportunistic imagination, which it remains in part. But the business of family in Puzo's Mafia is also a provocative revision of accepted notions of what ethnicity is and how it works—the new ethnic sociology in popular literary form.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a short outburst of scholarly interest in *The Godfather* and its myriad offspring. A consensus about the meaning of the popularity of this saga emerges from the books and essays of Fredric Jameson, Eric Hobsbawn, John Cawelti, and John Sutherland. The portrayal of the Corleone family collective allows post-Vietnamera Americans to fantasize about the glory days of "closely knit traditional authority." The portrayal of the power and destructive greed of the Mafia chieftains allows them to vent their rage at "the managerial elite who hold the reins of corporate power and use it for their own benefit." The themes of family and business, in each instance, are disengaged from one another. As Jameson puts it, on the one hand, the ethnic family imagery satisfies "a Utopian longing" for collectivity, while, on the other hand, "the substitution of crime for big business" is the "ideological function" of the narrative. In such standard treatments, Puzo's narrative is regarded as a brilliant (or brilliantly lucky) instance of satisfying two disparate appetites with a single symbol. This perspective, formulated in the late 1970s, seems to have settled the issue of the popularity of the novel.

I want to reopen that issue. We need to return to *The Godfather* because we have too easily dismissed its representation of the Mafia as a two-part fantasy. Of course, *The Godfather* is not reliable as a roman à clef or a historical novel: Puzo's details are fuzzy, mixed up, and much exaggerated.

"There was things he stretched," as Huck Finn would put it, and everyone knows it. But critics have been too ready to accept his major sociological premise—that family and business work in tandem—as pure mythology. I would argue that the importance of *The Godfather* lies not in its creation of a double mythology but in the way that it takes the fusion of kinship and capitalist enterprise seriously. Its cultural significance lies not in the simultaneous appeals of "family" and "business" imagery but rather in the appeal of an actual structural simultaneity, the business of family. If we fail to pause long enough to consider its surface narrative, we underestimate not only the strategies of the novel but the insights and intuitions of its huge audience as well.

Readers have underestimated the business of family because little in traditional theories of the family, ethnicity, and advanced capitalism has prepared them to recognize it. In both scholarly and popular treatments, ethnic culture and extended kinship are interpreted as barriers to successfully negotiating the mobility ladder, particularly its upper rungs. Southern Italian immigrants and their descendants have long been thought to exemplify the principle that the more clannish an ethnic group, the slower its assimilation and economic advancement. Herbert Gans's *Urban Villagers*, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's *Family and Community*, Thomas Kessner's *Golden Door*, and Thomas Sowell's *Ethnic America* essentially update the social work perspectives of such writers as Phyllis H. Williams and Leonard Covello. In 1944, Covello wrote, "Any social consciousness of Italo-Americans within 'Little Italies' appertains primarily to sharing and adhering to the family tradition as the main motif of their philosophy of life.... The retention of this cultural 'basis' is essentially the source of their retarded adjustment." But this long-standing tradition of identifying the Italian family structure as a dysfunctional survival runs aground when it comes to the Mafia.

Historians and sociologists attest to the difficulty of interpreting the Mafia in terms of a linear model of assimilation and upward mobility. All commentators recognize that the Mafia was not simply transported here: it arose from the polyethnic immigrant streets rather than passing from father to son; Prohibition was the major factor in shaping its growth. In *A Family Business*, sociologist Francis A. J. Ianni concedes these points, only to stress the family structure of the syndicates and the origin of this familialism in Southern Italy. The Lupullo crime organization "*feels* like a kinship-structured group; familialism founded it and is still its stock in trade. One senses immediately not only the strength of the bond, but the inability of members to see any morality or social order larger than their own." Ianni's research tempts him into abandoning the tradition of placing ethnic phenomena on a linear continuum running from Old World marginality to New World centrality. His research supports and his analysis anticipates, without quite articulating, the cutting edge of ethnic theory.

