



**UNIVERSIDAD DE ALCALÁ – INSTITUTO FRANKLIN**

**UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID**

**FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA**

**MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS NORTEAMERICANOS  
CURSO 2017/2018**

Tragedy and Realism in Baltimore:  
*The Wire's* Challenge to American Myths

Trabajo de fin de máster presentado por: Pablo García Irureta-Goyena

Dirigido por: Tom Byers

Departamento de Estudios Ingleses: Lingüística y Literatura

Convocatoria: Septiembre 2018

Calificación: 9,2

## Table of Contents

1. Abstract	2
2. Introduction	3
3. Methodology	8
4. Greek Gods on Baltimore.	10
A. Jimmy McNulty and Hubris.	20
5. The American Myths.	25
A. City Upon a Hill	26
B. American Exceptionalism	28
C. The False promise of the American Dream	30
a. Stringer Bell	34
b. Frank Sobotka	41
D. Public Education	50
E. Freedom of Press	55
6. Conclusion	59
7. Works Cited	62
8. Episodes Cited	65

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to contrast the social reality of the United States and the classic American mythology of the country in the HBO television series. *The Wire* to make a deep analysis of the American reality. The TV drama has deep conclusions about the American reality in different fields. *The Wire* gives insight into the different institutions shaping the functioning of a city, such as the police department, the unions, the political system, the education system, and the press. These are explored through different characters who participate in these institutions, and/or who suffer oppression at their hands.

American mythology has been created throughout different historical moments and is one of the most important factors shaping the United States. Myths such as the American Dream, the City Upon a Hill, American Exceptionalism, the democratization of the education system and Freedom of the Press will appear in this paper. Furthermore, American individualism will appear in contrast with the ideology of Greek Tragedy in *The Wire*.

The thesis of this essay is that the contrast and the gap between American mythology and American reality are central themes of *The Wire*. This paper also addresses both American mythology and American reality, with the purpose of showing a deep contrast between them.

### **Five keywords**

*The Wire*, American mythology, capitalism, corruption, ideology

## Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the contradictions between the American Dream and the current material and social reality. To do so, the HBO TV drama *The Wire* will be the instrument to understand these differences. Throughout the paper, I will try to stress the ideological struggle between different visions and realities about the American Creed and this will be shown by plotlines, characters, and dialogues on the one side and by other sources that explain and defend the American Myths on the other side.

The reason why *The Wire* is chosen is its ability to dissect each of the American institutions and also to show the American reality from every perspective in a post-industrial city such as Baltimore. *The Wire* (2002-2008) is a TV drama created by David Simon, ex-journalist of *The Baltimore Sun* and co-screen-writer Ed Burns, a former member of the Police Department of Baltimore and after that, a high school teacher in Baltimore. The lives of both of the creators reflect their interests on the different topics delivered on *The Wire*. Three out of the five seasons are related to the police institution and drug trade, the local newspaper as exemplary of journalism and the education system, institutions they have deep relations with. The two remaining seasons develop their plotlines in the port of Baltimore, from the perspective of the stevedores on the one hand, and of the political system and its hidden details, on the other.

*The Wire* is an urban police drama that became something bigger. Its research about the American Institutions and how individuals deal with them made an object for study. David Simon is very active on the role of debating and discussing the series. When he was asked what is *The Wire* about he answered saying that:

Thematically, it's about the very simple idea that, in this Postmodern world of ours, human beings—all of us—are worth less. We're worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It's the triumph of capitalism. [...] Whether you're a corner boy in West Baltimore, or a cop who knows his beat, or an Eastern European brought here for sex, your life is worth less. It's the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It's viable for the few. But I don't live in Westwood, L.A., or on the Upper West Side of New York. I live in Baltimore. (Simon, "Interviewing the Man Behind *The Wire*")

This explanation seems very vague for a TV drama: it needs more concreteness. *The Wire* needs to convey the previous message by Simon with a TV format, one of the most standardized ones. In spite of this difficulty, *The Wire* has become an exception since not many television products have generated so much debate and the reasons for that are still to be explored. On that matter, the sociology professor at Harvard William Julius Wilson has a strong contribution. He wrote the book *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* a dissection of the working class in the postindustrial societies that was an inspiration for Simon to develop the second season and the plotline regarding the stevedores (Bennett).

The situation changed and now Wilson is the one who uses David Simon's work as a source for his students to understand American social problems:

Although *The Wire* is fiction, not a documentary, its depiction of [the] systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor is more poignant and compelling [than] that of any published study, including my own [...] What I'm concentrating on is how this series so brilliantly illustrates theories and processes that social scientists have been writing about for years. (qtd. in Bennett)

Nevertheless, Williams Julius Wilson does not attribute the power of *The Wire* to its realistic portrayal but to its mixture with classic tragic elements. The drama balances perfectly between a sociological work in which American institutions and lives are meticulously analyzed and an engaging TV format series that must gain an audience and create an emotional bond between the spectators and the characters. This is what Williams defends and what made *The Wire* brilliant:

Berkeley's Williams argues that the greatness of the show stems from the way it interweaves realism and Simon's tragic vision with the sort of melodramatic elements that television demands: the brotherly bond between Stringer Bell and the gang leader Avon Barksdale, Bubbles' long battle with addiction, the detective Jimmy McNulty's attempts to rein in his self-destructive impulses, the use of foreshadowing and irony throughout. It's not a simple matter of, 'Oh, it's so real.' [...] There's something about the structure, the use of seriality, and obviously the writing. (qtd. in Bennett)

It is perhaps because of the above mentioned elements that *The Wire* has become such a brilliant piece of study in different fields of higher education<sup>1</sup>. Its combination of dissected

---

<sup>1</sup> Papers about *The Wire* have been published in many different branches, including sociology, pedagogy, criminology, philosophy, urban studies, film studies and many others.

American society and emotive characters and plotlines set the perfect scenario to make *The Wire* a great source for a better understanding of the United States of America.

Even though *The Wire* will be the main explanatory source of the paper as far as American Mythology is concerned; it will constantly be supported or challenged by different texts dealing with the same topic. American Mythology is a broad field of study and therefore different and diverse sources will constantly appear. Many of them will be primary sources of foundational myths from the Mayflower to the Constitution. Moreover, many texts will be studies of the development of different myths, and their importance in American society.

Among the myths that this paper will explore, The American Dream will be the most prominent one. This myth is usually conceived in a twofold fashion. Its first version is the belief that if you are smart and shrewd enough you will succeed enormously, while its second one utters that if this is not the case, but still one is willing to work every day and collaborate with his best, will have a place in the system. The first one of these two parts will be analyzed through the character of Stringer Bell and his core plot and development throughout the three seasons he appears. The second one is related with Frank Sobotka, and his indefatigable will to acquire decent jobs for him, and the stevedores he represents with his union. Both depict the failure of this dream in the fictional Baltimore.

To continue with other myths, individualism will also be taken as an important part of the American Creed that will contrast the dominance of the implacable institutions of *The Wire*. This American Individualism is contrasted in *The Wire* with the institutions as if they were almighty Greek Gods. The Greek Tragedy ideology occupies an important position in that part. Furthermore, the position of the United States of America as a shining example will lead the discussion to American Exceptionalism and its subsequent myth: The City Upon a Hill. These will show the decline of the American experience as exemplary; *The Wire* will prove how the city is no longer anything shining on the hill, but a place where all the evil can concentrate.

To complete the discussion of American myths, the last sections will deal with the education system and the press. The first one will represent the failure of the educational system as a leveler for every American citizen, and the second one will show how the role of the press in society has changed throughout history and the moment in which it is living right now. Both should have main roles in the healthy functioning of society and *The Wire* places them on the other side, full of corruption and malfunctioning.

There are many sources to understand the American reality and compare it with the American mythology, but *The Wire* may be one of the greatest examples to do so. The reasons are many, but first of all, it is one of the first TV shows making such a harsh critique of the American reality without any sympathy for its mythology. David Simon wanted to be as powerful as possible in its stand: “We tore the cover off a city and showed the American dream was dead” (qtd. in Lynskey).

During the first dialogue of the first episode of the whole series, McNulty and his interlocutor uncover the main topic of the series to the audience. In the first scene, they show the myth about the American Dream in which everybody has a new opportunity regardless of how many times they have been committing the same mistake and the American reality in which the person they are talking about is actually dead in the middle of the street. This contradictory visual moment creates the scenario in which the whole TV drama will develop.

A common thread during the five seasons is the similitude among the different systems and institutions existing in Baltimore. This idea is meant to reach out any postindustrial urban society. Baltimore is just the scenario chosen by the authors to spread those ideas, but it conveys a broader message. Among the many interviews and speeches given by David Simon, there is one in which he really nails the point of the importance that is given to the city in this historical moment. His views on the city are the following: “The city to me is basically the only possible vehicle that we have to measure human achievement at this point and to pursue real human achievement [...] which is how we all live together” (“David Simon on Why He Created *The Wire*”).

What comes clear with this sentence is that if this is the way to measure human achievement there is no hesitation in saying that it is a great failure of society. There is sometimes a sympathetic approach to American society in *The Wire*, but only in exceptional cases, such as the ones seen in the last scene of the whole series, in which many of the most problematic characters get beyond the deepest of their problems, such as McNulty with his addictions to alcohol and nightlife, Bubbles starting a new life out of the street or Namond giving a discourse at a Baltimore Debate League. These exceptions just confirm the rule for the common failure of the ‘how we all live together’ stated by David Simon. *The Wire* is a tale of a social failure in which the individuals fall constantly swallowed by the power of institutions out of control.

This chaotic scenario of Baltimore is the one in which all the American mythology is under debate and this is what this paper will deal with: American reality and American mythology.



## Methodology

In order to explain the methodology used throughout this paper, it is important to clarify my research question and the goals of this paper. First of all, the paper aims to be a comparison between a national imaginary and a social reality. This national imaginary is the American mythology and the American Creed that support much of the American ideology. On the other side, there is a reality that is not commensurate with the myth, and it deeply contrasts to the original Creed of this Nation. This is the stand I took in order to develop the paper.

The method used in this paper is the ideological criticism. It focuses the critique on the American mythology, one of the ideological bases of the United States. Moreover, it explores how this mythology affects society, and finally, the way in which *The Wire* challenges their virtues.

Therefore, to gather information about both the myth and the reality, I used different sources. For the first one, it depends much on the concrete myth analyzed, but the data are usually collected in research papers and academic books dealing with the American mythology. Nonetheless, many other sources have been investigated, such as newspapers and interviews. Among the research papers, the majority of them were analytic ones that research the deep roots of the myth and how it evolved and its actual moment in American society.

