

Victoria Smith
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Professoressa Fognani
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The Mafia Thrives on Betrayal

As is evident in the numerous firsthand accounts, articles, books, films, and other forms of media that discuss the criminal organization known as the Mafia, betrayal is a recurring theme. Even further, it can be argued that betrayal is a fundamental aspect in legitimizing the powerful presence and authority of the Mafia; as well as in showing the absolutes created for the people within a society plagued by this dominating network. It is impossible to seriously contemplate or discuss the Mafia without acknowledging and accepting the notion of betrayal that is absolutely prevalent in Mafia-dominated societies and environments. The Mafia offers only two choices to those within its reach of influence. For those it observes and/or “picks out”, they either must betray their family/friends, honor, and even identity, or betray the Mafia itself – which reaps dangerous and unforgiving consequences, not always only for the betrayer (*pentito*), but for their family as well. In the following paragraphs, betrayal will be examined in close proximity with the Mafia. First, we will look at betrayal *for* the Mafia, as shown by Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. Then, we will examine betrayal *of* the Mafia, as represented by Henry Hill in *Goodfellas*. Finally, we will conclude with an in-depth analysis of how the Mafia both creates and maintains this notion of absolutism –that there are only two choices for a person, both requiring betrayal of something(s)/someone(s). And, as we will see, both choices produce acute consequences.

The Godfather star Michael Corleone is a unique character who embodies the Mafia’s influential power and one who succumbs to the often-irresistible pull that without fail leads people towards betrayal. In this film, we observe Michael experience a drastic character arc that drags him deeper into the mouth of the ‘octopus’ (the Mafia). Through the need to avenge his

father, Michael comes to betray Kay's trust, the Church, and his morals –all for an organization which (under his father) has exposed him to the notion of “honor” and conditioned him into believing that the only way to receive justice is to take matters into his own hands and trust in the Mafia way of “taking care of business”. In the following paragraph from Travaglino's article on the roles of honor codes and other related cultural influences, we see the importance of maintaining ideas of masculinity and honor, in order to carry out the Mafia's “will”.

Travaglino and colleagues adopted a definition of culture as a dynamic set of beliefs, ideologies, and practices which may be endorsed (or contested) to different degrees within a society. They focused on honour-related ideology about masculinity, which is appropriated and embraced by COs [criminal organizations], and demonstrated that individuals' endorsement of such ideology is related to their perception of greater legitimacy of, and lower collective resistance against COs. (Travaglino, et al.)

A visual example of (one of) Michael's betrayals is best represented in the infamous Church scene that takes place during the baptism of his godson. In this iconic and cinematically intense sequence, the camera cuts back and forth from Michael's face (half hidden in shadow, half bathed in a holy, golden light) as he publicly declares his allegiance to the Church by renouncing the Devil and his acts of sin, to the brutal killings of the heads of the rival Mafia families – killings that are orchestrated by Michael himself.

This scene conveys the serious act of Michael betraying not just the Church, but ultimately God and the oath to renounce all sin in his life. It also shows the point in the story where Michael has truly betrayed his own morals and is indifferent to breaking his oath in a church –simply for the sake of preserving the Mafia and ensuring that his family and the organization continue to thrive and prevail. Michael cannot be allegiant to the Church and obey

its commandments without betraying the Mafia and its honor killings. And so, recalling the Biblical account of Judas betraying Christ, Michael imitates this act of betrayal. This situation is a prime example of showing the extreme lengths the Mafia is capable of bringing a person to; where they are willing to betray a structure that is –or should be—more powerful, holy, and untouchable than even the Mafia. Of course, there are other examples throughout the film of Michael’s betrayal (of Kay’s and Connie’s trust, etc.); however, we are limited now to simply this example, and must move forward to discuss the next type of betrayal.

A clear example of the brazen act to openly defy and betray the Mafia is with the character Henry Hill from *Goodfellas*. While Michael betrayed his morals, the Church, and the trust of the people closest to him, we observe Henry betray the Mafia organization he collaborated with for years in order to protect his safety and that of his family. In this situation, Henry can either “stick around” the Mafia and have his family (and eventually himself) pay the price in blood, or he can betray the Mafia and attempt to save himself and his family. A rather unusual ending for a Mafia film, it can be argued that *Goodfellas* ends on a happier note than many other similar stories; however, Henry does end up paying the price for his betrayal –not with his blood, but with his freedom. In his eyes, he is now confined to a boring, meaningless, degrading life of mediocrity, losing (what he considers to be) his dignity/respect.

The court scene during the final minutes of the film shows Henry testifying against the people who essentially made him who he is – who gave him a life of wealth, respect, and excitement (albeit gained from illegal endeavors and criminal behavior). Visually, this scene offers a poignant message of the nature of Henry’s testimony as a *pentito* who –literally—points the finger to the other *mafioso*, with the American flag behind him. The irony of this scene is that

he is positioned so that his back is to this symbolic flag which represents courage and readiness to sacrifice (red), justice for all (blue), as well as purity and innocence (white).