Scholars in a number of fields are working to change the way we think about ethnicity, ethnic groups, and ethnic culture. In identifying the social bases of ethnicity, theorists are shifting their emphasis from intergenerational transmission to arenas of conflict in complex societies. They argue that we need to examine ethnic cultures not as Old World survivals (whatever their roots) but as improvised strategies to deal with the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and status. In this light, ethnic groups include not only socially marginal peoples but any group that uses symbols of common descent and tradition to create or to maintain power. From a historian's perspective, European family structures and traditions do not necessarily dissolve in the face of capitalism but rather, as they have always done, evolve to meet its changing needs.

Anthropologist Abner Cohen conceives of ethnic groups as "interest groups" in which ethnic symbols function in lieu of more formal structures, such as the law. When he speaks of the symbolic apparatus of ethnicity, he refers to the emphasis on common history and tradition, endogamy and social boundary maintenance, religion and ritual, and everyday encoded behavior, including "accent, manner of speech, etiquette, style of joking, play" and so forth, that is, the rhetoric and codes of "blood." As Cohen explains, the symbolic apparatus of ethnicity incites genuine loyalty and emotion, the power and idiosyncrasy of which cannot be underestimated. But the apparatus also serves utilitarian purposes within society at large, including those of the economic marketplace. In many of our most familiar examples, the function of ethnic ritual is primarily defensive, to organize a group on the margins of society, but the uses of ethnicity can be quite aggressive as well. The Italian-American Mafia is a case in point. As Ianni and others have demonstrated, it is the ethos of ethnic solidarity that puts the organization into Italian-American organized crime.

In her discussion of *The Godfather*, Rose Basile Green comes the closest of any critic to unpacking what she calls the "socioeconomic ethnic image" of the Corleone crime syndicate. Unlike almost everyone else, Green takes seriously Puzo's portrayal of the syndicates—not as historical fact about actual gangsters but as a treatise (however romanticized) "dealing with the contemporary strategy of gaining and securing power." Yet Green's analysis splits into typical parallel paths: crime as a means for social mobility versus the family as a locus of traditional Southern Italian responsibility. Although Green identifies "a subtle line between personal interest and structural power," she, too, fails to make the strongest connection between the private family life ascribed to Don Corleone and the illegitimate enterprise he heads. When Green says that *The Godfather* explores "the contemporary strategy of gaining and securing power," she means the tactics of bribery, intimidation, the brokerage of votes, intergang warfare, and so forth that Don Corleone uses to conduct business outside the confines of his own organization. But the most noteworthy device for gaining and securing

power in Puzo's depiction is internal to the Corleone syndicate: it is not a gun or payola, but, quite simply, that mystified entity, the "Southern Italian family."

In narrating *The Godfather*, Puzo adopts the familiar role of cultural interpreter, mediating between outside readers and a secret ethnic society. Puzo's agenda, implicit yet universally understood, is to explain why Sicilian Americans have made such good criminals. The answer, generally speaking, is their cult of family honor. The Corleones believe, with a kind of feudal fervor, in patriarchy, patronage, and protection. *The Godfather* is saturated with the imagery of paternity, family, and intimate friendship; with the rhetoric of respect, loyalty, and the code of silence; with references to Sicilian blood and the machismo attributed to it; with the social events—weddings, christenings, funerals, meals, and so forth—that embody the culture of family honor. The business of crime is always interlaced with the responsibilities of family. In the film, for instance, Clemenza frets over a request from his wife Eve as he presides over the execution of Paulie Gatto: "Don't forget the cannoli!" Don Vito himself is a true believer in the mutual obligations of kinfolk. He seeks both to expand his wealth and power to protect his dependents and to make his protection available to more and more people. He recruits from within his family to keep the business "all in the family" for the family's sake. "It was at this time that the Don got the idea that he ran his world far better than his enemies ran the greater world which continually obstructed his path." At the same time, "not his best friends would have called Don Corleone a saint from heaven"; there is always "some self-interest" in his generosity. For everyone recognizes the wisdom of family honor, Corleone's Honor, given the special exigencies of operating in a big way in an outlawed underground economy.

