

Boardwalk Empire: The Romantic Side of Crime and Capitalism

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Boardwalk Empire, HBO's series about Atlantic City during Prohibition, was adapted by Emmy Award-winning screenwriter and producer Terence Winter from Nelson Johnson's *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City*. The series is a beautifully scripted piece of historical fiction, beginning in 1919 on the boardwalk of Atlantic City on the eve of Prohibition. The protagonist, Enoch "Nucky" Thompson, is based loosely on the real-life Atlantic City politician Enoch L. Johnson. Nucky is Atlantic City's treasurer, master schemer, and effective ruler of the city. The onset of Prohibition offers a new black market in the United States, and the ruling politicians and law enforcement agents of Atlantic City are eager for a piece of the pie, cheering as Nucky declares he will keep the city "wet as a mermaid's twat," despite the federal mandate. Nucky offers a unique vision of an American gangster with the aid of actor Steve Buscemi's skill at performing this complex character. Nucky also helps bring Atlantic City alive, allowing it to shine as the centerpiece of the show, a show that encourages its audience to cheer for a crooked anti-hero and all of the antics of those that produce a narrative perpetuating an idea that corruption is an inevitable part of U.S. culture and that the black market and flesh trade are somehow linked with escapism and harmless civil disobedience.

The Gangster

From the rise of the mafia to the biker gangs of California, certain attributes have become associated with the archetype of "gangster:" he swaggers, he is physically dominant, he is quick to anger, his emotions are on the surface, and confrontation is not something he avoids, but often seeks. Nucky offers a different set of characteristics, as well as a new definition of toughness.

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Buscemi, typically a character actor with a litany of incredibly awkward, strange supporting roles in films on his résumé, seems an odd casting choice for protagonist. However, audiences are first introduced to him in the title sequence, where he stands, in suit and wingtip shoes, on the shore as waves crash over his feet. Empty liquor bottles roll in with the tide and bounce around him as he calmly smokes and thoughtfully gazes out over the Atlantic Ocean. As a wave recedes and cleans his shoes of sand, he turns to head back to the boardwalk. His gaze is focused and determined, and the bizarre Buscemi roles of his past seem to dissipate as a new, focused, leader emerges. But as he turns back toward the boardwalk, he *waddles* in that awkward way most of us do when trying to negotiate sand and a hill in inappropriate footwear. It is a very subtle waddle, but obvious enough, and a clear indicator that Nucky is a unique character who will continuously challenge audience expectations. Though he is the true protagonist of the series and a sympathetic rogue, his core desire for power and wealth render him not much more than a complicated Horatio Alger character, a champion of unbridled capitalism who makes political corruption seem not only a given, but somehow thrilling and romantic.

Buscemi is 5 feet 9 inches tall and slight in build. He stands in stark contrast to his HBO predecessor, gangster Tony Soprano of the popular series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). The character of Nucky is not outwardly intimidating and not outwardly bombastic, impetuous, or emotional. His emotions are closely guarded. Buscemi's characterization of Nucky is not as a man who would resort first to his fists in a fight. He is always immaculately dressed in a formal, vested suit and tie with a trademark red carnation in his buttonhole. His most powerful weapon is his intelligence. Strategy, patience, and an incredible poker face are Nucky's main arsenal, and Terence Winter is able to challenge the tropes of the American gangster and twist the genre expectations in a way that is slight yet remarkable, particularly as it elevates intelligence as the mark of a leader among the common mainstream message of anti-intellectualism on television.

Nucky is calculating, corrupt, and deadly when crossed, yet these traits are often balanced for the audience by his humanity. He is an anti-hero who is easy to root for, particularly in contrast to the characters he comes up against. He is the Prohibition rogue, maintaining a fun "getaway" as a place for an escape, which initially seems harmless. He is also a businessman—organized, efficient, and smart enough to treat those in his city with kindness, a kindness that is often genuine. The fact that Nucky is challenged again and again, yet uses his intellect

to come out on top makes him extremely likeable and admirable. Though as a character he is unique, among popular gangster fictions he is reminiscent of Michael Corleone in that he is sympathetic, relatable, and at times easy to forgive (or at least understand) when he commits a particularly heinous act.