In fact, from *mafioso* perspective, Henry takes the coward's way out by choosing himself (and his family) over his assumed *Family* and the implied brotherhood that relies on the code of omertà –characterizing men of honor. Although Henry is not actually a made member, his proximity to the higher-ups in the organization (like Paulie) and his involvement in the criminal activity closely linked to the Mafia make him as close a *mafioso* as an outsider can be. His choice to betray, stemming from his trapped situation, results in the loss of his wealth, freedom, and respect. High prices to pay; yet the minimum that the Mafia demands of a someone who decides to break the silence. Henry's statement directed to the audience secures all these losses into one regretful phrase: "And now it's all over". Now, he is confined to the mediocre and simple life of a man who has been stripped of the fame, power, and wealth given to him by the same organization that is capable of taking it all away. Here again we see a choice to betray being made –this time, in opposition to the Mafia. However, like Michael Corleone sacrificed much for the Mafia in order to become its head and continue its governance, Henry sacrificed much in order to not become strangled by its vicious tentacles.

After examining the two types of betrayal in relation to the Mafia, we now delve into the main contributors to why the Mafia can maintain this ultimatum over people. The first contributor is the fact that the Mafia *controls* the notions of honor and justice and prescribes them to young, impressionable people. Consider, for example, the men Henry Hill grows up around and the influence of their presence throughout his childhood. As a teenager living in a "neighborhood full of nobodies", of a middle-class family who (according to Henry) embodies mediocrity, Henry is desperate to join the group of men who appear rich, respected, untouchable,

and unaccountable to anyone but themselves. As a naïve teenager who venerates these *mafioso*, Henry is a perfect target for being shaped into the perfect collaborator for them –even though he can never be able to become a legitimate ‘made member’. Siebert’s article “A Men-Only Society” describes the intricate and infinitely important process undertaken by *mafioso* as they search out a younger generation to raise and continue Mafia tradition and ideals.

The best of the young ones are carefully watched and studied by the older men.....and when one of them makes an impression because he is smart and sure of himself and bossy he is immediately taken in hand and encouraged by the adult men of honour who teach him and show him the ropes, take him along with them, start giving him things to do.
(pp.15)

While Henry is not the son of a mafioso or able to become in fact a legitimate member of the Mafia, his adoption by men like Paulie are a prime example of the very process described above. (We recall Henry pointing out the mailman to be beaten up and showing no remorse for sharing information with the dangerous *wiseguys*). His “grooming” process occurs in the beginning of the film, where he is constantly included in criminal activities as a messenger, carrier, etc.; and always being rewarded with approval and money. These positive affirmations by the mafioso create within Henry’s mind the desire to always serve the organization which always seems to repay him with rewards by the people he misguidedly looks up to.

By instilling these views of the Mafia into young boys and men, the Mafia creates a perception that is hard to overcome and unlikely to be questioned. Men of honor are respected and viewed as carrying out justice; so even considering breaking their trust or becoming a *pentito* is almost unfathomable to newly recruited *mafioso* and those (like Henry) who are within its sphere of influence. In this way, it is clear to people that to betray the Mafia means to betray all

of the ideals wrapped up into this complex organization -justice, honor, vendetta, brotherhood. The Mafia weaponizes positive values in order to manipulate people into complying with it. And when someone finally decides to go against the grain, the consequences are severe and often fatal.

Another contributor to the Mafia's power over a person's choices is the emphasis on replicating/imitating the almost-indestructible family-structure which relies on loyalty and sacrifice of self for the overall good of the group. In *The Godfather* we see Michael Corleone become so allegiant and loyal to his (Mafia) Family, that he kills a member of his legitimate family, albeit someone related only by marriage. Despite the fact that Carlo is his sister's husband, Michael has him killed, since he has attacked the Mafia Family by having Sonny, a brother to Michael both by blood and through the *cosca*, murdered by rival gangs. The Mafia is brilliantly organized in that it limits the victim's choices by reframing a person's emotional (and physical) environment through copying the valued and unique format of the family. This is a family made up of members that only death will separate; and that few will dare to betray. The Mafia makes absolutely clear that to join the organization means life and to part it means death.

While the choice of an individual is ultimately their responsibility, we have observed how the Mafia manages to limit those choices to two options. One can either betray one's identity and morals in favor of a new, prescribed identity and new set of morals (that deal with "honor", "justice", etc.), or one can choose to betray the Mafia itself by ignoring/defying its established rules and codes of brotherhood, honor, and omertà. With the former type of betrayal, the person is pigeon-holed into sacrificing themselves for an organization that ultimately kills them. With the latter type, the person is able to maintain some semblance of self-identity and freedom –at the cost of (also) being killed by the organization, or hunted for the rest of one's life. In both

scenarios, the Mafia determines which choices the individual faces, and –even more significantly—the consequences as well. And, although the individual is ultimately free to make his/her choice, the limited and highly controlled options prove once again that the Mafia is an organization that is capable of reaching its tentacles into every facet of life –from politics to large corporations to personal and domestic life. And so we see that the Mafia is fueled by its link to betrayal and the ultimatum it presents to its victims –who happen to be every person who is unfortunate enough to be exposed to this cancerous organization.

Works Cited (in progress)

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