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Jimmy McNulty, Tragic Hero of "The Wire"

Jimmy McNulty is the protagonist of the HBO crime drama “The Wire.” He is an extremely skilled detective in the homicide division of the Baltimore police department, who fulfills all of the criteria of the tragic hero of epic poetry. McNulty is deeply troubled by alcoholism and a failed marriage, and exhibits Aeneas’ “moments of despair” (Johnson xi-xii). McNulty values humility, self-sacrifice and most importantly his concern for others’ well-being, which he actively works toward by solving important murders.

In “‘The Game is the Game’: Tautology and Allegory in ‘The Wire,’” Paul Allen Anderson explores the show’s characters and their relative positions within the social institutions of Baltimore, Maryland. “The Wire brings Ares and the other gods and their powers down from Mount Olympus to the faceless modern institutions towering over the series’ characters. The series, according to creator David Simon, ‘is a Greek tragedy in which the post modern institutions are the Olympian forces.’” (Anderson 373) Watching *The Wire* as a modern reinterpretation of mortals struggling against the gods and fate paints the show’s protagonist, Jimmy McNulty, as a reimagined Aristotelian tragic hero.

In his introduction to Stanley Lombardo’s translation of the *Aeneid*, W. R. Johnson identifies tragic heroes as determined to achieve their objectives and maintain hope in the face of adversity. They are tested with the destruction of their world and the people around them (Johnson ix). The audience can easily empathize and relate to a hero who “comes to incarnate the capacity of human beings to endure existence on the brink of ruin — and then to begin again and to flourish” (x). Essential to the archetype is a misjudgement on the hero’s part because of their own flaw, fate or chance, or gods’ manipulation. Aeneas is a Trojan who is completely committed to the unwritten laws of his gods, and by extension the well-being of his family and fellow citizens. He puts this over man’s laws. “I am Aeneas, devoted to my city’s gods” (Virgil 13; 1.461). Both Aeneas and McNulty inhabit a space between the

laws of gods and the laws of me, which allows them to fill the heroic archetype by “sacrificing his individual self to this widening collectivity of needs and duties and emotions becomes more than himself” (Johnson xviii).

McNulty’s empathy is illustrated by his unlikely relationship with a young Barksdale drug dealer named Bodie Broadus, one which reflects Aeneas’ sympathy for his enemy, Lausus (Virgil 160; 10.968 - 70). In the fourth season McNulty has bailed Bodie out of jail a number of times and eventually the two meet to discuss details about the rival Stanfield drug organization. Bodie talks about his ethics that have brought him this far in a life of selling drugs. In “Walking in Someone Else’s City: ‘The Wire’ and the Limits of Empathy,” Hua Hsu analyzes the importance of the connection between these two characters. Bodie has always lived by a warrior code that places loyalty and external strength above all else. But now, the drug world is run by a different, darker set of rules which, by his standards, are cruel and barbaric.

"We be like those little bitches on the chessboard," Broadus observes, referring back to a conversation years earlier, which the viewer recognizes from season 1. "Pawns," McNulty offers— but he does not follow the reference. He probably does not realize that he himself might be regarded a pawn as well. (Hsu 526)

The allegory of the chessboard illustrates how the agency of both Bodie and McNulty is limited by forces outside their control and by their adherence to differing codes of ethics.

In Robert Fagles’ translation of *Antigone*, the eponymous protagonist puts “the great unwritten, unshakable traditions” (Sophocles 82; 505) of the gods over the laws of the city-state of Thebes. The city’s ruler, Creon, accuses Antigone’s dead brother of being a traitor and demands that his body be displayed as a warning against future treason. Antigone and the other citizens’ religious values dictate

that family members are to be given proper burial. This friction between written and unwritten law is central to the drama of both *Antigone* and *The Wire* and to the flaws inherent in their respective protagonists. Just as *Antigone* ‘hasn’t learned to bend before adversity’ (82; 527), McNulty is defiant in the face of his friends’ pleas and superiors’ demands to give up on his investigations, and actively criticizes the methods of the police department and the city government. Both have an “uncompromising determination, the same high sense of their own worth and a consequent quickness to take offense, the readiness to die rather than surrender — a heroic temper” (Knox 50). As *Antigone* attacks Creon for his tyranny, McNulty does the same for the powers that be within the police department.

One of the show’s most important themes is this corruption of ideals which is not limited to either the police or criminals. Each side is one part of the polis, and therefore everyone’s morality and behavior is affected by the unseen forces of the show. The viewer can more easily see this corruption on the side of the Barksdale organization, the first major criminal organization introduced in the show. For most of the drug dealers, enforcers, front company owners and addicts, the characters on the “streets,” these organizations are the only structure in their lives. They all live by an unwritten code of conduct separate from state or national law. These people have been unsuccessful in contributing and becoming a part of the existing economic systems of America, so they have created their own systems outside of the law. Tragic heroes such as McNulty are traditionally morally ambiguous, and the worlds they inhabit blur the lines between right and wrong.

It’s important to note that McNulty is just one of hundreds of essential characters in the show, a single political animal within a vast American polis. The epic scope of the show prompts viewers to pay as much if not more attention to the polis, the show’s social and political structures, as the individual inhabitants of Baltimore. Just as *Venus* and *Juno* affect the events surrounding *Aeneas*, the city’s

government, police department and criminal organizations bear down on McNulty. The dystopian portrayal of Baltimore and the United States in *The Wire* reflects the historical context of Rome at the time Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* between 29 and 19 B.C.E. “Its prosperity seemed to generate irreparable damage to its values and its ideals by prompting, particularly among its leaders, a culture of greed and harmful competition — one that left its political, military, economic, and social traditions in shreds” (Johnson x-xi). Lower-ranking police officers and detectives are worried about their “numbers,” quotas for arrests or solved cases in a given period, forced upon them by their superiors. Knowing that they could always return to their comfortable suburban homes, fighting crime for them becomes just another day on the job, in which victims and criminals are dehumanized. Bureaucratic politics, the will of the gods of capitalism and democracy, become a mechanism through which career-oriented police develop tunnel vision toward a promotion and the money that comes with it. Just as McNulty’s superiors dismiss his efforts to solve murders, Creon dismisses Antigone’s loyalty to her brother and her desire to give him a proper burial. “There let her pray to the one god she worships: / Death” (Sophocles 100; 875 - 76). Creon condemns Antigone to be buried alive. Major Williams Rawls, commander of the homicide unit, condemns McNulty to the marine unit, where McNulty will do the least investigating and in turn the least damage to the department.

Despite his constant drinking, womanizing and lying to his bosses, McNulty draws sympathy from audiences because of his loyalty to the good of Baltimore and his determination to do what is right and not necessarily what is legal, to devote himself to the gods of his fellow citizens rather than the gods of bureaucracy and politics. His character and environment are testaments to the influence of classical Greek culture on western society in the 2000s.

## Bibliography

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