The *Godfather* tradition and the tropes of gangster entertainment run rampant through the series, but Nucky challenges this trend. While many of the traditional gang dramas highlight the negotiation between family and “the Family,” as *The Sopranos* did so well, Nucky is negotiating politics with real family, however there is no true gangland Family in his world, as will be discussed below. What is romanticized in *Boardwalk* is not the gangster lifestyle as it has become typically fictionalized. In contrast, gangster life is shown as ugly, brutal, treacherous, and utterly devoid of any false notion of some kind of “brotherhood.” With Nucky there are no second chances and no bonds that cannot be broken or people who cannot be used as pawns in his master plan. His wife, his only brother, even his surrogate son suffer at the hands of Nucky’s ambition and self-preservation.

What is glamorized is Nucky’s opulent lifestyle and those of the other criminal kingpins in the series, such as Chalky White, who lives in a beautiful home with his wife and highly-educated children despite the difficulties of being a black man in the early part of the twentieth century, and Arnold Rothstein, who is consistently shown in billiard rooms, surrounded by silver tea trays and delicate china cups. The implication is that it is the power behind the criminals that truly matters, and he who can distance himself from actual wet work is the most skilled and the most masterful in the world of Prohibition gangland.

Though initially a seemingly innocuous, if corrupt, politician, Nucky inwardly deteriorates quickly as he transcends from dirty politician to full-on gangster. Yet Winter makes no huge jumps or character inconsistencies in his depiction of Nucky. The poker face remains, though he becomes deadlier and less stable as the show progresses. But this transformation is subtle. He does not suddenly become a sociopath or even spin noticeably out of control—he is not Scarface. Nucky’s most obvious changes are played through Buscemi’s facial expressions, his eye movements, and his jerky mobility. The times he loses control, when emotion is displayed, are shocking and extremely uncomfortable to watch. For example, in season 1, episode 7, after his abusive father’s stroke and subsequent evacuation of the family home, Nucky offers his family homestead, in a gesture of goodwill, to one of his employees with young children. But when he takes a tour of the newly refurbished house, the memories of his childhood overwhelm him and he sets off

an inferno that destroys the home. He walks casually away and a composed Nucky emerges from inside the burning home, handing money to the family to assuage the damage. Yet this demented act betrays the layers of grief and anger that lurk just below the surface of his façade of unflappability.

Though he continues to instigate corruption and the detestability of his acts increases as the show progresses, Nucky remains a consistently sympathetic protagonist. This is largely due to Winter's writing and the way he weaves moments of honesty or tenderness into the fabric of Nucky's character at key moments. It also has a lot to do with the fact that few of the other characters are as fully developed and complex as the lead. Nucky's enemies, cronies, nemeses, and so forth are mostly two-dimensional and essentially loathsome.

No true "good guy" exists to serve as means of contrast to Nucky. There is no strong presence of purity in the show. With minor exceptions, the characters of *Boardwalk Empire* are all twisted by the lives they lead, even the ones who seem the most innocuous and lovable, such as Angela, Jimmy's wife, and Margaret, Nucky's eventual wife. Arguably, besides Nucky, the women of the show prove the most complex in their characterizations. And though I will discuss Margaret in some detail in the following, a more thorough analysis of *Boardwalk's* women would be too substantial for this particular discussion.

From Serial Killing to the Charleston

Nucky Thompson is a perfect protagonist for a series that utilizes nostalgia to create a loss of historicity, enabling the romanticizing of criminal behavior and embedding corruption in politics as a given part of American culture. He helps bring Atlantic City to life. Atlantic City has a fascinating past and, really, any era chosen as the backdrop to *Boardwalk* would have proven interesting. But Winter chose the 1920s because it was the era that "most struck [his] creative fancy" (Johnson xii). Atlantic City in the 1920s, he offers, "was a place of excess, glamour, and most of all, opportunity. Loud, brash, colorful, full of hope and promise—it was a real microcosm of America. A place of spectacle, shady politics, fast women, and backroom deals" (Johnson xii). Inevitably, regardless of decade, using an iconic landscape such as Atlantic City allows nostalgia to be a conduit for audience connection. "Nostalgia" can be a contentious term,

particularly for scholars. The connotations related to nostalgia range from a whimsical desire for a past unknown to a destructive homesickness.