On the other hand, there was a social reality to explore and understand. To do so, the source to use was one of the most acclaimed TV series; *The Wire*. This approach to the social reality through a visual fiction may be seen as inaccurate but on the contrary, it had many advantages for a better understanding of the social reality. For instance, Galen Wilson asserts: “*The Wire* is more than a realist representation of Baltimore’s victims of American capitalism; it is a meditation on whether such realist representations can be a productive force for social change” (59). *The Wire* sets a scenario in which the society and all its institutions are treated with a critical eye towards their main functions. It also creates many characters with different positions in the social scale and their relationship with the different institutions and the system. There is a tremendous advantage to having in the same source and with the same dynamics, the youth of the low rises of Baltimore, the police officers in West Baltimore, the journalists of the *Baltimore Sun*, the workers of the port, and also the mayor of the city. This variety of characters and perspectives about different institutions but similar problems creates a broad idea of the social problems of the American people stated by different people

in different contexts. The realistic portrayal of this series is the reason why many academics have used it for research papers. Furthermore, there were other sources that were explored using the data to explain, for instance, the racial segregation in American schools and the education system.

Nonetheless, any source has its advantages but also its disadvantages. The limits that of using *The Wire* as a source should also be stated. First, it is a work of fiction and therefore, it does not present scientific or comprehensive data about the full reality of the American society. However, I prefer to use this work of fiction because this source creates a better understanding of how American reality is lived than do academic papers or other works of fiction. Furthermore, the representation of social reality in *The Wire* is confined to an urban area on the East Coast. The city of Baltimore is representative of many others and many of its conflicts can be applied to other cities, but it is important to keep in mind that every city has its own dynamics, problems and conflicts. Of course, rural areas and small cities have different visions of the American reality. Nonetheless, the conflict theme of *The Wire* is as broad as it can be, exploring the institutions and the system that works in every corner of the United States. This is why it works effectively as a sample for the rest of the society, although the scenario is limited to Baltimore.

The historical and cultural context is also something remarkable. Although *The Wire* is almost recent, it seems that fifteen years can be a big gap to the problems to deal with. Yet *The Wire* looks closer to reality as the years pass on.

To conclude this section, and as an evaluation of the methodology used, the results are conclusive and useful. The American mythology examples are effectively representative of the whole idea of an American mythology and also, *The Wire* has been an excellent source to analyze the United States and to compare the gap between myth and lived reality.

## Greek Gods on Baltimore

“This is Baltimore Gentleman. The Gods will not save you”

- Deputy Burrell (“Dead Soldiers”)

In the first section of this paper, I explain the struggle between the American Myth of the ideology of individual control and the notion of control by a larger, implacable system. *The Wire* takes the position of denying the individual control and stresses the domination of an implacable system: the institutions. The series will do that during the five seasons and I will explore different moments in which this happens.

In this section of the paper, Greek Tragedy will become essential to understanding *The Wire*. Firstly, as an introduction, we need to understand the use of Greek Tragedy, its aspects, and features. To do so, we must bring to bear the meta-narrative and off-screen understanding of *The Wire*. Later on, Greek Tragedy will be examined as a contrast to the American Individualism to explain the tension between these two different ideologies.

There is a long-acknowledged idea repeated continuously by David Simon – as I will repeatedly quote later on- that *The Wire* must be understood as a Greek Tragedy. Although many times authors do not reach their goals, we should not ignore the purposes of their creations. Before looking at Simon's and other creators' thoughts, I want to recall the meta-narrative created in *The Wire* that constantly resembles Greek Tragedy. Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney, two of the most recognized scholars dealing with *The Wire*, defended the importance of the off-screen message given by Simon and other creators: “off-screen *The Wire*’s writers provided a rich context to its intentions and message, a meta-narrative that situates the series within twenty-first century American capitalism” (Sheehan and Sweeney). The important recall of this sentence is the link made between the fictional Baltimore created by David Simon- in which the Greek Tragedy ideology dominates - and the capitalist America in which the TV drama was created and developed in which the optimistic American individualism is the main ideology. *The Wire* has much to say about the fictional Baltimore, but it resembles all the time the country in which it is putting the –usually harsh- critique. Furthermore, Sheehan and Sweeney continue:

Rarely, if ever, has a television drama constructed a narrative with such a strong thrust toward meta-narrative. *The Wire*'s intricate and interwoven storylines dramatize the

interaction between individual aspirations and institutional dynamics. These build into the larger story of a city, not only the story of Baltimore in its particularity but with a metaphoric drive toward the story of Every City. Each character and storyline pulses with symbolic resonance about the nature of contemporary capitalism. While the text itself does not name the system, the meta-text does with extraordinary clarity and force. (Sheehan and Sweeney)

This symbolic resonance that they talk about is one of the factors why *The Wire* made such an impact. During the second season, anybody could see how Frank Sobotka – as a representative of the stevedores – represented the American working class, and The Greek was a standing character for capitalism. The Greek says in the last chapter of the second season – also the epigraph of that chapter: “business, always business” (“Bad Dreams”) when asked what his travel purposes were, but he was also implying that everything he does is because of business. He is the “purest form of capitalism” (Simon “Interviewing the Man Behind *The Wire*”), not only because he does everything for money, but also because The Greek is always in the shadow, not seen by anybody, but seeing everybody around him, this character is constructed as omnipotent, although he is just a man keeping his business done. On the other side, Frank Sobotka never mentions the working class, but the atmosphere around him is always implying so. He has everything surrounding that idea, from the stereotype of his character, a bit rude and impolite with a few racist and misogynistic comments without real knowledge about the nature of his comments, but also loyal and obliging for every worker of the port and at any cost – however illegal or dangerous it could be.

These two characters are just an example of how the text is not naming the system or class, but the meta-text is doing it regularly. Sheehan and Sweeney conclude about the topic:

David Simon, the primary voice of this collective creation, has engaged in a powerfully polemical discourse articulating the worldview that underlies the drama. The meta-narrative, the story about the story, is implicit within the drama, but explicit in the discourse surrounding the drama, going way beyond that of any previous TV drama. (Sheehan and Sweeney)

According to these ideas, and after considering two basic and clear examples of the implications of the discourse in *The Wire* –The Greek and Frank Sobotka-, one becomes able to understand the symbolism of the characters. However, it is time to deal with the clear meta-

narrative surrounding the drama. To do so, many interviews in which David Simon and other creators deal with the nature of *The Wire* and its relation with the Greek Tragedy will be quoted and explained. These will help us to move forward into the ideology of the text and its dynamics.

In an interview, David Simon expressed his position as follow:

[We've] ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides. Not funny boy—not Aristophanes. We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state. [. . .] What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason—instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it's the postmodern institutions . . . those are the indifferent gods. (Simon qtd. in Love)

This text tells us two things. The Greek tragedy association refers to the content of the series, not its form. It means an ideological use of the Greek Gods. Within this content, the idea is to twist the Greek ideas of God and create more accurate postmodern Gods.

One of the main ideas David Simon wants to transmit is the lack of free will of the characters in *The Wire*. It does not matter whether they work within the drug trade institution, the police department or the union. All those are controlled by modern-day Gods who do not kill by anger, fury or revenge, but by total and absolute indifference. This switch is the turn of the screw David Simon gave to Greek Tragedy.

Another aspect of classic Greek Tragedy is that characters are usually aware of the Gods' will. They may try to fight them back, escape their fate or accept their destiny, but they know they have to play by their rules. The same happens in *The Wire*. In the second season, Burrell seems to be aware of it: "The gods are fucking you; you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore, gentlemen, the gods will not save you" ("Dead Soldiers"). This sentence, which will appear throughout the paper, seems representative of a general vision of *The Wire*. In this case, the characters know the Gods will not care about their fate and actions.

In order to analyze the intended Greek Tragedy of David Simon, in the next paragraphs there will be a recompilation of sentences and ideas he expressed in different journals or books, and they will be linked with precise moments that can exemplify them. By

extracting and putting them all together, I hope to give the reader a better judgment of Simon's intentions:

1. The Postmodern institutions –Police department, political structures, drug economy, or school bureaucracy- are the Olympian forces (Simon, “An Interview with David Simon”).
2. Furthermore, these institutions triumph over the individual. In much of television and drama, the individuals are rising above institutions to achieve a catharsis. In *The Wire*, postmodern institutions trump individuality and morality and justice, as Gods did to individuals in Greek Tragedy (Simon, “An Interview with David Simon”).
3. “It was a Greek tragedy done in a modernist urban way, with the city as the main character” (Simon, “*The Wire*: David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy”).

The fact that he intended to portray the city as a very powerful–yet ineffective–character, with all its consequences, can be traced as a similarity to the way Gods were portrayed in Greek tragedies. The city may be recognized as almighty in the sense that it can dispose of any of its people. This means that nobody is essential except the institutions, that there is not anybody above the institutions and nobody who can fight against them. Nevertheless, there is a sense of ineffectiveness because the goal of these institutions is not achieved. The institutions do not help people with social matters, but rather discourage them about the importance of them. This idea works if we still think about the institutions as something that should be useful for society.

4. The fate of some characters is not logically constructed, but it occurs randomly. Some of the most popular characters had to die because that is how the institutions work. “It had to happen” is the sentence used by Simon, a tautology similar to “The game is the game” in the show (Barton).
5. In addition to the last claim, the importance of fate is remarkable in other ways. It is a return to the loss of control of humans over their destiny. Simon intended to create characters separated from the modern idea of individual control of their lives. They play a rigged game constantly facing their mortality (Simon, “*The Wire*: David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy”).

These intentions will show up on many of the plotlines of *The Wire*. It is time to make an in-depth look at the different characters or plotlines representing these situations and ideological tensions.

In the first and second points above, Simon defends the institutions as Greek Gods and claims their victory over the individuals. Scholar Chris Love finds a significant moment in the series to support this idea. He describes a scene in which Pryzbylewski ('Prez') is dealing with a situation in the school and his wife comes and asks about a TV match he does not seem to be actually watching or caring much about. He is asked by his wife who is winning, and he answered "No one wins. One side just loses more slowly" ("Refugees").



Prez's glance before saying the previous sentence. The moment that Chris Love finds remarkable ("Refugees"). (fig. 1).

Chris Love argued about this moment: "With this quick, nearly unthinking reply, Prez articulates one of *The Wire*'s central tragic conflicts, between the value of human aspiration and its near-certain dissolution in the face of political, economic, and institutional nemeses" (Love). Prez expresses in one helpless sentence the two ideas of the Greek Tragedy Simon wanted to convey. The first one is how every character is subjugated to the game and to the victory of the Gods or Institutions. The second one is that these wars among people are just a constant losing.

In these post-modern institutions, as in the Greek Tragedies, the Gods need some offering, but in this case, it will take the form of numbers, statistics, and results. In these terms, Chris Love explained the sentence I mentioned before, by Burrell:

If the reality of urban crime [the gods] does not tally with your need to conform with your institution [are fucking you], you must alter the numerical representation of this reality [you fuck them back]. The reality of Baltimore's drug trade and consequent murders will never change [it's Baltimore gentlemen]. Therefore, do not expect rewards for any attempt at reform [the gods will not save you]. (Love)

He basically accepts the constant winning of the institutions and suggests that the only way to fight them back is by cheating them. The other option is to accept that any subject of any institution is continually losing when fighting the institutions.