In his analysis of the ethnic group as an interest group, Cohen stresses the growth potential wherever there is a sector of an economy that has not been organized formally:

> Even in the advanced liberal industrial societies there
> are some structural conditions under which an interest
> group cannot organize itself on formal lines. Its
> formal organization may be opposed by the state or
> by other groups within the state, or may be incompatible
> with some important principles in the society;
> or the interests it represents may be newly developed
> and not yet articulated in terms of a formal organization
> and accommodated with the formal structure
> of the society. Under these conditions the group will
> articulate its organization on informal lines, making
> use of the kinship, friendship, ritual, ceremonial, and

other symbolic activities that are implicit in what is known as style of life.

The ethnic ethos means sticking together, respecting the authority of the group rather than that of outsiders, defending the group's turf, and abiding by tradition. The reasoning comes full circle, for tradition is equated with group solidarity. The family is the core element of the group and its most powerful symbol. Under appropriate conditions, the ethos of ethnicity is by no means anachronistic in late capitalism, no matter how rooted such values might be in the history of particular groups. Wherever ethnicity can facilitate enterprise, ethnicity as a system can be said to be one of the primary motors of capitalism, not its antithesis. Focusing on the old moneyed elite of London, Cohen has argued that ethnicity functions among the privileged as well as among the impoverished, among "core" castes as well as among racial and national minorities. In another case study, historian Peter Dobkin Hall implicates family and tradition in the mercantile practices of Massachusetts elites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As both Cohen and Hall contend, a precondition for capitalized ethnicity is a legal vacuum. I would add to this a corollary based on the history of the Mafia: the desire to engage in enterprise, not simply in a vacuum (where law and formal arrangements are lacking) but in an economic zone outside the law and opposed to formal arrangements, makes some form of family and ethnic organization a necessity.

The seemingly feudal, deeply internalized ethos of family honor cements individuals together in American crime, structuring syndicates and giving them their aggrandizing momentum. Loyalty and devotion to group honor are the values according to which individuals are motivated, recruited, judged, and policed in the Mafia. These values are especially effective at binding criminals together and at making criminals out of those not otherwise drawn to the outlaw life. These values surfaced in the United States when Prohibition created an enormous unorganized sector of the national economy, legally proscribed but driven by immense appetites and the willingness of legal institutions to play along, especially for a price. Such values are also necessary to hold together the large-scale enterprises not structured or protected by law, which Prohibition created but which survived after it: rackets devoted to gambling, loan-sharking, prostitution, various forms of extortion, and eventually drugs. In legitimate business, a prized executive who sells himself and perhaps a secret or two to another company is written off as an unexpected operating loss. A *caporegime* who becomes a stool pigeon can bring the whole system down. The ideologies of tradition and group solidarity, principally of the family, are ideal for rationalizing crime syndicates in both senses of the word "rationalize": ideal for organizing them because such ideologies are ideal for justifying their existence and their hold over their members.

The Godfather would warrant attention from scholars for the way it depicts an ethnic subculture that functions as an interest group even if, like Puzo's *Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), it had disappeared into obscurity upon publication. But the novel has had a major impact on popular culture. The figure of "the godfather" outstrips all but the most ubiquitous cultural symbols, falling somewhere between Huckleberry Finn and Superman, better known, perhaps, than Uncle Sam himself. By 1971, when the first film was released, there were over one million hardcover copies of the book in circulation—multiple copies in every library in every town in America—and at least ten million more paperbacks. Historically, the reading of the novel framed the film; not, as in academic criticism, the other way around. By the early 1980s, the book had become the best-selling novel in history, and it continues to sell steadily even outside the United States.