Fredric Jameson stands out in his use of the term in his goliath *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* in which he introduces “nostalgia mode” to describe the way in which contemporary culture, through pastiche, detaches past style, icons, and images and imagines them through the lens of current culture, resulting in what he identifies as a “loss of historicity” (159). Hila Shacher argues that the

idea that our modern culture functions via the flattening out of history as a marketable “image” or a commodified “style” is assumed as fact. And it is a fact that is applied to a whole host of contemporary historical and period films that utilise the appeal of the past through a type of museum aesthetic, where the cultural legacy of the past is displayed as a pleasing aesthetic, and nothing more. (“Seeking Substance,” par. 2)

Of course, many critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, take issue with Jameson’s theory of nostalgia and the loss of historicity, arguing that the use of past artifacts and their manipulation can be used self-critically, opening a space in the discourse on one’s evaluation of the social past (*Poetics and Politics*). I, however, agree with Jameson’s argument and, like Baudrillard, see the mediation of the past in particular as unable to produce anything more than simulacrum. Thus, placing the script of *Boardwalk Empire* within a simulated past allows a manipulation of fact and a loss of historicity.

Dylan Trigg argues in *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*, that

the divergence between universality and the temporal present is compounded as ideas are mistaken to be intuitive, humanistic, or otherwise innate: terms which justifiably warrant suspicion. In the absence of such suspicion, the familiarity of reason prevents it from disbanding. The implications are twofold. Disillusionment and dogma are the likely consequence as a society adjusts to the void between a static principle and the mutable world in which that principle exists. (xxi)

A loss of historicity, consistently perpetuated by a culture that is mediated in a manner never before imagined, rather than offering opportunities of creativity and empowerment through art and entertainment, has blurred the line between reality and fiction to a moment of crisis. The more we lose of history, whether as a people, a nation, or a disenfranchised group, the more ground can be lost as the lessons we were supposed to have learned return, mutated and mediated. This is not self-reflexive, but a loss of the self. It is not ironic, but terrifying. Though Trigg's argument seems apocalyptic within the context it has been placed in this article, to fear the new ideological notions that seem "intuitive, humanistic, or otherwise innate" seems entirely logical.

Boardwalk Empire is offered as a simple, somewhat milder example of this phenomenon when I argue that presenting political corruption alongside brothels, speakeasies, and the fantasy playhouse of 1920s Atlantic City further perpetuates the underlying notion that corruption is already always present in American politics. With messages such as the omnipotence and omnipresence of corruption in politics, it is possible and of grave concern that the apathy and discouragement may be easily absorbed by audience members when such messages are repeatedly shown on television. Shooting scenes in which scandalous political dealings are waged besides the bare breasts of giggling prostitutes emphasizes the spectacle of politics, reducing it to entertainment. In a world where politics has truly become a mediated spectacle, this is not shocking, but seemingly natural.

The location of Atlantic City, particularly in the 1920s, most certainly helps perpetuate all of these ideas. Both Trigg and author Elizabeth Wilson discuss the issue of nostalgia in connection with place, cities in particular. This is, of course, covered extensively in European-based study of nostalgia and romanticism, or, in Trigg's case as with many others, tragedy. In the United States, nostalgia, as it pertains to cities or "place" in general, seems to inevitably harbor some form of decadence, some desire for debauchery and "freedom" that is longed for. The thong-bikini-lined South Beach along Ocean Drive in Miami; the roller-skating, bikinis, and weight-lifters of Venice Beach; the blinding lights of Times Square in New York City; and the gaudy indulgences of Los Vegas all come with connotations of desires fulfilled, fantasies indulged, and the everydayness of life truly escaped. Winter has reminded us of how Atlantic City fits in with these nostalgic dreams, even as it currently faces a steep decline in attraction. Within the series, the symbol of the boardwalk has come to stand for other American landmarks of excess and self-indulgence.

Self-indulgence, excess, debauchery, escape—all of these suggest a certain kind of freedom and autonomy. “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas,” the hip catchphrase of Sin City, implies not only the discretion of a place one goes to indulge, but also says something about the very indulgence itself. To suggest that one must not speak about his/her behavior in Vegas outside the city suggests that the moral turpitude in which one must have engaged is so vile or so outside of what stands as normalized behavior that it must not be revealed in one’s everyday life, for fear of some kind of repercussion. With this dichotomy established—fun in Vegas versus punishable offenses in Real Life—the notion that one is not truly free within the confines of one’s day-to-day existence has been established. The quest for freedom, fun, and escape becomes a modern-day form of nostalgia in relation to place. There are certain places one can *go* to enjoy life, while normal existence means restriction, prohibition, and regulation. Outside of cities, vacation spots, fun parks, and resorts rely on the implication that a trip to their location will somehow change, free, and/or empower citizens. Parents are shown acting like teenagers to the dismay of their children in a popular cruise-liner’s advertisements. Theme parks show adults reverting back to children and experiencing the pleasures of the park as a child might. Resorts suggest that they can restore romance to a relationship. The ads and temptations to “escape reality” are endless, really.