In the third point, the city is seen as a character itself. Consider the last scene in *The Wire*, in which detective McNulty contemplates the city, and a sequence appears with the opening music by Tom Waits. In these shots, we can see the development of the characters in the whole series. If individuals have overcome their situations, their earlier incarnations have been replaced by other younger characters. It does not matter whether two people are different in their habits, worldviews, life plans or preferences; it only matters that they can fulfill the tasks that a particular role in the city requires. If such a system needs a role fulfilled and the individual that used to perform it is no longer able to do so, it will find another suitable candidate, no matter what his or her plans were in first place. That is why the city and the system always win, as the Gods did. In the very last shot of the series finale, McNulty enters the car, turns it on, and says "let's go" and we see how the car leaves the frame, uncovering the city, a city we can observe for the last fifteen seconds of the series, becoming the protagonist of the last frame of the entire series ("–30–").





This is the last shot of the entire series, with the city as the main protagonist (“–30–”). (fig. 2).

David Simon recently made an assertion about the role of the city in the post-industrial society: “The city to me is basically the only possible vehicle that we have to measure human achievement at this point and to pursue real human achievement [...] which is how we all live together” (“David Simon on why he created *The Wire*”).

Linking these two previous ideas, the city becomes a character that somehow measures the achievements of the institutions and its characters.

Finally, the last two points regard the nature and importance of fate in the series. In the interview quoted in support of the antepenultimate point, the journalist Burton said that the murder of certain characters was a response to the questions about the necessity of killing Stringer Bell or Omar Little on the series. Consequently, I will use these examples to demonstrate how important fate is. The argument that it was not necessary to kill them and that their deaths were not indispensable for *The Wire* does not mean that they were not likely to happen. Omar Little was chasing and robbing drug dealers and Stringer Bell was the brilliant mind behind a drug cartel. The possibility of being killed is pretty high in these circumstances. Nevertheless, it is not necessary for the portrayal of the urban drama or social

realism and the development of the plotline, and according to my previous argument, nearly every character in *The Wire* could have been killed. Why these two people in particular? This is where Simon wants to focus. The answer could be, it does not matter or moreover, why not? It is completely random, as fate was understood to be in classic Greek tragedies. The absence of climax in both deaths is also the icing of the cake; it shows how death happened as the situation could have been the other way around. Stringer Bell ends up in an abandoned building and Omar Little is shot in a store by a corner kid, without any music or drama intended for their ends. As Galen Wilson asserts: “*The Wire* is, in other words, a tragedy of systems and institutions rather than of individuals; the spectator is meant to mourn the oppressiveness of Baltimore’s social totality (...) rather than feel a personal sadness at the loss of an individual character.” He points out this as a tool to create a “critical, rather than emotional viewership” (Wilson).

All these characteristics of the Greek Tragedy seem to fit in *The Wire*, and when we analyze the series, they must be considered as supported by the text. Nevertheless, we need to distinguish between intention and impact. Terry Eagleton devises this distinction between the series ideology and the series reception by the audience. The Greek tragedians understood that we do not construe meaning subjectively, but within the confines of the symbolic order, which necessarily produces a “dislocation between impact and intention which the Greeks know as *peripeteia*, suggesting not simply a reversal but a kind of irony, double-effect or boomeranging, aiming for one thing but accomplishing another” (Eagleton 328).

Moreover, these Greek features are applied to the postmodern urban society, making the audience aware of their position in this social order. This relation between Greek ideology and contemporary impact is the reason why *The Wire* is saying so much about American values and ideology. It deals with the anxiety of the postmodern world, but it also challenges many of the mundane problems of American urban reality, and defying American myths.

The first and foremost impression after one finishes watching the series is of impotence and powerlessness in the face of some external power, that most people would call, the institutions, which one depending on the season, and against which the characters seem to fail. The combination of ideologies worked perfectly in creating awareness about the postmodern reality we live in. The spectator begins to understand the dominance system they live in and to which they cannot escape. “If people are merely entertained, then we've failed what ambitions we had, I'm afraid” (Simon qtd. in Wilson).

After exploring the Greek Drama ideology in Baltimore, now the contrast starts, and it is time to check how the series defies the ideology of American Individualism. It is a contrast between the ideologies of individual control against the notion of control by a larger system. The first one, being a verified piece of American society and mythology, it is put in doubt by the ideology of Greek Tragedy that switches the source of power from the individual to the institution.

To give an ideological background of the difference between the American Individualism and the control of a more extensive system or what it has been called the ideology of the institution, I will quote Claude Atcho in his article “Wired for Destruction?: Understanding the Implications of Michael Lee’s Degeneration, American Individualism, and the Institution of the Hood in HBO’s *The Wire*”:

This ideology of the individual [...] clashes with what I’m calling the ideology of the institution, an adaptation of Althusser’s ideological state apparatus, held by *The Wire*’s creator, David Simon, who in speaking on the show’s model, declares, that the institutions above his characters—politics, the drug trade, school system – these “Postmodern institutions” are the “gods” that dictate fates, rather than individual choices (O’Rourke, 2006). Where critics [...] place autonomy and fate in individual choices, Simon places such ultimate outcomes in institutions very much right to an Althusserian ideology, though one that must be considered an adaptation since, unlike Althusser, I find Simon crediting the cause of such institutions to an amorphous societal force rather than a distinct, tangible source.

This vision is a great ideological source, and it opens many debates, but there are a few aspects worth remarking. First of all, the relation of the Greek ideology used in *The Wire* with Althusser’s point of view says a lot about how these institutions work, especially taking into account the remark made by the author at the end. The most important part of the ideological state apparatus is the primary goal: Control and dominance of the subjects by the ruling ideology.

Nevertheless, the institutions doing that do not tend to be a standard and structured power as the author stresses, but on the other side, it looks like a chaotic source of power managing the fate of Baltimore citizens. To continue with this ideological stand, the author of the article continues:

As alluded to this ideology of the institution mostly finds its theoretical origins in the work of Louis Althusser's (2007:1271) "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser posits that all people are "always already subjects," that what people may consider their "free" subjectivity to hold to an ideological belief is, in fact, an act of merely freely accepting one's submission. A person's subjectivity is thus indeed only perceived subjectivity; all are ultimately a product of the ideological state apparatuses (what I'm calling the ideology of the institution, or simply the institution of the hood or inner city) to which they ascribe. (Atcho 795)

The problem with this ideology of the institution is the clash it has with the broad American imaginary of the American individualism. In order to prove the victory of the ideology of the institution against the American individualism –at least in *The Wire's* Baltimore- the author decides to use the character of Michael, one of the main characters of the fourth season who ends up becoming part of Marlo's Crew and finally, as a somehow-successor of Omar Little. The argument is elaborated and the main conclusion to draw about it is how every subject within the ideology of the institution is forced, or at least prone to fall into destructive paths. Obviously, the big difference with the American Individualism is not the destiny of the kids, which it could happen with both ideologies, but rather the cause of this phenomenon: It is not the bad choices made by one person, but a social structure ready to trap anybody who is necessary to satisfy its needs. In other words, I will quote the book *Re-writing Baltimore* in which the author says: "Simon illustrates the institution of the hood as a social structure built to condemn even its most hopeful subjects to the pits of destruction" (Kinder 52). The power leaves the individual actions in favor of the superior social structure.

To conclude, there are many names given to this control system. David Simon, as it has repeatedly been quoted in this section, attaches it to the Greek Drama and the power of the Greek Gods. Claude Atcho links the system to Althusser's ideological theories and calls it the ideology of the institution. Regardless of the name, it is a current that threatens the notion of the individual's control. Obviously, this ideological Greek drama is an ideology that threatens American mythology – since American Individualism is another feature of this mythology-, yet it is in a different section because the way it is challenged is not by characters, actions, dialogues or inside aspects, but by the institutions and the larger whole of them: the city. The development of *The Wire* rejects the self-made man, the city upon a hill, the American Dream and other myths that are to be discussed and it is a stand taken by the show. The ideology of the institutions develops as something that not only contradicts

American Individualism –it is not made to reject an American myth- but also creates a constant struggle between the system and its subjects. In *The Wire*, the individualism is not rejected, but it is continuously losing against a more prominent player such as the institutions.

### **Jimmy McNulty and Hubris.**

“They can chew you up, but the gotta spit you out”

- Jimmy McNulty (“Collateral Damage”)

During the whole last section, we developed the scenario in which *The Wire*’s characters have to survive. This part will study how the characters react to this scenario and what kinds of resistance they make, if any. The part will have two sections: first, the action of juking the stats as a way to cheat the institutions will be examined and second, the character of Jimmy McNulty will be related with another Greek term: Hubris.

This section is placed mainly within the police department and its idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless, the department will work similarly to any other studied institution in the relation it has with its subjects. Like every institution, the police department has a rigid hierarchy, a particular code to which everybody must submit, and different ways to survive in it. Within this institution, the most insubordinate character in the hierarchy, toward the bosses and toward the code is Jimmy McNulty.

Jimmy's McNulty conception of the police department is based on a struggle between two ways of fighting the institution and its demands. The police department needs to increase its budget and to do so, the institution demands numbers; It demands low crime rates and good clearance rate. There are different ways to achieve these goals, the first and more obvious would be to solve crimes and do useful police work, but it seems that is a utopia in the Baltimore police district. On the other hand, another effective way to satisfy the institution demands is to cheat it and to fall into one of the most typical practices in *The Wire*: Juke the stats.

Jimmy McNulty stands on the side of doing effective police work, not for the sake of the institutions’ demands at all, but for his own police pride. The moment that exemplifies this moment at its best is in the moment in which Bunk and McNulty find the corpse of Stringer Bell. McNulty is not proud of having caught Stringer Bell’s dirty business, but the fact that he died without being aware of it. McNulty says: “I caught him, Bunk. On the wire. I caught him. And he doesn't fucking know it” (“Mission Accomplished”). McNulty just

wanted to be cleverer than the smartest one of the Barksdale organization, and it was a personal quest since the very beginning of the first season when he realized the importance of Stringer Bell. Nevertheless, regardless of the reasons why McNulty does effective police work, the important part is why this contrasts with the needs of the police department as an institution.

On the other side, juking the stats seems to be a common practice in any Baltimore institution. In the fourth season, when Prez becomes a teacher, and the basis of the exams has been explained to him, he realizes the similarity of the demands made by the education institution and the police institution. At first, he shows his nonconformity with the subject: “I don't get it. All this so we score higher on the state tests? If we're teaching the kids the test questions, what is it assessing in them?” and after he is answered by his colleague: “Nothing. It assesses us. The test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving. The scores stay down, they can't.” Then Prez states the parallelism:

“Juking the stats.”

Sampson answers: “Excuse me?”

Prez goes on: “Making robberies into larcenies. Making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and mayors become colonels. I've been here before.”

“Wherever you go, there you are.” (“Know Your Place”)

Prez realizes the similar dynamic of the institution in this episode in which its title “Know Your Place” seems to be talking to the subjects of any institution.

The reality is that if any person wants a promotion in the police department, this person needs to enter the game of juking the stats and cheating the institution. This practice usually derives from negative police work that focuses on raising rates instead of solving crimes.

