

Buonanima, James Gandolfini

Fred Gardaphe (June 20, 2013)



Through Gandolfini's fine talent, Tony Soprano began the move away from that traditional, patriarchal sense of manhood that came from an old European model in which violence and silence could bring and sustain honor. Through his therapy, he began to question the traditional order of things and his roles of husband, father, son, and gangster. And so, in this way he became a 20th century trickster. Society has always needed its tricksters and scapegoats to teach us what happens to those who dare to break taboos and social contracts. In the hands of Italian American artists like Gandolfini, the gangster as trickster did not represent Italian America as much as it presented the last stand for an outdated patriarchy in America.

I never met [James Gandolfini](#) [2], and probably the same goes for you, but it's funny how I thought I knew him? Funny how? Funny, like he amused me. Funny like no matter the role he played, I always found a way to connect to the character he was playing. And while I never will really know the man, my life is different because I've seen his art at work.



In a rich and varied acting career, his characters seemed to bring out the best and worst of us no matter the role, perhaps that's why so many of us think we liked the man. He never seemed to play up or down for the paparazzi, perhaps that's why we think we know him so well.

[Tony Soprano](#) [3] was my buddy. I happened to be going through therapy the same time he was seeing Dr. Melfi. Each week I compared my experiences to his; I was made of some of the same stuff as he was, and while Gandolfini wasn't Tony Soprano in real life, he was for me, a way to check my process and progress as I grew from a wiseguy into a wise man, and for that I thank Gandolfini, and the writers who gave him the material to interpret.

Gandolfini seemed so perfect for the character he played, that it was hard to imagine him as any other character. He seemed to exist once and forever as the suburban man who grew up and out of a working class Italian neighborhood. His struggles with his past and present left him little time to look to the future. He had the good sense to know he needed some way to connect to a future that would be different from his father's, and as he strove to make his way there, he ran into all the obstacles that an undigested and often misunderstood past can provide.

He knew he was Italian, but he didn't know how. He knew he was a man, but not in the same way his father and uncle had been men. He knew that family and loyalty to friends was important, but he didn't always know the best way to get out of the problems they create for us. He had an idea that things could be better, but he didn't know how to make that happen. For years we watched as he fumbled his way through his fictional life, showing us all what happens to those who can't find a way beyond the violence that threatens us all if we don't rise above those streets that are paved with the fears and prejudices that come from our past. Through it all Tony Soprano became a vehicle in American culture that connected us to and enabled us to rethink all the fictional gangsters that preceded him.

Like many male baby boomers in the throes of middle age, Tony was trying to figure out who he is and why he does what he does. He came to realize that he was not the man his father was and to want that his son's life would be different from his. Trapped between the past and the present with an unimaginable future, he stumbled upon a way of feeling better.

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Even David Chase couldn't kill Tony Soprano. And when he came close a number of times, it was hard to imagine how the series could go on without Gandolfini. Now that the actor is dead, we will go about our lives, not having to worry about Tony, for he will live as long as there are ways to screen video. It will be different for those whose lives were actually touched by the real man who played his parts so well, for certainly there must have been much more to this gifted artist than met the audiences' eyes. Buonanima, James Gandolfini.

* Fred Gardaphe is the author of *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (2006)



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