But again and again, what is unsaid is that life—real life, outside of a vacation—is restrictive and tedious. It appears as though the United States has drawn a clear line between the two that encourages a playful rebelliousness. It also appears that in order to have fun one must consume and commodify the elements of one’s escape, perpetuate the materialist, late consumer culture in which the US is so mired.

The Loss of Historicity

To set a series in the time of American Prohibition taps into that same rebelliousness. For a culture that assumes real adult life to be boring and constricting, looking back on the Volstead Act (the act that enforced Prohibition/the 18th Amendment) appears to show us a people who rose up against something intended to end their freedom of extracurricular fun. Flappers and speakeasies have become symbols of innocent mutiny, a simple civil

disobedience. Trading in alcohol and challenging social morals, those involved in the 1920s liquor industry, it seems obvious, were simply paving the way for a celebration of personal liberty.

In reality the political and social violence of Prohibition touched the lives of the working class, immigrants, people of color, Jews, and Catholics in ways unmentioned in the series. Much of the discourse surrounding the debate between “wets” and “drys” was surprisingly ethnocentric. The “drys” in Congress fought for deportation of those found in violation of the Volstead Act. The Immigration Restriction Act was passed in 1924, severely limiting the number of immigrants, particularly those from non-Protestant, non-“Nordic” nations (Orkent 238–39). It was not actually a crime to consume alcohol, thus those with wealth and influence could maintain their private stocks, leaving the messiness of cooking new bottles of booze and selling them to those who needed money the most. This era in United States history was incredibly difficult for men and women of color, but also extremely difficult for Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, a fact that *Boardwalk Empire* seems to either be ignoring or playing with, as its most powerful characters happen to be from the most oppressed groups. The Roaring Twenties was not a time of dancing and shorter hemlines, but a battlefield of years for women, immigrants, the working poor, people of color, and returning veterans of World War I.

To The Lost

Boardwalk Empire has received numerous accolades for its dedication to historical accuracy. The show is particularly notable for the nuances it includes, such as Arnold Rothstein’s diet of cake and milk, and the subtle ambiguity of the relationship between Harry Daugherty and his accomplice Jess Smith. Even Luciano’s gonorrhea, which he contracted to avoid going into battle during World War I, is explored in excruciating detail (Winter, qtd. in Watercutter par. 26). The detail of the architecture, the precision of the costuming, and the news of the time is beautiful and precise, and Winter and his team are proud of their accomplishments. This precision also helps the plot; the storylines are moved along and the characters are developed sometimes simply by the props around them or the events to which they refer. For example, season 3 features an Egyptian-themed New Year’s Eve party at the Thompson residence. King Tut’s

tomb had only been discovered a few months prior, leading to an explosion of Egyptian references and themes throughout popular culture in the few years that followed. Margaret, this shows the audience, is on the cutting edge of culture, thriving as a “society” wife and hostess, demonstrating her transition over the fourteen-month gap between seasons 2 and 3 (Winter, qtd. in Watercutter par. 63).

Beyond the superficial and the spectacular, one of the most powerful historical component of the series is the ever-present ghost of World War I that lingers among the men, the families, and the violence of the series as a whole. The pilot episode introduces Jimmy Darmody, at age twenty-two a three-year veteran of World War I who came home with a damaged leg and a Pandora’s Box of memories from his time overseas. He returns to his fiancé and young son, his mother, and the man who had been his life-long father figure, Nucky Thompson. Jimmy returns with expectations of rising quickly within the ranks of Nucky’s organization in Atlantic City, but is surprised to be relegated to driver and bodyguard with an offer of an assistant clerkship. Nucky gently but firmly rebuffs Jimmy’s frustration, reminding him that had he stayed at Princeton instead of going to war, he’d be in a better position at this point.