McNulty's understanding of this duality is reflected in one scene in which he encounters with Carcetti, the new Mayor of Baltimore. In this scene Carcetti answers the demands of the police workers to stop the numbers game: “Well, under my watch the numbers game is over. You will no longer be under the gun to meet monthly quotas of ineffective, meaningless arrests and citations.” On the other hand, McNulty believes that the numbers game is not something that depends on the Mayor and he believes it is a much more complicated process to end than with politicians' promises: “Excuse me, Your Worship.

You're not the first person who stood at the podium making promises [...] No, I'm just saying, the first community activist who pitches to bitch about the corner activity in her neighborhood, are not we gonna go right back to rounding up bodies?" Carcetti answers politely: "Yeah, well, we need to educate our citizens to the new approach." But then, Jimmy points out the problem right to the bosses: "Well, they're not the only ones who need educating. We got bosses that wouldn't know police work if it bit 'em in the ass. They been juking stats for years, and they'll do it again once the neighborhoods complain. It's all they know." McNulty sees the opportunity to state real police problems to the mayor in front of the bosses and uses it, but he is also defining the problem of the system. The last answer of the mayor is: "Well, if the old dogs can't get the job done, I'll find new ones who can" ("A New Day"). Jimmy seems unsatisfied with this answer although he does not complain anymore. He understands that to become a boss you need to play the game of the numbers and the institutions, and it does not matter that the mayor decides to change the bosses because different people with the same attitude will replace them. If a person does not play the game or tries to win against the institutions, he will be replaced by another character who can fulfill his role in the city.

Therefore, it is evident that the institutions demand something and there are different reactions against this. The example of Jimmy McNulty as a symbol of resistance is probably the most representative. Nonetheless, other characters decide to fight the system or to stop being its subject.

For instance, the case of Lieutenant Daniels is really symbolic. Daniels has been a loyal service to the bosses and the institution regardless of a few disagreements. Although he managed to get promoted and to have a high position he decides to stop participating on the dynamics of the institution and to step aside. It is in the last episode of *The Wire* when he is asked by his ex-wife to do his last favor and juke the stats for Carcetti when he finally rejects to continue the game. Nonetheless, it is pointed out to him that this game has been done before and that it will be done again when he is gone: "And, after you're gone, Rawls or whoever will juke them. So what?" This sentence is a coming back to the idea that the system will put aside any of its members so the next one can fulfill its purpose. Daniels tells the truth about how the juking stats game ruined the institution: "I'll swallow a lie when I have to. I've swallowed a few big ones lately. But the stat games, that lie, it's what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold, so mayors become colonels and mayors become governors. Pretending to do police work." Moreover, he finishes by declining to bend one

more time as his ex-wife is asking him: “Bend too far, you're already broken” (“-30-”). Daniels is an ambivalent character. He has been accepting orders although most of the time his mind is opposing them. Any time he wanted something that had been denied by the bosses – for instance, when he asked McNulty to join his team again in the second season – he would always negotiate and push, but without ever trespassing the code and the limits imposed by the institutions. The change of mind in the last moment creates a climax in the story of Daniels but also says something to the rest of the subjects of the institution: There is no way to fight the institution back; you have to go out if you are not willing to play its game.

There is a concept in ancient Greek mythology that can be related to the conception of resistance to the institutions: Hubris. The literal meaning of hubris would be ‘arrogance’, a term that fits the character of McNulty perfectly. Nevertheless, the term ‘hubris’ has a more significant meaning as it is explained in this book about ancient mythology:

Insolent or presumptuous behavior such as arises from an excessive sense of self-importance. The cosmic status of characters is ordinarily persistent, immortals remaining immortals, mortals remaining mortals, and so on, although a few mortals are elevated to a higher status in the cosmic hierarchy. For the most part, however, a being remains in the cosmic category of birth and is expected to behave accordingly. Any mortal who acts as though he or she were equal or superior to a deity in some respect is likely to incur the wrath of the deity, and the same is true of a minor deity who ventures to compete with a major deity. “Know thyself,” as the Delphic maxim expresses it. That is, understand your place in the scheme of things. Many mythological narratives portray the hubristic behavior of a mortal (or minor divinity) who offends a deity by acting above his station, often in an insolent manner, prompting the deity to punish the offender in some way. (Hansen 204)

This explanation of the term hubris helps to clarify the analogy of the Greek ideology that is used in *The Wire*. McNulty has this presumptuous behavior that comes from an excessive amount of self-importance; there is no doubt on that. The hierarchy is the next concept that Hansen deals with. There is a hierarchy in the Greek mythology, and any subject is supposed to live and behave according to it. The same happens with the institutional system in which everybody has a role that needs to be fulfilled. McNulty usually acts as if he were superior to the institution or high-ranked beings of the institution. The hubristic behavior of a mortal – as Hansen states – is to offend a superior deity, usually in an arrogant manner. The



explanation finishes asserting that the last consequences of this hubristic attitude are the punishment by the deity of the mortal who has exceeded the limits he is supposed to have in this schema. This is really similar to what happens to McNulty many times during the five seasons: He is demoted to the port area for his insubordination: he is given unimportant cases for his task, and he is set apart from his team until he is finally relegated from the police department due to this lack of ethics in the fifth season.

To conclude, there is a duality which every subject of an institution has to face. The people who want to play within the system, give what the institution requires, usually end up promoted and being useless for the real purposes of their jobs – juking the stats instead of solving crimes, giving the answers of the pupils instead of teaching them. On the other side, the people who are willing to challenge the institutions have two destinies. The first one, the one Daniels experienced is to leave the institution and stop being a useful tool for the mala praxis of the institution. The second one is this hubristic reaction to the system in which you will be punished and demoted, although this path can lead one to make meaningful work – as McNulty did. Nonetheless, in both last cases, the ending is the expulsion by the institution to which they belonged. Burrell knows the institution dynamics better than any other: “If the felony rate doesn't fall, you most certainly will. If the Gods are fucking you, you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore, gentlemen. The gods will not save you” (“Dead Soldiers”).

## The American Myths

This section is a study of how *The Wire* deals with different American Myths. I will begin by scrutinizing these myths, where they come from and why are they so important in the American imaginary. The central myths that will concern us in this essay are the American Dream, the Self-Made Man and the Land of the New Start or New opportunities, although there will also be space in this section to mention briefly The City Upon a Hill and American Exceptionalism.

One of the most useful sources for understanding the American Myths concerning American social reality is the book edited by Howard Temperley and Malcolm Bradbury titled *Introduction to American Studies* in which they discuss the gap between the American myths and the American reality:

there were always apt to be discrepancies between what America stood for in image or concept – the City on the Hill, the Land of the New Start, Democracy, Equality, Liberty, Freedom if Opportunity- and the explicit realities that Americans actually encountered in their everyday lives, a space between ideal and real, between dream and fact. (2)

This space between ideal and real is what *The Wire* makes visible during its five seasons. Temperley and Bradbury assert that the American mythology's contradictions were explored in many other fields of art, especially in literature, and they name several examples; thus “in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, the Gothic and agonized stories of Poe, the transcendental essays of Emerson, the novel-romances of Hawthorne and Melville, we can sense a prevailing tension, a split between idealism and realism, individual and society” (9). However, these contradictions had not generally been explored so deeply in a format such as the TV series. *The Wire* is exceptional in its determined focus on all the tensions created by the pressure of an extraordinary American mythology on an ordinary American reality. Myths are often inspirational and moral tales to encourage citizens to better social behavior. But American reality seems to encourage the opposite. The more an individual enters the game of corruption and accepts the decline of the institutions and their functioning, the more he or she will be rewarded as a citizen. At least, this is the impression that *The Wire* manages to transmit to the spectator. These tensions have been explored in many formats, as Temperley and Bradbury assert. The authors also define the features of many US artistic achievements and their relationship with their society. They “articulate the functional complexity of

American culture, the enormous refractability of its images and its eclectic variousness drawn in part from the American social order” (Temperley and Bradbury 14). “Complexity” and “eclectic” are the keywords in this sentence. If a cultural artifact manages to convey these features when dealing with American culture, it will become a great object of study for understanding American society, and *The Wire* achieves these goals. It deals with the complexity of institutions, characters, and hierarchies, but it also shows the different mantras, ideals and social views regarding these complexities.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, I will provide a summary of concrete myths such as American Exceptionalism and The City Upon a Hill.

### **American Exceptionalism**

American Exceptionalism has different readings. One of the possible readings is the idea of Exceptionalism as an example. The United States is to provide a shiny example to the rest of the world, and this is related to the concept of the City Upon a Hill that will be discussed later. Another possibility is Exceptionalism as superior, better or exceptionally good. This possibility belongs to the idea of the American Creed, an essential concept in the construction of the national identity:

I believe in the United States of America, as a government of the people, by the people, for the people; whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed; a democracy in a republic; a sovereign Nation of many sovereign States; a perfect union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes. I, therefore, believe it is my duty to my country to love it, to support its Constitution, to obey its laws, to respect its flag, and to defend it against all enemies. (Page)

These identity features named in this creed are the pieces that create the idea of America and what Americans believe make them special and unique. They are foundational ideas that create a prominent national identity.

American Exceptionalism is the sensation of America being, first, special and unique, different from the other nations, and second, superior, better or exceptionally good, not only different but also greater. *The Wire*, however, implicitly denies the idea that the United States is better or superior in any category. It upholds the idea of America as special and unique, but

it predicates that this specialness and uniqueness does not always mean something good as Americanism believes it does.

The deconstruction of these myths is not something baseless in *The Wire* but is rather a representation of the process the United States is immersed in: “America is in the process of becoming a more ‘ordinary country’ –larger and more powerful than most, but rather less remarkable than it once seemed” (Temperley and Bradbury 17). It is difficult to know whether these myths were always false or if the US just became less greatness with the passing of time, but the result is a country in which the mythology they stand for seems to be far away from the everyday lives of the citizens. It suggests “that the special magic of the United States will turn into a network of great highways, franchise restaurants, gas stations, high-rise cities and sprawling suburbs that looks and feels not greatly different from those to be found in many other parts of the world” (Temperley and Bradbury 17).

American Exceptionalism seems to be out dated, and it is difficult to believe in it in today’s United States. Mark Wheeler discusses the loss of Exceptionalism of the cities in an article, and he mentions that “The old certainties of US Exceptionalism have been questioned as the American society has become further divided on racial and class lines” (Wheeler 10). The city of Baltimore stresses these divisions, it creates racial and class tension among its citizens and it gives no symptom of Exceptionalism. This critique made by Wheeler suggests the ‘Melting Pot’ or ‘Salad Bowl’ ideas that define the immigration identity of the United States. They represent other myths created by American Exceptionalism that are challenged by *The Wire*.

Two phenomena are stressed during the five seasons of *The Wire* that also attack the ideals of American Exceptionalism: bureaucracy and hierarchies in the sense that they oppose effectiveness and the possibility to become whatever you want, as the American Dream intends. Both represent a glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that slows down one of the essential bases of the American Creed and American Exceptionalism: The possibility to grow as much as your ambition desires. These ambitions are not always fulfilled and in the section in which the character of Stringer Bell is analyzed, the myth of the self-made man and the power of ambition will be a prominent subject examined.