The most immediate spin-offs of the novel were the two films, versions of those films rearranged for television, and the video format, in which the two films plus outtakes are combined as *The Godfather Epic*. By 1975, 260 more books on the Mafia theme had been released, principally of the hard-boiled variety. In 1984, Puzo himself tried again with his fictional account of Salvatore Giuliano, *The Sicilian*. Ethnicity in crime has figured in many major films, including *The Cotton Club* (co-scripted by Coppola, Puzo, and William Kennedy), *The Gang Who Couldn't Shoot Straight*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *Heart of the Dragon*, *Scarface*, *Once upon a Time in America*, *Miller's Crossing*, and *Goodfellas*, Martin Scorsese's reply to Coppola. During the 1980s, the popularity of family-dynasty sagas, especially in their many ethnic varieties, can be traced in part to Puzo's model. Most telling has been the ceaseless production of *Godfather* clones, emphasizing the fusion of family and crime. Now a genre of its own, the proliferation includes (auto)biographical works such as Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father*, Joseph Bonanno's *Man of Honor*, and Antoinette Giancana's *Mafia Princess*; novels such as Vincent Patrick's *Family Business* and Richard Condon's trilogy of the Prizzi family; and a legion of films and teleplays, including "Our Family Honor" (ABC's ill-fated attempt to combine Italian-American gangsters with Irish-American cops), *Married to the Mob* (which picks up on the feminist themes in Condon), the "Wiseguy" series (an affecting drama of homoerotic underpinnings in the mob), *China Girl* (Abel Ferrara restages *Romeo and Juliet* between Italian and Chinese mobsters), and *The Freshman* (Brando parodies his portrayal of Vito Corleone). *The Godfather: Part III* was released on Christmas in 1990.

What are we to make of the lasting fascination with *The Godfather?* Since its appearance, scholars have recognized *The Godfather* as an artifact of the "new ethnicity." The timing of the novel and its immediate offspring, from publication of the novel in 1969 to the television miniseries in the late 1970s, corresponds to an upturn in Americans embracing ethnic identity. This celebration included not only groups that were by and large still

marginal—Native Americans, the descendants of Southern slaves, the newest comers from the Caribbean, the Hispanic Americas, and the Far East—but also the descendants of European immigrants, including the Italians, who were well on their way to middle-class security. Necessarily, the connections drawn between the increased salience of ethnicity and popularity of *The Godfather* have been premised on construing *The Godfather* as two-part fantasy in which family sanctuary and successful corporate enterprise are polar opposites. My reading of *The Godfather*, which emphasizes the complicity of family and business, calls for a reexamination of the role of the novel in the new ethnic self-consciousness. Both the popularity of *The Godfather* and the celebration of ethnicity are complex phenomena, reflecting myriad attitudes toward race, class, and gender as well as ethnicity, attitudes that often conflict with one another. By claiming that *The Godfather* articulates the business of family, I do not wish to mute these other voices but to point the way toward situating the voice of family-business within the larger cacophony of debate.

Scholars such as Jameson and Cawelti, who work within the frame of traditional *Godfather* interpretation, seek to locate within the novel an anticapitalist energy—not an overt critique so much as an impulse, the energy of a potential critique partially veiled and misdirected. Both critics argue that Puzo portrays the Mafia as the center of a capitalist conspiracy and, simultaneously and irreconcilably, as a refuge from the conspiracy of capitalism. Because Puzo's Mafia functions as "the mirror-image of big business," its brutality provides a focus for anticapitalist anxiety and an outlet for anticapitalist anger. Similarly, the equally powerful image of the family reflects, in Jameson's terms, a "Utopian longing" for escape from the prison house of capitalism. "The 'family' is a fantasy of tribal belongingness," echoes Cawelti, "that protects and supports the individual as opposed to the coldness and indifference of the modern business or government bureaucracy."

In the standard view, the putative double fantasy of *The Godfather* reflects the misdirected energies of the new ethnicity. The new ethnicity arises from frustration with capitalism yet mutes its resistance in clamor about the decline of the family and traditional values. My analysis of *The Godfather* suggests we might hesitate before we accept the majority opinion that the family in the novel embodies a refuge from capitalism. We need to question whether a case for the subversive nature of *The Godfather* can rest on the myth of the Italian-American family as a precapitalist collectivity, particularly when Puzo uses all his forces to undermine this false dichotomy. The representation of the Southern Italian family in *The Godfather* is not the kind of saccharine portrayal of innocent harmony, the haven in a heartless world, that scholars take as the benchmark of ethnic nostalgia. In *The Godfather*, capitalism is shown to accommodate, absorb, and indeed accentuate the structures of family and ethnicity. Americans respond to *The*

Godfather because it presents the ethnic family not as a sacrosanct European institution reproduced on the margins of America, but as a fundamental Ameri-can structure of power, successful and bloodied.