Outside of Nucky’s celebratory dinner on the eve of Prohibition, he corners a sulking Jimmy:

Nucky: What’s with you? And don’t tell me it’s your stomach.

Jimmy: (pause) You wanna know what’s with me? You expect me to go to work for Ryan, that mick?

Nucky: You’d rather be my driver?

Jimmy: Of course not. You make Ryan clerk? I could run rings around that chump.

Nucky: Well, listen to Bonnie Prince Charlie . . .

Jimmy: Come on, Nuck. You were assistant sheriff when you were my age.

Nucky: And for eight years prior to that I spent night and day kissing the Commodore's ass.

Jimmy: I've been kissin' your ass since I was twelve!

Nucky: Yeah? Well what about the past three years?

Jimmy: (Pause) I wanted to serve my country.

Nucky: And nearly get yourself killed. . . . You know who dies for their country? Fucking rubes. ("To the Lost," season 2, episode 12)

This discussion plays out with Jimmy looking like an impetuous adolescent and Nucky an overly strict parent. But it is through Jimmy that the audience is able to bond more firmly with Nucky. He is introduced early on as a benign father figure, despite his underhandedness and corrupt dealings in office. He is seen as parental, not just with Jimmy, but also with his vapid showgirl mistress, Lucy, playing the straight man to her impish ridiculousness. We see his tolerance and willingness to indulge her and a side of him that desires, enjoys, and escapes—a slice of wildness that he hides behind his normal façade of detached coldness.

Lucy is frivolous, excessive, outlandish, and brash: the physical embodiment of Atlantic City. And she is Nucky's sexual plaything. And though he enjoys her wiles, he provides for her and treats her with a kind of paternal indifference, ensuring she is pacified and taken care of without having to do any work. The quintessential "here's some money, go buy yourself..." line often passes between them. He treats the city the same way, ensuring it is cared for and happy, as long as it offers its favors in return. Though sleazy and corrupt, Nucky manages to keep the city like a happy mistress.

In the pilot episode, when he first meets Margaret and listens to her story and grief, Lucy stumbles out of his bedroom into the meeting, leaving Nucky, who had the night before addressed the women's Temperance League, in an awkward position. Yet his generosity and warmth toward the then-Mrs. Schroeder muffles the immoral audacity of the moment. Looking at the photo of his wife and then looking back at the heavily pregnant woman, his face softens as he listens to her plight. And she, knowing her place, ignores the broach in his moral conduct.

A Worthy Opponent

Margaret plays the final role in setting up Nucky as a benevolent anti-hero in the pilot episode. She comes to him as a beaten wife with two young children, scared for their well-being as winter is approaching and her husband lacks work. Nucky gives her a shoulder to cry on and enough money to tide them over until her husband is taken back onto his job as a baker's assistant when the busy season once again starts. He ensures that the pregnant woman is safely driven home and then goes about his dealings. This seemingly uneventful moment unfolds into a series of life-changing events. Margaret's brutish husband finds the money for the children, punishes her with a beating, and then steals the money. When Nucky and he have a run-in at one of the city's casinos and Nucky has Schroeder physically removed, the drunken man goes home and beats Margaret so severely that she suffers a miscarriage and ends up in the hospital. Nucky has the police pick up Schroeder, beat him to death, and dump him in the sea. His body is caught in a fishing net and thrown back onto the boardwalk the next day.

Nucky's order is an act driven by emotion. This act is what many might identify as a kind of vigilante justice, the sort of action that makes a violent anti-hero seem a humanist hero. Nucky's passions, glimpsed as they escape his cold, heartless persona, are flames that burn as brightly as the inferno he starts at his father's house, but they cut Nucky both ways. The ones to which audiences may be attracted—his struggles to overcome his childhood victimization, his desire for Margaret, his affection for Jimmy—are beautiful in their humanity and depth. His father was a brute, unforgiving, and physically dangerous, leaving Nucky with plenty of scars. It is obvious that as the oldest boy he felt the need, even as a child, to protect his family and somehow protect those around him and it often leaks through his stone-faced demeanor that he has to try hard not to become his father. However, his desire for control and power guided him to decisions that destroy those around him and chip away at his humanity one bit at a time. The Nucky of the pilot episode, who is patient with Jimmy, kind to Margaret, and pained by memories of his deceased wife, becomes a self-contained monster fueled by selfish desire by the end of season 2. This degeneration of the audience's key protagonist, however, does not seem intended to taint the glimmer of Atlantic City or the dramatic appeal of the show.