Another excellent example of an American Myth is the nation’s constitution that is a shining example to the world. It has been one of the most critical constitutions, being the first one in the world and setting a precedent for the other countries that were turning their eyes on

the United States. Nevertheless, recent studies reveal that the constitution of the United States is no longer an example for other countries and it seems to be getting older:

Rather than leading the way for global constitutionalism, the U.S. Constitution appears instead to be losing its appeal as a model for constitutional drafters elsewhere. The idea of adopting a constitution may still trace its inspiration to the United States, but the manner in which constitutions are written increasingly does not. (Law)

This fact is just another example of how the basis of the American Creed that became an important and considerable influence in the world is not working anymore.

### **The City Upon a Hill**

The next myth mentioned can be placed within the bigger scope of the American Exceptionalism, and it is The City Upon a Hill. This one is a biblical myth that was used by the Puritan John Winthrop while he was still in his way to Massachusetts Bay. It is one of the first discourses regarding American Exceptionalism: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken ... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world” (Winthrop 63).

The city has a great importance as an entity in *The Wire*, and its representation departs harshly from The City upon a Hill myth. It seems that it has become the opposite idea, in which the eyes of all people are turning away from Baltimore streets since nobody wants to acknowledge the failure of the city. The transformation from the ancient myth to the reality in which citizens of Baltimore city live is gigantic and it became from a utopian vision to a dystopian reality as Mark Wheeler defends in his article: “an informed critique of the decline of the democratic ideal in which John Winthrop’s vision of the ‘city upon a hill’ gives way to the modern urban dystopia of Baltimore” (2).

Throughout all this article titled “A City Upon a Hill: *The Wire* and Its Distillations of the United States Polity” Wheeler devises the reasons of the downfall of the city from a shining ideal place that everybody admires to an urban atmosphere that everybody wants to leave and in which there is no place for the brotherhood suggested in Winthrop’s discourse. The reasons mentioned by Wheeler are the hierarchical limitations, the interconnected institutions that have led to an economic, social and political decline and the binary divisions of the two Americas of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in American Society (2). Many of these

reasons have been mentioned or will be mentioned in the paper, but in this part, the point I want to stress is not the reasons for the downfall, but rather the actual differences between the ideal City Upon a Hill described by Winthrop and used by different presidents of the United States and the urban dystopia created by Simon.

In the original text titled “A Model of Christian Charity”, the cities will be upon the basis of brotherhood, and according to “two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another: Justice and Mercy” (Winthrop). On the other side, Baltimore deals with social injustice as one of the main problems of the city, both in the street –as a lawless place- and also in the courts of justice –described as ineffective, slow and many times, incorrect- where justice is meant to be safeguarded. Furthermore, the vital organs of the city, the institutions, are the most corrupted and unjust hierarchies. The institutions do not protect John Rawls’ idea of distributive justice – a crucial idea in American philosophy regarding the term justice- in which social equality and the protection of the needy are the definitions of an ethically just society (Rawls 65); indeed, the institutions actually encourage the opposite idea, a commodified vision of a meritocracy in which individual worth is defined by competitive gain (Wheeler 5). This idea of the city opposing justice as Wheeler exposes it is an antagonist to any idea of social justice that a city upon a hill may have. Justice needs to be guaranteed by the system, and it is continuously failing to do so.

It seems evident that The City Upon a Hill belongs to the idea of American Exceptionalism as a bright example to the world. It may appear that this idea was uttered by Winthrop a long time ago and it was no longer a myth that belongs to the American Imaginary of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nevertheless, it is a recurrent myth in presidential speeches. During his farewell address to the American People, Ronald Reagan said:

I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it [the shining city]. But in my mind, it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind swept, God blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace - a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors, and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. (qtd in “Transcript of Reagan's Farewell Address to American People”)

Furthermore, in a conference four years ago, former president Barack Obama stated that “America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will” and he also

added that this lead must be done “by example” (qtd. in Condon). The reality is that this idea is as strong as it has been in the past. The different ideas about how this shining example has to be transmitted to the world can be by military dominance – Monroe doctrine, Roosevelt Corollary, war on terror- or with the use of Soft Power – popular term in Obama’s term – but it is obvious that the belief is still ongoing: American ideals are an example to the world and it is important to deliver them correctly.

David Simon has debated in different terms the role of the city in our society. When questioned about the nature and the reasons to create *The Wire*, he answers this: “*The Wire* in our minds was an argument for the city. We were depicting a dystopia and the institutions didn’t work, but in our minds there was never a thought that everybody could walk away. Walk away where?” (“David Simon on Why He Created *The Wire*”).

The city is no longer a shining place where anybody can go to fulfill his dreams but on the other side, it is a place to which everybody wants to escape although nobody can achieve it. The United States as an exemplary place is gone and Baltimore is its picturesque failure in *The Wire*.

### **The False Promise of the American Dream**

“We ain’t gotta dream no more, man”

- Stringer Bell (“Middle Ground”).

This section of the paper will have two main characters and one idea: Stringer Bell and Frank Sobotka and how they respond to the American Dream. David Simon, his creator is categorical in his declarations: “We tore the cover off a city and showed the American dream was dead” (qtd. in Lynskey). He denies the current existence of the American Dream, and he uses *The Wire* to break the myth. In this part of the section, on the bigger of the American myths, I will try to understand the American Dream and which aspects are not fulfilled anymore in today’s American society. Furthermore, I will explore two characters’ whose stories prove the false promises of the American Dream: Frank Sobotka and Stringer Bell.

*The Wire* is continually challenging the American mythology, and it stresses the importance of telling the truth at any cost. That is why Rafael Álvarez titled his book *The Wire: Truth be Told*. In it, he interviewed many people of the cast and creators about their thoughts on *The Wire*. David Simon argues that among many, there are two prevailing

American myths challenged in *The Wire* that are a unifying thread over the five seasons. These are the complementary myths that together might be summarized as the *American Dream*:

if you are smarter (. . .) if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination (...) if you are not smarter (. . .) clever or visionary, if you never do build a better mousetrap (. . .) if you are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work your ass off (. . .) you have a place. And you will not be betrayed. (Simon "Introduction" 4)

Simon is forceful in his arguments about the American Dream: "is no longer possible even to remain polite on this subject. It is (. . .) a lie" (Simon "Introduction" 4, 5). To challenge these myths, the Greek Tragedy that has been explored in this paper makes excellent sense. It is a genre that sets a perfect scenario to break this myth, because, it takes power from the individual and places it in the much more powerful institutions portrayed as Greek Gods.

Although both of Simon's versions are part of the American Dream idea, it is essential to break them down as Simon did and to find evidence on the screen of how neither is fulfilled anymore. During the five seasons, the audience may feel that these two myths rest on the importance of the word 'deserve.' In both sentences, it is implied that all people will get what they deserve. In general, the epigraphs in *The Wire* are a great source of knowledge about the series. In the penultimate epigraph of the last season, the spectator can read: "Deserve got nothing to do with it" ("Late Editions"). This epic epigraph taken from Clint Eastwood's movie *Unforgiven* comes – as many epigraphs of *The Wire* do- from the episode we are going to watch but it leads to different readings. For instance, about the crimes made by Marlo or also to the destiny of Michael. The fearsome character of Snoop is debating with Mike and says this sentence when they are talking about killing someone who may compromise Marlo's organization. More generally, the sentence reminds us that *The Wire* is not about what people deserve. In the police department, Daniels, McNulty, and Freamon are arguably among the most competent people, yet their lack of respect for the chain of command and their preference to do their jobs instead of juking the stats only lead them to be demoted. The same happens to Alma and Haynes, the two journalists who still want to make their job meaningful in conflict with their newspaper's agenda.



On the opposite side, we can find Valchek, the detective who moves because of personal impulses and does not care much about the real police job. Still, he plays the system and is rewarded for doing so. The same attitude is seen in Carcetti as a politician or Templeton as a journalist, the latter creating false stories to get attention from the national media.

In the streets of Baltimore, the ending with the murderer Marlo Stanfield free –because of the faults in the legal system- and making an attempt to become a businessperson – although it seems he rejected the position in his last scene - makes a high contrast with the fate of other characters such as Dukie, who is noble and kind but ends up becoming a junkie like many black kids in the streets of Baltimore.

Moreover, there have been theories about the title of the show and what it means. One of them keeps on mind the critique of the American Dream, and it is the one made by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. He wrote an article about his thoughts on *The Wire* and speculated about the possibility that “*the wire* does not represent the wires used by the police forces to catch drug dealers and corrupted unionists, but it represents an ‘imaginary but inviolate boundary’ between those who participate in the ‘American Dream’ and those who are left behind in its wake” (Žižek 92).

It is possible that the American Dream still exists but it is only available to an upper-social class, and Simon also suggests the breakdown of the other half of the population:

There are two Americas – separate, unequal, and no longer even acknowledging each other except on the barest cultural terms. In the one nation, new millionaires are minted every day. In the other, human beings no longer necessary to our economy, to our society, are being devalued and destroyed. (Simon, “The Escalating Breakdown of Urban Society across the US”)

This section will focus on two main characters that represent in their acts and their fate, the false promises of the American Dream and its failures: Stringer Bell and Frank Sobotka.

The importance of the topic is vast as the significance of these characters. Nevertheless, the introduction to the subject that we are dealing with in this section begins with the first scene of the series. This conversation sets the scenario in which American reality and American ideals remain far from each other. Detective Jimmy McNulty is talking

with one corner boy over the murder of his supposed friend Snot, another corner boy. After McNulty understands that Snot used to grab the money and run each time they were gambling, he wonders why they still play with him:

“Let me understand you” McNulty inquires. “Every Friday night, you and your boys would shoot crap, right? And every Friday night, your pal Snotboogie he'd wait till there was cash on the ground, then grab the money and run away? You let him do that?”

“We catch him and beat his ass. But ain't nobody ever go past that.”

“I gotta ask you. If every time Snotboogie would grab the money and run away why'd you even let him in the game? What? If Snotboogie always stole the money, why'd you let him play?”

“Got to. This America, man.” (“The Target”)



McNulty's face at the end of the conversation and the sentence “This America, Man” (“The Target”). (fig. 3).

The opening scene ends with this sentence invoking the American myth of the new land with new opportunities for everybody. No matter what you have done before, where do you come from or what your vices are, you will have a new chance in America. This idea is one of the deepest myths, and it echoes in this conversation by McNulty and the corner boy. After that, the credits open and the next scene is a conversation between Detective McNulty and his partner Bunk:

“Guess what he says.”

“What?”

“Gotta let him play, this America.”

“No fucking way.” (“The Target”)

This first dialogue is the first attack on the American Dream in *The Wire*. The first dialogue ends up with a great sentence acclaiming the virtues of the United States – even though the man they are talking about was stealing from them- about letting everybody play because it is their right as an American. Although the reality they are facing is horrible, there is a corpse in front of them and it seems that it is irrelevant for the people in the neighborhood; the corner boy believes and repeats the mantra of the American Dream. Moreover, it has an implication about *The Wire* itself and the idea of ‘the game’, since everybody has to play it, no matter if they want to or they do not.

