

How far does the reader sympathise with Sherman McCoy?

Sherman McCoy is narcissistic, covetous and adulterous. Yet, as readers, we feel some sort of attraction towards him, and even if we do not condone his lifestyle, we understand it, and we accept his motives, because McCoy, for all his money, is a human being and it is his flaws themselves that fascinate us. After all, it seems a paradox of sorts to describe him as a tragic character and then condemn him, because if all his contemporaries share the same flaws, then there must be something else that sets him apart. Firstly, his self-awareness comes into play: 'The Master of the Universe was cheap, and he was a liar,' says Sherman. The fact that he understands his failings is important: it raises the question, if he is aware of his motives, then can he be held any more responsible for his actions than if he was oblivious to his own intentions?

I feel that he still cannot be held liable, as another factor is involved: his environment. In fact, McCoy describes his greed as 'myocarditis,' which is a disease, and this image helps us to better understand what drives him onwards. A disease is involuntarily received, destructive and abnormal. In the same way, Sherman's conscience is being eaten away from the inside, and at Maria's apartment, inadvertently thinks, 'His Majesty, the most ancient king, Priapus, Master of the Universe, had no conscience.' Although once again acknowledging his blemishes, the comment has deeper implications. Yes, Priapus was the Greek God of procreation, but also the God of fertility, and a Pagan figure. This is appropriate, as out of 'this tidal wave of concupiscence,' as Sherman describes it, comes a catharsis for Sherman, out of which grows a new man, and, one could say, a new city. In addition, religion has ignored Sherman, and God has left him. His Godless environment is what *forces* a primitive moral code upon him in 'the jungle,' and it is what sets superficial social conventions that Sherman must adhere to, or be shunned. This is clearest when he first sees Maria's new painting, and says, 'What a piece of garbage ... It was sick ... But it gave of the sanctified odor of serious art, and so Sherman hesitated to be candid.' This pressure from the social order summarizes the general hollowness of not only 1980s New York art, but also culture itself. It is worrying to think that the mechanism for determining the relative worth of art exists totally independently of the art itself. Thus, if we look deeper, perhaps Sherman is the victim even before he ventures into the Bronx.

Stylistically Wolfe's work is full of touches that reveal subtle differences between characters: they are not all the walking, breathing piles of pure sin they appear to be. As Sherman is introduced, the first thing he thinks about is his family. He thinks, 'But the smile on her [his wife's] face was obviously genuine, altogether pleasant ... a lovely smile, in fact ... *Still a very good looking woman, my wife* ... with her fine thin features, her big clear blue eyes ... *But she's forty years old!* ... Not her fault ... *But not mine either!*' Towards the end, the internal conflict in Sherman is clear, through use of the parallel syntax: he is torn between his inherent desires and external pressure from society. He then goes on to think about Campbell, and only then does he commit adultery. Kramer on the other hand, is introduced differently. The first sentence is, 'The next morning, to Lawrence Kramer, she appears, from out of a feeble gray dawn, the girl with the brown lipstick.' Both in his mind and structurally (on the page), lust takes precedence over family life, and this is why McCoy and Kramer are two different characters. "Truly pathetic, wasn't it?" asks Kramer, referring to his apartment, because he also fails to appreciate his life and anything in it. Perhaps Sherman is also guilty of this, but as his circumstances change his satisfaction ironically improves.

However, whether or not we blame Sherman for his faults at the beginning of the book becomes less and less relevant, as the differences between him and the other characters become more pronounced. When accused of killing Henry Lamb, McCoy is, without a doubt, treated unfairly: ironic considering that the case is an exercise to prove that justice is blind. But of course, if the characters recognised irony then we wouldn't have the situation in the first place. The most important point in the book, concerning McCoy, comes as he is jailed. 'Even in the midst of the storm, Sherman felt strangely unmoved ... *Since I'm already dead,*' thinks Sherman. His death is described as a pure, cleansing experience that purges him of all responsibility. In 'Richard III' Richard, a very similarly tragic character, comments, 'Say, is my kingdom lost? Why, 'twas my care/ And what loss is it to be rid of care?' Sherman asks himself the same question and the answer appears to shock him. His sudden realisation that he has lost all he can lost puts him in a calm, bemused mood and this is reflected in his

thought processes that Wolfe describes. He says, 'He couldn't remember whether he had died while he was still standing in the line outside, before the door to Central Booking opened, or while he was in the pens. But by the time he left the building ... he had died and been reborn.' The long, flowing sentences give the impression of a man who feels no emotion and is trying to understand himself. At this moment, Sherman transcends the seemingly trivial desires of the press, and he acknowledges this, saying, 'The eerie thing was ... that he was not shocked and angered.' We should, however make it clear that at no point does he realise the flaws that set his tragedy in motion: this rebirth is not his Anagnorisis. Should we then conclude that he has learnt nothing? Interestingly, Aristotle extensively discussed catharsis, and considered it to be linked to the **positive** social function of tragedy – this is shown to an extent here. Through destruction and suffering emerges a new man, but also a new city, although it is questionably whether or not it has improved at all. I feel that it may be slightly inaccurate to describe Sherman's metaphorical death as a catharsis for the entire city. After all, most characters come away with little insight, and the ending still displays the twisted social values that we observed at the very beginning. McCoy is the lone figure emerging from the crumbling city. 'Judge ... it don't matter! It don't matter!' says Sherman, and 'He smiled.' By the end, McCoy needs no sympathy: he comes away with a pure mind, and achieves a separation of himself and the city.