The complexity of his character makes him even more fascinating and the drama of the series more intense. And though he is clearly the protagonist of the

show, the inner workings of his mind are still mostly hidden. Often in dramatic serials, the lead characters' thoughts or emotions are revealed through voice-overs or in-depth dialogue sequences. Even within the complex narrative of *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano had his therapy sessions that helped reveal more of his inner world. With characters as complex as Nucky, what writers often do is posit them against a nemesis whose insights and dialogues with others help the audience to further understand the character. In Nucky's case, one would expect law enforcement officers or some kind of opponent of strong moral standing to offer these insights as they oppose him. Yet each time a character appears on the show who pursues Nucky in the name of law or "good," the character falls—if not under his spell, then to the corruption that surrounds them all, leaving audiences with only vague ideas of Nucky's scheming. He is never profiled and never truly challenged to the extent that he opens up or becomes vulnerable enough to reveal his inner workings.

In terms of opposition, the moral opposition of lawless or corrupt behavior is slim, almost nonexistent in the series narrative. The two main characters of moral order initially appear to be Mrs. McGarry, the president of the Atlantic City Women's Temperance League, and Father Brennan, Margaret's son Teddy's parochial schoolmaster and her priest. Both figures surround Margaret, but not Nucky. Their guidance and ability to provide a moral compass for Margaret becomes complicated as the series progresses. Mrs. McGarry is earnest in her desires to perpetuate the Temperance movement, and she seems a model of first-wave feminism—demure, domestic, and willing to work within the political system dominated by men to achieve her goals. However, as the series progresses, the audience learns that Mrs. McGarry is much more of a radical than at first glance, telling Margaret that she uses her deceased husband's wealth to be a land-owning, independent woman intent on helping other women. So though she is strong, noble, and admirable, her position in Margaret's life becomes less of an oppressive source of feminine guidance and antiquated "morals" and more of a progressive source of wisdom as she teaches her about birth control and helps her navigate her relationship with Nucky.

Father Brennan is also a complicated figure in Margaret's life. She first encounters him in discussions about her son and is essentially forced back into the church to help Teddy with first communion. Father Brennan is the one to whom she confesses and the person she goes to for guidance when her daughter Emily is stricken with polio. His directive that she examine herself and her actions before

she asks anything of God forces her to once again examine her relationship with Nucky, her fixation on monetary stability, and her affair with Nucky's young Irish bodyguard Owen. But after she ponders her sins and takes "action" in the form of donating a significant amount of money to her church, we see that Father Brennan might be slightly less concerned with her soul than he is with her money, as he guilts her into giving even more. Though we see the strikingly intelligent Margaret change and develop early in the series, her skills at manipulation and deception gain significant traction by the end of season 2, and the woman whom, perhaps, the audience may have used as a moral contrast to Nucky has simply become more like him. Margaret's role reinforces the series underlying messages of innate corruption and inevitable debauchery.

Nucky does face jurisprudence to some degree, and there is tension at times between the legal system and his preferred way of doing things. In season 1 this comes in the form of Agent Van Alden, an overly earnest Prohibition officer. He develops an obsession with Nucky, recognizing that he is "running the show" in Atlantic City. All of his evidence falls on deaf (and corrupt) ears, and Van Alden realizes that his presence in Atlantic city mere lip service to enforcement; he is more of figurehead, a simulacrum of an enforcement officer when he recognizes that the extent of bootlegging in the city can barely be touched by the resources he is given. He flexes his muscle when he can, making example busts—some legal and some not. For example, when his long-suffering wife comes to visit, he attempts to show her the "good" side of Atlantic City as she is an extraordinarily devout Christian woman who would be appalled at the real world of the City. One evening, as they dine, she notices the presence of alcohol on the premises. To show off for her, Van Alden instigates a brawling, unsupported bust-up of the restaurant, issuing threats and throwing around orders.

The tightly wound agent, initially so strict in his religious code that he self-flagellates after having lustful thought, begins to unravel as he recognizes his position of weakness. To be clear, he does more than unravel. He explodes. He kills his deputy and he impregnates Nucky's ex-mistress, Lucy, and keeps her secretly hidden away in an apartment during her pregnancy in the hopes that he can eventually buy her baby for his infertile wife. His wife, however, discovers his betrayal and divorces him. Lucy tricks him out of money and abandons their daughter. His attempts at redeeming himself by helping the Assistant U.S. Attorney in her case against Nucky for election rigging backfires, and he shoots

her clerk and flees Atlantic City with his newborn child and her sexy Scandinavian nanny.