But it is in the second scene, after the intro, when the audience feels that this acclaiming of the American Dream will not last long in *The Wire*. McNulty tells the dialogue to Bunk, who does not believe that Snot mentioned the American Dream in that situation. In the first two scenes, there is a scenario designed to question the American Dream and it tells much about what *The Wire* has to say about the Dream.

### **Stringer Bell**

“Business, always business.”

- The Greek (“Port in a Storm”)

The evolving characters on *The Wire* are telling many things about the American Myths and the gap existing between these myths and the American Reality. Stringer Bell, the co-leader of the Barksdale Empire represents one of the most significant gaps in today’s American society. He is the representation of the sentence I quoted before: “if you are smarter [...] if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination” (Simon “Introduction” 4). He is the character who believes that the power of the individual will lead him to the peak of success in business. His evolution as a character and all the events and people surrounding his plotline say many things about the importance of business in each small detail of the American lives.

Before a more in-depth analysis of Stringer Bell's moves, it is essential to know who Stringer Bell is and what his position within the drug trade is. In the great scene in which Dee Angelo explains chess to Bodie and Wallace, Bodie makes different analogies when Dee explains the position and moves of each piece. At the moment the king is explained, Bodie remarks his position as similar to Avon's as Wallace grins and Dee Angelo confirms his thoughts. Later on, when the queen is explained, she is treated as fierce and smart, with freedom of movements and the one who is the 'go get shit done' piece. Naturally, Wallace points out the relation of the queen with Stringer Bell. The analogy seems accurate as Avon remains the king of West Baltimore, but Stringer is the one making most of the moves of the Barksdale organization ("The Buys").



Dee explains the rules of chess, and consequently, their roles within the drug trade institution to his partners ("The Buys"). (fig. 4).

Stringer Bell is an outsider who believes that he can join the respectable system, although he never really gets rid of his street part. He is a man trying to live in two different worlds, trying to combine different aspects from both to run his potential business. Stringer Bell is continuously learning and devising how to give to his gangster crew a business approach. In this shift from a gang crew to a more serious organized band, there is the underlying idea that any American citizen can join the system, no matter where he or she comes from if he or she is prepared to play the system well. To do so, Stringer revises his ideas of the drug trade in light of business ideals in The University, and after that, he will

implement them in two places: his photocopy shop – probably as a rehearsal- and the Barksdale organization.

In the University he learns the basic of the finance world. However, it is in the meetings with his crew when he tries to implement what he has learned in one of the most powerful gang bands in Baltimore. It is essential to understand all these scenes as a whole in which the American ideals of change and becoming whom you deserve to be prevail if you are smart and shrewd enough – which Stringer Bell happens to be.

The primary purpose of Stringer Bell is to transform the Barksdale Crew into an organized and cool-headed –since it is impossible to make drug trade legit – business. To do so, the theoretical approach seems very important, and here is where the university part comes in. He decides to join the university, what is seen for the first time in a macroeconomic class in the eighth episode of the first season (actually titled “Lessons”). Although there is not a clear view of what is going on in the class, we can see Stringer as an obedient student answering questions and late on we can listen to his talk in the photocopying shop, as he debates with his employee Damon about the importance of running the business as best as they can. He starts by saying:

“Damon, we got work orders here, and ain't nothing happening. These jobs were due promised yesterday, and people going to be coming in here asking for their work and nothing been done.”

“Man, fuck them. Let them wait.”

“No, you are not going to bring that corner bullshit up in here, you hear me? You know what we got here? We got an elastic product. You know what that mean? That mean when people can go elsewhere and get their printing and copying done, they gonna do it. You acting like we got an inelastic product and we don't. Now, I want this to run like a true fucking business. Not no front, not no bullshit. Understand me? I'm serious.” (“Lessons”)

Stringer Bell runs this photocopying business, which looks like a potential business to wash dirty money, but he asserts the importance of making it a real, competent business. He explains economic terminology to his employees to make them understand the importance of their strategy in the small photocopying business. The scene suggests that he is applying his

newly acquired knowledge to this small business as if it were a test of how to run a business correctly.

In his next appearance in the university, Stringer Bell explains his problems with putting his inferior product in the street. With the help of his teacher, he realizes the best chance he has to use the product he has is to change the name. As if he were the teacher, in the subsequent meeting with the Barksdale crew, he asks his crew the same things his teacher asked, and makes his corner boys participate in the economic debate the organization is going through. Stringer Bell does want to run his business properly, but also he wants to educate his employees that the business will be done differently from now on (“Undertow”). There is an inevitable comparison to the reorganization of the criminal gangs into more prominent and strategic criminal corporations: The mafia. Frederic Jameson suggests this idea: “To be sure, the comparison of the mafia with a business enterprise is hardly metaphoric or figurative, although we sometimes omit to think historically and to identify those who actually reorganized the crime gangs in this way, along the lines of profitability - Lucky Luciano, I believe, for the mafia” (Jameson 365). What I find remarkable from Jameson’s comparison is the idea of crime as a pure business focused on profitability. Stringer Bell is not a passionate murderer, as Marlo, or a gang leader who enjoys the days leading the streets, as his partner Avon, but rather a businessman – or this is just own vision of himself - who is in the drug trade due to his background, but when he has a chance at other options, he also develops a real estate business and a photocopying shop. The idea of using Lucky Luciano –one of the biggest Italian-American mafia leaders- as an example of the mafia fits perfectly because both developed similar institutions to protect the profitability of their business: the co-ops and The Commission, institutions made to safeguard the excellent situation of the different corporations and bands involved in crime.

Stringer Bell indeed has the purest business mind. He tries to stick to the rules as long as it does not cost anything to its business. He will try to avoid any bodies in the street unless it is indispensable to run the business properly. Therefore, he is the purest capitalist who will sacrifice anything for his business. As Avon says: “You know what the difference is between me and you? I bleed red; you bleed green” (“Moral Midgetry”). Avon distinguishes his respect for the street, no matter how dangerous this world is, from Stringer's vision of the street as a business area.

I will exemplify this with different moments in which he does different actions that oppose his ideas, but still, Stringer makes them for business sake. First of all, he kills different characters with whom he had a good relationship or who were at first sight harmless. Stringer usually commits murders that have nothing to do with blame or even proportionate reaction to the person's conduct. Stringer approaches executing as though it were essentially another part of his business, as almost any act he did in the series. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the rest of his acts and the commitment of murder. Murder is considered immoral even in the drug trade, and it is unmistakably illegal, but yet, it is another instrument that he uses unreservedly and too often when he has chosen to kill somebody from his association, or when he cannot be entirely sure that a person is not at all a hazard. This consistent and business-oriented way of dealing with slaughtering is the thing that makes him a dislikeable character.

These moments lead us to the first season with the murder of Wallace and the second season with the murder of Dee Angelo. The audience ask themselves if these deaths were necessary at all. The answer to this question is ultimately no. The main problem the spectator has with these deaths is the non-understanding of killing people who just wanted to leave the drug trade without harming the Barksdale organization at all. The only reason to do that is the small possibility that Stringer had in mind that Wallace or Dee could bother the Barksdale organization at any future moment. Wallace did not want to be in the drug game anymore, and he was probably one of the softest and most peaceful characters in Baltimore, but it seemed that Stringer Bell wanted to prove the loyalty of Bodie and Poot as soldiers at any cost. They were the lowest of the pawns in the organization at that moment, and they accepted to kill one of their friends to get credit from their boss without the knowledge of his immediate superior: Dee. He is checking the loyalty of Bodie and Poot to Stringer Bell, and he also wants to see if they are ready to follow an order and hide it from his friend and leader Dee. It is a murder committed for the sake of playing with the workers of his organization since the possibilities of Wallace being guilty were almost zero. It is one of the bloodiest crimes in *The Wire* since it involves neither any real revenge nor any exchange of money.

The murder of Dee represents the importance of protecting every part of your business, but it is also the first move made by Stringer Bell without the knowledge of his partner Avon. The conversation that happens in episode eight of the third season in which Stringer confesses his crime to Avon is one of the most important ones for revealing the real face of Stringer's character. It is in this part when we understand better the murder of Dee, and

we can see Stringer's real purposes. In this conversation, there is a slight moment in which the spectator can feel how Stringer still wants to be part of the street world and not only be a mere businessman. He is provoked by Avon who utters a prominent sentence representing Stringer Bell's position: "You know what? I look at you these days, you know what I see? I see a man without a country. Not hard enough for this right here. And maybe, just maybe, not smart enough for them out there" ("Moral Midgetry"). This sentence recalls the doubts of Stringer Bell about his true position in the organization. First of all, he discredits Avon's sentence by saying that the only difference is that he thinks before snatching a life, instead of murdering senselessly, probably a true statement and a great defense. Nevertheless, his second response is to reassert his 'hard enough' part for the street appearance by confessing the murder of Dee: "I knew you couldn't do it, and Brianna wouldn't do that shit. But there goes a life that had to be snatched, Avon" ("Moral Midgetry"). He is not only proving himself hard enough but also suggesting that maybe Avon is not that hard either since he cannot see the dangers for his organization from his family members. This conversation represents the continuous problem of Stringer Bell, he belongs to two worlds, and he cannot decide which one he has to head for.

It is fundamental to bear in mind always that the scenario in which Stringer wants to do business is more similar to a war zone than to a business or university. He mixes the rules of the street with those of the business area and vice versa. The moments in which Stringer Bell is trying to do legit business, he is many times clumsy, and he also finally gets played by Clay Davis, incapable of understanding that there can be different delinquents in the business world also. After his humiliation by Davis, he tries to bring the street world into his business by asking Slim to kill the senator, a request that even Slim himself can see is senseless and sudden. Avon confronts him and reminds him that he does not agree with Stringer's business decisions: "What I tell you about playing those away games?" and he finishes by saying "That shit is on you" ("Middle Ground").

On the other side, we can see at the very moment of his death the lack of understanding he has for the murder Omar and Brother Mouzone are committing against himself: "What y'all niggas want, man? Huh? Money?" ("Middle Ground"). He still thinks that money can buy everything as his capitalist mind is always working, but he forgets there are more important rules in the street than money. In a conversation with Avon, Brother Mouzone reminds him that: "What got you here is your word and your reputation. With that alone, you've still got an open line to New York. Without it, you're done" ("Middle Ground"). Consequently, Avon decided to leave Brother Mouzone to do his business with Omar and



finish Stringer. Probably Avon knew, when he uttered his sentence about the limits of Stringer Bell in the two worlds in which he is operating, that he was hard enough for the street to kill people and maintain order in his organization, but on the other hand, he was not hard enough to understand many other aspects: For instance the rule that the word in the street has much more reputation than money.