Scholars' desire to identify ethnic piety as a locus of anticapitalist energy has blinded them to the existence of an alliance between the new ethnicity and the procapitalist celebration of the family. This alliance is an insufficiently recognized strain within recent popular culture. At least until World War II, and perhaps into the 1970s, the dominant attitude was that the ethnic family in the United States was incompatible with capitalism, whether ethnicity was favored or not. The rabid Americanizers of the early decades attempted to strip immigrant workers of their familial and cultural loyalties. Many of the immigrants themselves feared that the price of upward mobility might be a loss of family solidarity, even as most relied on the family as a basis for group enterprise and mutual financial support. And intellectuals, who were partly or wholly skeptical of capitalism, based one strand of their critique on the damage that capitalism supposedly inflicted upon traditional family cultures. We hear less and less frequently from these nativist Americanizers and guardians of ethnic tradition, but the nostalgia among scholars remains pervasive nonetheless. The general public, however, increasingly has come to accept and indeed to welcome the idea of compatibility between ethnicity and capitalism. In the case of Italian Americans, for instance, public figures ranging from Lee Iacocca to Geraldine Ferraro and Mario Cuomo emphasize the role family values have played in their own success stories, occasionally stretching our imaginations. Similar rhetoric appears in the reemerging critique of the black family, in the widespread lauding of Asian- and Caribbean-American merchants and their schoolchildren, and in the general appeal for a new American work ethic. In this light, *The Godfather* helped to introduce and continues to feed upon a strain of American rhetoric and expectation that has reached full salience in the last decade.

Perhaps no artifact of American culture, popular or serious, has made the case for the business of family with quite the force of *The Godfather*. At no time in United States history has ethnicity enjoyed the vogue that it first achieved in the years of *The Godfather*'s greatest popularity and, in large measure, now maintains. The convergence is no coincidence. While *The Godfather* does participate in the new ethnicity by celebrating the ethnic family, the Mafia achieves its romantic luster not because Puzo portrays the Italian-American family as a separate sphere lying outside of capitalism, but because the Italian-American family emerges as a potent structure within it. The ethnic family in *The Godfather* feeds off a market sensibility rather than undermines it. The Corleones can provide protection from the market only because they have mastered it. Indeed, Puzo reaches the height of romance in *The Godfather* by choosing the Mafia as a model for family enterprise, for illegal family enterprises are capable of growing and expanding to an extent

that the structure and regulation of legitimate capitalism ultimately will not support.

If *The Godfather* does indeed harbor anticapitalist energies, as a thorough reading of the novel might suggest, then perhaps scholars have been looking for that energy in the wrong places. Jameson concludes:

> When indeed we reflect on an organized conspiracy against the public, one which reaches into every corner of our daily lives and our political structures to exercise a wanton and genocidal violence at the behest of distant decision-makers and in the name of an abstract conception of profit—surely it is not about the Mafia, but rather about American business itself that we are thinking, American capitalism in its most systematized and computerized, dehumanized, "multinational" and corporate form.

Jameson and the others may be correct in insisting that fascination with *The Godfather* is motivated, at a deeper level, by anti-capitalist anxiety. But the real scare *The Godfather* entertains, however much suppressed, is about capitalism, not in its "most systematized and computerized, dehumanized" form but rather in its more "intimate" varieties—ethnic, familial, personal. My reading of *The Godfather* suggests that if we wish to press charges against capitalism, we must press charges against family and ethnicity, too.