In season 2, Esther Randolph, the Assistant U.S. Attorney, comes to Atlantic City to build a case against Nucky for election rigging. She digs into all aspects of Nucky's dealings, finding scores of skeletons in his decadent closets, unearthing his years of entertaining every crook and politician on the East coast, his intimate knowledge of the flesh trade, and his multiple holdings and properties. Her pressure becomes a force of nature and her zealous desire for justice nearly matches Van Alden's, though it lacks the obsessive insanity.

Nucky is forced into a complicated kind of chess match with the legal system while he deals with strife in his city as many of his loyal followers have turned against him. Although Randolph is really on the side of good and attempting to stop a tidal wave of corruption, her demeanor and manipulations make her an unsympathetic character. Father Brennan, Van Alden, and Randolph all underscore the weight of ever-present political corruption. The audience is shown how corruption perpetuates corruption, is shown that it is an impenetrable force, and a goliath that cannot be tackled by ethical means.

In *Boardwalk Empire*, the audience's affection for Nucky puts those watching on the side of the corrupt. After having invested so much time in his development, we as an audience do not want Van Alden to succeed or Randolph to put Nucky in jail, and we certainly do not think too deeply about Father Brennan's methods of garnering funds for his parish.

Nucky, despite his misdeeds and the blood on his hands, remains the protagonist and the implied character for whom the audience is to root. It is his master plan that we follow as an audience and his intellect and calmness under pressure that come across as heroic. Even after the largest scene of bloodshed in the series, which he instigates to free himself of vote-rigging charges and his disavowal of both his brother and young Jimmy, when he and Margaret discuss their life and a possible trip with the children, we are pulled into the domestic bliss, hoping for a happy outcome. His anti-hero status remains, despite the waves of destruction he wrought simply to maintain his wealth and power.

In the end of season 2, however, Winter throws the audience a narrative curve ball when Nucky kills an unarmed Jimmy by shooting him at point-blank range, all the while screaming "I'M NOT LOOKING FOR REDEMPTION!" It is a frightening moment. All of Nucky's mannerisms change, his voice changes, and all of the rage that he pockets away lunges forth in a moment of violence intended

to send audiences reeling. Jimmy, to whom Nucky had been a surrogate father and who had been a primary character on the show, dies violently for turning on Nucky, though he was prepared to atone for his betrayal. The twist ends season 2 and, perhaps, forces audiences to question their support of Nucky.

Thinking about the series' point of departure in contrast to the finale of season 2, in some regard Nucky has indeed changed. His character has become more aggressive, more bloodthirsty, and more of a stereotypical gangster. But the corruption and the things for which he fights never change. The audience is brought into the series with Nucky lying to a room full of women in order to garner their future vote and then taking Jimmy to a dinner table surrounded by men already corrupted in their politics, plotting to squeeze more money out of the game. The corruption is there from the beginning. And Nucky Thompson carries it through to the end of season 3, when he rises from the ashes of a bloody and deadly turf war, recapturing his city. He never lies to the audience, never pretends to be anything he is not. That he bloodies his own hands killing Jimmy is shocking, but the amount of bloodshed he instigated or that simply followed in his wake is enormous. Seeing him as anything other than a villain is frightening, yet the entire series enraptures the audience and encourages them to bond with the single-mindedness of a man who will do anything for wealth and power, a man that refuses to hide from himself or anyone else. The narrative of *Boardwalk Empire* ensures its audience is aware of the depth and breadth of corruption in US politics. Through a loss of historicity and a close correlation of escapist amusement and issues such prostitution and the black market, inextricably binds together romance, fun, depravity, and the desecration of political institutions.

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Boardwalk Empire book. Read 312 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. For longtime Jersey residents, the phrase Atlantic City politics...Â While the links between organized crime and the politicians is documented extensively, the book centers on the political corruption instead of gangland shenanigans. So while thereâ€™s no Martin Scorsese-style violence, itâ€™s an interesting history of a unique city. ...more. flag 21 likes Â Like Â see review.