On the other hand, and even though the spectator may see Stringer as a monster in different moments of the series in which he commits murders, it is just for the business' sake, no matter if he is right or wrong at a particular point. The best moment to understand that his killing mind is just a business mind is when there is no need for killing: In the Hamsterdam era, in which a part of the city lives in an open drug free space, Stringer opts for following the current and chooses to do business in the new scenario that has been provided by some members of the police department. These actions show us one of the most important words related to Stringer Bell: He is an opportunist. However, he is not an opportunist waiting for any chance to make money but a keen minded one who thinks about the benefits and the risks of any actions more than any other character in the whole series.

Secondly, setting aside his murders, the co-op meetings in which he sets aside differences with the rest of the drug leaders in Baltimore are essential to understanding Stringer's character. He prefers to share and work together rather than to fight in the street to be the most significant drug lords. These moves are similar to the ones he makes when Hamsterdam situation appears. He understands the logic of crime, and he knows when it is necessary to avoid it to do more business. These co-op meetings are something that his partner Avon would not have done, to sit with street enemies to make peace and to make more money only makes sense in the purest capitalist mind, far away from the rules of the street. Money motivates any move made by Stringer Bell in the whole series.

Ultimately, however Stringer fails at living in two different worlds. He mixes and confuses them and ends up dead because of his mistakes in both areas. He could not get out of the gang world at all since he did not foresee the dangers of playing business in the dangerous streets of Baltimore. The central contradiction then is that he cannot run a cool-headed corporate enterprise in an atmosphere in which illegal trade and killing is part of the business.

Before his death, he gives Avon to the police without any remorse: Colvin says: "He must have done something to you." Stringer Bell answers: "That's just business" ("Middle Ground"). This act proves that absolutely everything is business for Stringer Bell.

Stringer Bell's plotline contradicts different myths discussed earlier. He means to be an enlightened entrepreneur, representing the urban Baltimore person who can succeed in life regardless of his unfortunate background. Nevertheless, he gets trapped more than anyone in the streets of Baltimore by his businesses and people.

Furthermore, it is time to remember the sentence that we analyzed at the beginning: "if you are smarter [...] if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination" (Simon "Introduction" 4). Stringer Bell has all these characteristics, and still, he ends up killed by the drug trade and cheated in the business world. His well-run business does not succeed, and everybody turns against him. He understands the economy and believes in the American Dream, he has the means to succeed and still, *The Wire* denies him the success promised by the dream. He represents the contradictions of the American Dream. As Simon said: "We tore the cover off a city and showed the American dream was dead" (qtd. in Lynskey). In this particular case, they tore the cover of a character and proved that the American Dream was dead.

### **Frank Sobotka**

"Ain't never gonna be what it was"

- Little Big Roy ("Ebb Tide")

In this section, I will explain the problem of the port in the second season, how the drama moved to the stevedores' situation and how Frank Sobotka represents an essential failure of the American Dream.

The opening sentence of the second season of *The Wire*: "Ain't never gonna be what it was" ("Ebb Tide"), has multiple meanings and resonances. First of all, it talks about *The Wire* itself, and it is at the beginning of this second season that the plot starts changing from the low-rises of Baltimore to the port. The show's makers intend to tell the people watching it that the show will not be as it was before and that it will be different each season from now on. Nobody expected the show to change its primary focus of attention from drug dealing to the union and the port, and this is the moment in which *The Wire* present itself as something different than a drama about police and drug dealers. It becomes something more prominent at this precise moment.

More important for my purposes, this opening sentence may refer to the stevedores' situation. It is talking about the nostalgia of a whole social class about their past and the

uncertainty for their future. The sentence means to describe a feeling that will run through the whole season in different dialogues, attitudes and feelings. The stevedores' nostalgia about the past is there all the time, mainly with the most important character of the second season, the leader of the union Frank Sobotka, who has a clear view of the times in which he is living, the class he belongs to and the enemies he has to fight in order to defend his people. He is the voice of the workers, and he is a symbol of pride at many moments of the season: “lots of people ready to work, that's my fucking town. Except the thing is we are a hundred ten miles for any ship coming here” (“Hard Cases”). He is there to remind the spectator the visions of the American working class: “Do you know what the trouble is Bruce? We used to make shit in this country, build shit. Now we just put our hands in the next guy's pocket” (“Storm Warnings”).

During the second season, the plotline of the stevedores begins and with it the problematic situation of the working class we are dealing with. Although the story is specific to a particular job in a particular place – the stevedores in the port of Baltimore-, there is a sensation that Frank Sobotka and his fellow workers are broadly representatives of the working class in the United States. The story of the working class in the United States is a story of decay and survival, and Frank Sobotka is an essential character in this version of that story. He is the leader of a Union for a job with not enough work and too many people, and still, he is ready to defend it and to fight for his ‘Union Brothers’, as they sometimes called themselves.

Frank Sobotka is probably one of the most charismatic characters of the five seasons. He is fierce in his convictions and ready to defend his people more than any other character. He tries to play the system, but he fails. Frank Sobotka and his men will be the representative of this part of the myth that Simon stated: “if you are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work your ass off [...] you have a place. And you will not be betrayed” (Simon “Introduction” 4).

The betrayal Frank Sobotka suffers happened many years before he shows up in the fictional Baltimore as he states many times how his union has been ignored many years. But it is in the eleventh episode when the FBI is interrogating Frank Sobotka that he realizes that the system never tried to help him at all. They told him to “Name names and come clean, you help yourself and your union.” This interrogation is the moment in which Sobotka realizes he cannot play the system anymore; he realizes that he has been played by the system indeed. He

responds: “Help my union? For 25 years, we have been dying slow down there. Dry docks rusting, piers standing empty, my friends and their kids like we got the cancer. No lifeline got thrown all that time, nothing from nobody. Now you wanna help us, help me...” (“Bad Dreams”).

Before considering this so-called betrayal, let's analyze the character of Frank Sobotka, his understanding of the class conflict, the real power he has and the opportunities he uses to help his union. One of the most important things to understand about the role of Sobotka is his knowledge of the situation. Sobotka is not just a nostalgic unionist who believes that work will come back. He knows and understands the decaying situation of the working class. The viewer sees how Sobotka changes his mind after reconsidering the situation of the port of Baltimore in two different scenes.

The first is the first scene of the fourth episode, which I mentioned in the introduction of this part of the paper when Frank utters

Except, the thing is, we're another 110 miles for any ship coming up from Hampton Roads. An extra day. So why come? Unless you know your cargo's gonna move fast and clean through the port. Why offload in Baltimore, except that a Baltimore gang can turn your ship around faster than any other port and will make sure your cargo all your cargo, gets where it needs to go faster than anywhere else. (“Hard Cases”)

He is criticizing the attitude of Nick –his nephew, and fellow worker at the port-, who stole a container previously. Sobotka stresses the importance of keeping the companies that still come to the port and says he will balance out the lack of work by giving money to the workers. He is supporting his people economically with the money he acquires from the system -different institutions, lobbyist, and politicians- but still, he knows this situation will not last forever and that his real power comes with more workload and therefore, he dismisses Nick's behavior in robbing one of the few companies who still harbor in Baltimore's port.

On the other side, the opening sentence of the next episode stands as follows: “They used to make steel there, no?” It is great they use this sentence as an opening of the episode because it remarks the importance of this conversation between Vondas, the emissary of The Greek and Sobotka. The situation is the following: Sobotka has criticized Nick for stealing the can, and after that, Vondas comes to renegotiate the terms of the collaboration with Frank to keep stealing material from the port. Vondas offers to double Sobotka's fee if he keeps on the dirty business, stealing in the port. Sobotka hesitates due to the reasons mentioned before

about the importance of the ships coming to the port and the impossibility of losing workload, but Vondas continues –as he looks to an empty factory on the other side of the river -, “Smoke from the stacks, but inside” (“Undertow”). He makes a face implying that there is no work in that factory anymore, reminding Sobotka of what he already knows: that his industry is dying as the other ones are dying. Either Sobotka continues to do dirty business, or his union will be dead and with it, hundreds of jobs. Sobotka dislikes this very much, but he keeps doing dirty business until his last moment.



This image of the factory resembles the following conversation between Frank Sobotka and Vondas: “Smoke from the stacks, but inside” (“Undertow”). (fig. 5).

These two moments represent the dilemma of Sobotka in the two situations he has to deal with. First of all, his port has to be as effective as possible, he needs to raise funds for his union, and he has to deal with politicians so more is invested in the port and therefore, more ships come in and there will be more work to be done in the port. On the other hand, he perfectly acknowledges the real situation of the port. Although he keeps going to meetings, he knows there is not much to gain from the false promises of politicians. The only way to give all his fellow workers a decent wage is by doing dirty business.

The attitude of this character is very problematic. Sobotka is a member of the system who believes he can resist it or fight back against it. Sobotka does business and goes to meetings with influential people in the system, but he never belongs to it, he is an outsider to the leading circles on society, even though he leads one primary institution and he has a seat

to discuss the principal business of the city. He is used to doing politics- he has been buying lobbyists- but still, he is a pawn in the game and when the politicians want to get rid of him, they will.

The idea of the American Dream is very present in Frank Sobotka's mind. He discusses it with Bruce, the lobbyist. This is a scene in which Frank distances himself from the one he is taking part in the negotiations and the meetings with the elite of Baltimore as it has been said in the previous paragraph. Frank has just attended a conference in which a project for the port of Baltimore has been presented. It involves the use of technology and it decreases the number of jobs in the port. After reading the budget, Frank accuses Bruce:

“Come on, I can read a budget summary. There's nothing in there for dredging. Shortfall in revenues. The governor's looking to limit bond issues.”

“But the grain pier is still in there.”

“And the rest is just talk?”

“Talk is good, Frank. Talk is a start.”

“Talk is your fucking job description.” (“Backwash”)

Frank realizes this is another false promise and that no budget will go to the port and starts talking about their class differences and their possibilities for their families:

“Your son, the oldest one, he goes to what school?”

“Jason's at Princeton.”

“Princeton. And after he graduates, he's gonna do what?”

“Whatever he wants.”

“Right.”

“You sent him to Princeton to do whatever the fuck he wants. You know, back when we were kids Danny Hare's father stole a couple cases of cognac off a ship. Except when he gets it home, it ain't cognac, it's Tang.”

“Tang?”

“Just invented. TV said it's what the astronauts drank on their way to the moon.”

“You drink it”

“You could be an astronaut, too. All summer long, that shit was all the Hare kids drank. Tang with breakfast, Tang with lunch Tang when they woke up scared in the middle of the night. What do you think they grew up to be? Stevedores. What the fuck you think? Something tells me Jason DiBiago will grow up and squeeze a buck the way his old man did.”

“You're out of line, Frank. My great-grandfather was a knife sharpener. He pushed a grinding stone up Preston Street to Alice-Ann one leg shorter than the other from pumping the wheel. Since he didn't want his sons to push the goddamn thing he made sure my grandfather finished high school and my old man went to any college that would take him.”