One strand of rhetoric in twentieth-century America, dating as far back as Howells's *Hazard of New Fortunes* and surveyed by *Christopher Lasch* in *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), urges Americans to go home to escape the specter of capitalism. Professionals often complain about taking work home with them, mentally if not literally. How much more frightening, then, is the alternative Puzo represents: when some Americans go home to papa, they end up confronting the boss. Critics have been quick to interpret the brutality of the Mafia as a symbol for the violence to the individual inherent in capitalism, and to assume that the family represents an escape from that violence. Yet the melodrama of *The Godfather* implicates the family not only in the success of the Corleone empire but in its cycle of self-destructive violence as well. Michael reintegrates the family business only after burying a brother, murdering a brother-in-law, alienating a sister, and betraying his wife's trust. For Americans who experience family and economy as interwoven pressures (if not actual combined enterprises), the Mafia genre may allow them to focus their resentments, even if, inevitably, a Mafia analogy overstates them. For the cost of employing blood in the marketplace is finding "The Company" at home.

Puzo is often maligned for exploiting the stereotype of Italian-American criminality, which has long been used to discriminate against the general Italian-American population. But, in the final analysis, *The Godfather* does not so much rehash an old tale, whatever its strands of inheritance, as tell a new one. In *The Godfather*, Puzo refashions the gangster genre into a vehicle for overturning the traditional antithesis between ties of blood and the American marketplace. He thus transforms the stock character of the Italian-American outlaw into the representative super(business)man, and transforms the lingering image of immigrant huddled masses into the first family of American capitalism.

Source: Thomas J. Ferraro, "Blood in the Marketplace: The Business of Family in *The Godfather* Narratives," in *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 18-52.

Adaptations

The Godfather was adapted as a film by Francis Ford Coppola in 1972. Starring Marlon Brando as the Godfather, Al Pacino as Michael, James Caan as Sonny, and Diane Keaton as Kay Adams, it is considered one of the greatest American films of all time. Mario Puzo cowrote the Academy Award-winning script with Coppola. It is available on home video from Paramount.

Many critics prefer the moral complexity of *The Godfather, Part II*, which was also written by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola and directed by Coppola. The major characters returned, with Robert De Niro playing young Vito Corleone in scenes from the novel that were left out of the first movie. Released in 1974, it is also available on home video from Paramount.

None of the scenes from the novel is dramatized in the 1990 movie *The Godfather, Part III*. It picks up the story nearly twenty years after the close of the last installment, with Michael Corleone trying to get out of crime and make the family empire legitimate. The film stars Pacino, Keaton, Andy Garcia, Sofia Coppola, Joe Mantegna, and Eli Wallach. The script was co-written by Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, with Francis Ford Coppola directing. It is available on home video from Paramount.

All three Godfather films are available together in one deluxe DVD box set, with deleted scenes, full commentary by Coppola, sections of Puzo's script, interviews with key production people, and an option to watch the story in chronological order, starting in 1909 when young Vito Andolini leaves Sicily (which originally did not appear until the second movie). It is available from Paramount.

An abridged audiocassette version of *The Godfather*, read by Joe Montagna, is available from B & B Audio, released in 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct a mock trial of Michael Corleone for the shooting of Virgil Sollozzo and Captain Mark McCluskey. Have legal teams from each side present the best case for their point.

Research the Corleone section of Sicily where Michael was sent into hiding. Report on how the government has dealt with the Mafia in the time since the novel took place.

When this book was released, Italian Americans were upset because they felt it presented organized crime as a specifically Italian problem. Its defenders said that this closed community was based in historical truth. Write about one commonly held ethnic stereotype, research its base in reality, and judge whether you think it is realistic or not.

In the book, Fredo Corleone is sent away to recover from a nervous breakdown while control of the family business passes from Vito to Sonny to Michael. Write a short story showing a day in Fredo's life if he had taken over.

Write out the lyrics to a song that glorifies the gangster lifestyle. Explain how you think that, aside from the music, Don Corleone would respond to the ideas expressed in the lyrics.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: American support for American involvement in World War II is overwhelmingly strong. The Godfather's anger that his son enlisted in the war is extremely unusual.

1960s: American support for American involvement in The Vietnam War becomes weaker every day. More and more people sympathize with those who would like to keep their sons out of military service.

Today: The United States has not drafted soldiers into military service since 1973.

1940s: Women have a narrow, specific place in society. There are only a few professions, such as nurses and teachers, which are deemed appropriate for them.

1960s: Women are in the midst of the struggle for liberation, so that social laws and prejudices will not limit their potential.

Today: Women are accepted in most professions and activities, although there are still a few areas where disparity between the genders exists.

1940s: Motion picture studio bosses have performers under strict contracts and can prohibit actors who are out of favor from working.

1960s: Performers in motion pictures are free agents and can sign deals to work where they please.

Today: Many top performers have formed their own production companies and in essence work for themselves.

1940s: The American economy is one of the few in the world that was not wrecked by World War II, making this the land of prosperity.

1960s: By the end of the 1960s, the U.S. economy is booming. Unemployment is at the lowest level it has been at since 1954, and the stock market has reached record highs.

Today: The country has gone through a long period of prosperity in the 1990s but has cooled to modest levels.

1940s: The government is concerned that communist agents are trying to subvert the American way of life.

1960s: The government is concerned that agents of the Black Panthers and the Students for a Democratic Society are trying to subvert the American way of life.

Today: The government is concerned that terrorists are trying to subvert the American way of life.

What Do I Read Next?

Puzo is often considered to have been a serious, artistic writer before he "went commercial" with the publication of *The Godfather*. Readers can judge this for themselves by reading his 1955 novel *The Dark Arena*, which was reissued by Ballantine Books in 1999.

Among Puzo's other novels, *The Sicilian* comes closest in tone and subject matter to *The Godfather*. It opens when Michael Corleone is exiled in Italy. Before returning home, the Godfather asks him to find legendary bandit Salvatore Guiliano and bring him back to America. The book tells the story of Guiliano, who is based on an actual person. Published in 1984, it was reissued by Ballantine in 2001.

One of the few academic studies of *The Godfather* is Christian K. Messenger's *Citing the Don: Mario Puzo and the Meanings of an American Popular Classic*. It was published by State University of New York Press in 2002.

Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard (Il gatto pardo)* is a hauntingly beautiful historical novel about Sicily. Lampedusa, himself a Sicilian prince, based his book on his great-grandfather

and the turbulence that overcame Sicily as the aristocracy lost power. This book is essential reading for understanding the country and its people. It was published in 1958 and reprinted in 1998 by Pantheon Books.

The same year that *The Godfather* was published, 1969, Peter Maas was on the best-seller lists with *The Valachi Papers*, the biography of Joseph Valachi, a true gangland boss whose life was similar to Don Corleone's. This book, now out of print, was published by Bantam Books.

In 1999, Peter Maas wrote *Underboss: Sammy The Bull Gravano's Life in the Mafia*. This book, an "as-told-to" story by a crime operative that turned state's evidence, is full of details about how the underworld works today. It was published by HarperCollins.

One of the most respected books in the overcrowded category of true stories about organized crime is Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father*. Published by Ballantine in 1971 as part of the wave of interest in crime that *The Godfather* fostered, it is the true story of Joe Bonanno, one of the most notorious New York mob bosses.

Further Study

Camon, Alessandro, "*The Godfather* and the Mythology of the Mafia," in *Francis Ford Coppola's "The Godfather Trilogy,"* edited by Nick Browne, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Although Camon is writing here about the films, the things he says about them apply equally to Puzo's novel, which has the same approach to its subject.

Capeci, Jerry, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Mafia*, Alpha Books, 2001.

This book may have a frivolous title, but its author is an expert in the field of modern organized crime, having written a column on the subject for the *New York Post* for six years and producing one of the best compendia of crime information on the internet.

Lebo, Harlan, *The Godfather Legacy*, Fireside Press, 1997.

This book is basically about the three films that came from Puzo's novel, but there is much about the author's life as background to how the films came to be made and how he wrote the scripts.

Puzo, Mario, "The Making of *The Godfather*," in *The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972. pp. 32-69.

Puzo wrote this article so that he could quit answering interview questions about his experience in Hollywood. It is in-depth and full of background about his life and the writing of the novel.

Sterling, Claire, *Octopus: The Long Reach of the International Sicilian Mafia*, Simon & Schuster Trade, 1991.

This is a comprehensive history of the connection between American and Italian organized crime, reaching back into the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's“For Students” Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited

from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as

Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.

- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).
- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.

- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood's “The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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