“You're talking history, right? I'm talking now. Down here, it's still: Who's your old man? 'til you got kids of your own. Then it's, Who's your son? But after the horror movie I've seen today Robots! Piers full of robots! My kid will be lucky if he's punching numbers five years from now. While it don't mean shit that I can't take my steak knives to DiBiago and sons it breaks my heart that there's no future for the Sobotkas on the waterfront.” (“Backwash”)

This conversation is a defining moment between Sobotka and all the people he does business with. Although they share meetings, there are obvious differences between them. Frank Sobotka knows he is in their meetings, but when the union loses power, he will not be needed anymore; he is doing business with them as long as his union is necessary for the lobbyists and politicians to win votes and power. It is not only a class difference, but it seems that Frank Sobotka has reached a glass ceiling where he cannot climb further on a hierarchy. Both visions about the possibilities of different people on the American Dream exposed by Bruce and Sobotka are correct and accurate, but there is a slightly different reading on their goals. For an understanding of the contemporary working class, there is a book that made a great impact on this subject: *Chavs, The Demonization of the Working Class* by young English journalist Owen Jones. Although the main area of study of this book is in the United Kingdom, there is an underlying component for the situation of the whole working class in the more developed countries. In the book, he quotes labor MP Stephen Pound who reminds the reader of the loss of an old socialist motto: “Rise with your class, not above it” (qtd. in Jones 90). The true face of the American Dream actually portrays that if you want to rise, you have

to do it above your class and not with it. This move implies leaving people of your class behind you since obviously, not everybody can rise in the system.

Bruce and Sobotka believe in the American Dream, but this sentence creates a gap between them. Bruce believes on the individual part of the American Dream in which his grandfather rose above his class giving his family a better future, but on the other side, Frank has a class vision of the American Dream in which if his whole union and fellow workers are ready to “get up every day and work their ass off (. . .)” they will not be betrayed” (Simon “Introduction” 4). After the socialist motto uttered by Stephen Pound that the “reality is that in this country to rise, you rise above your class” (Jones 90) Owen Jones continues by saying that this sentence must also be applied to the United States reality; the American Dream is only possible if, first of all, you are ready to rise above your class and leave your fellow workers behind. However, this is something that does not belong to Frank Sobotka's mindset.

Nevertheless, it is essential to bear in mind that the possibilities to rise if a citizen has a working-class background are minimal and that nobody starts the race for the American Dream in the same position. Quoting Owen Jones again, although he analyzes a British situation, he says that if you belong to a working-class family “the odds are that you will not be better off than your parents” (182). The American situation is no different, but the American dream is present everywhere so everybody, no matter the background, race or gender can have a goal (however illusory) of success.

Later on and coming back to Sobotka and Bruce, four episodes after the previous scene, there is the moment in which lobbyist Bruce no longer needs Frank Sobotka. Although he comes to see him, as there is an underlying friendship going on, he delivers bad news to him and the future of his union. Frank Sobotka believes that his corruption will not affect the projects for the port:

“The grain pier is dead. Half the votes we had lined up are walking sideways now. They read the paper, Frank.”

“So what? So I'm dirty. The grain pier's still the grain pier, right? They ain't voting for me, Brucie! It ain't about me! I'm not gonna lie.”

“No one is gonna stand with us now that the FBI is on you. They're scared.”

“Of what?”



“They took the money, Frank. And now if they deliver the votes, they figure the feds will be on them, too. I’m sorry, Frank. You find a way of putting this FBI thing to bed maybe we can come back the next session with the grain pier. You’ll have a couple of people down there knowing they owe you a vote or two. I don’t know what else to say. I don’t. I’m sorry, Frank.”

“You know what the trouble is, Brucie? We used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket.” (“Bad Dreams”)

This iconic sentence spoken by Frank at the end of the conversations happens while Bruce is just leaving the room and he barely pays attention to it. This last sentence explains all the attitude of Frank during the last chapters and our central thesis about the American Dream and Frank Sobotka’s disappointment.

The port workers fit David Simon’s description: “if you are not smarter [...] clever or visionary, if you never do build a better mousetrap [...] if you are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work your ass off” (Simon “Introduction” 4). Nick Sobotka believes in the importance of work and its rewards, and he is constantly asking for more days. When Ziggy suggests seeing the positive side of getting a day off Nick answers: “Days off is the fucking point. I can’t keep waking up in the morning not knowing if I am gonna get paid” (“Hot Shots”). David Simon’s statement of the dream of working people ends by saying that if you fit all these previous features, “you have a place. And you will not be betrayed” (Simon “Introduction” 4). Frank keeps expecting the Grand Pier to be a reality, and when he realizes the project will not happen, it is the final act of betrayal for him and the workers of the union. The main problem with Frank Sobotka is that he did know that this act of betrayal may happen and it is why he was still putting his hands in the next guy’s pocket to survive. He is nostalgic and longs for the past days of the port, but still, he never believes that the American Dream will ever pass through their homes, so he goes dirty with any business that could give a chance to his workers.

To conclude this part about Frank Sobotka and the stevedores I will recall some similarities with the duality in which Stringer Bell is caught. Both characters try to juggle between two sides, and it is difficult to survive between two different worlds. The main reason why Frank Sobotka keeps doing dirty business in the port and Stringer Bell still acts like a gangster in the street is because they never honestly believe in the American Dream, or at least they never put all their eggs in one basket, but instead decide to have a second plan of

action in case the American system –or their thoughts of the American Dream- fail them. There are undoubtedly many differences between the two situations, but both of them fail in the scenario in which they can prosper following the American Dream and in which they could succeed, one as an honorable businessman and the other one as a constant worker and union leader. Frank Sobotka may have doubts from the beginning, and probably Stringer Bell learned the lesson with his actions, but both ended up trying to play the system and failing.

Moreover, there is a more in-depth reading of the stevedores' story. Frank Sobotka and the stevedores' plot represent the larger story of the American working class. The condemnation of the working class is associated with forgiveness by the ruling powers, it is the story in which a social class was fundamental to build and support the country in its worst moments, and suddenly, it has been betrayed when it was not needed anymore. Frank Sobotka acknowledges this situation from long ago as he says: “We're here through Bobby Kennedy, ‘Tricky Dick’ Nixon, Ronnie ‘The Unionbuster’ Reagan and half a dozen other sons-a-bitches. We'll be here through your weak bullshit, no problem” (“Hard Cases”). He knows there is a struggle between the workers and the system, or in this concrete case, the political agenda of the different administrations of the White House, and although he tries to avoid it, the loss of power of the working class is obvious. Jason Ralph associates that loss of power with the lack of need of workers inside the United States: “With the liberalization of the international economy in the 1970s, however, the political strength of the working class and their unions came under increasing pressure. The mere threat to move production overseas weakened labor's negotiating position” (qtd in Teixeira and Rogers 7).

The sensation left by this season is that the working class maintains its pride, but not its power. At one point of the season, Nick is doing business with Frog, a white drug dealer and he shows his pride in belonging to the Baltimore working class: “Second, I'm also white. Not ‘hang-on-the-corner, don't-give-a-fuck white,’ but ‘Locust Point [Working-class and immigrant neighborhood in Baltimore] I.B.S.[International Brotherhood of Stevedores] Local 47 white.’ I don't work without no fuckin' contract” (“Backwash”). However, all this pride seems to be the only thing left for the Stevedores and for the American working class who do not see any glimmer of hope in the present struggle or in their future times.

The disintegration of the classic workplace, such as a factory, the loss of a common identity within one's job and moreover, the lack of resources and power as a working class group have managed to disintegrate much of the working class movement and its unions and

with that, many of its workers have felt that betrayal by the American Dream. These are people ready to work who do not have a place in the postindustrial United States.

To conclude this section about the American Dream, it is important to recapitulate the challenges made by *The Wire* to this myth. First of all, the series shows how the myth is torn in two, one version for the people willing to succeed with the capacities to do so, and another one for the people with fewer capacities who are willing to work as hard as it is needed. This breakup creates a deeper analysis with more concrete evidence about both arguments. Stringer Bell and Frank Sobotka live in a perfect scenario to understand the limits of both parts of the American Dream. Furthermore, the personality and characteristics of both characters make them look as prominent stereotypes to reproduce the characteristics of the American Dream stated by Simon. The fact that they end up not achieving them but both dying makes it a strong critique.

In the article “I am the American Dream: Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction.” Included in the book *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* there is an idea that redefines accurately the meaning of success in the United States. The idea says that the only measurement of success is surviving, so the other possible measurements are no longer any of the previous ideas about the American Dream (Potter and Marshall). The old means for success of the American creed to succeed are gone and what it is left is an urban scenario in which everybody is trying to survive by his own means. Many of them belong to organizations, but – as in the chessboard – their only thoughts are about becoming the king so they have more possibilities to survive.

### **The Education System**

“Lambs to the slaughter here”

- Marcia Donnelly (“Boys of Summer”).

This sentence is the epigraph of the first episode of the fourth season, as usual, is a brilliant way to start the section and the season. Assistant principal Marcia Donnelly says it to Prez as he applies to be a teacher. This sentence is referring to the educational system as a whole, the one that has no actual educational goals, but also to the four kids of Baltimore who became protagonists in this season and to the new teachers who are joining the school.

One topic and one plotline regarding the fourth season and the educational system have been mentioned briefly earlier. The topic of juking the stats has been repeatedly

explored, and it has its moment in the fourth season when the teachers give the answers to the NCLB - No Child Left Behind - tests to the kids in order to cheat the stats and get the budget. Moreover, the plotline of Michael as a problematic corner boy has also been mentioned. Both will be mentioned in this section. Nevertheless, this part will be about the myths regarding the education system.

In what follows, the fourth season will be analyzed as a whole, for its critique of the public education system and what educational myths are trying to question. It is essential to understand what myth education represents in this scenario. The myth *The Wire* deals with is that one stating that public education levels the arena for every American citizen giving the same opportunities and rights.

In reality, American schools are among the most unequal ones in the world. Scholar Linda Darling-Hammond has dedicated much of her scholarly work to the topic of inequality in schools, focusing on race. She stated the following:

America's schools are among the most unequal in the industrialized world concerning both inputs and outcomes. Inequalities in spending, class sizes, textbooks, computers, facilities, curriculum offerings, and access to qualified teachers contribute to disparate achievement by race and class, which increasingly feeds the “school-to-prison pipeline”—a function of many young people’s lack of adequate skills for joining the labor market. (1)

She traces the roots of this inequality to the funding system for public education: “Whereas most other nations fund schools centrally and equally, U.S. schools typically are funded by a combination of highly unequal local property taxes and state revenues that only partly redress differences in local wealth” (Darling-Hammond 2).

This problem explains much of the plot in the fourth season in *The Wire*. The season contradicts the American myth of schools leveling the ground. American public education reproduces and maintains the essential establishment by limiting budget and resources to poor neighborhoods and reducing opportunities to them.

During this season of *The Wire*, the school aims to get a larger budget by cheating on the NCLB exams so they can keep on assuring that the school is able to function. The paradox is obvious; the exams made to level the education in the different states of the country are the

ones they need to cheat in order to survive economically. This trick is something they do not need to do in wealthier schools.

Another problem with the educational system is how schools are segregated by race and class. Orfield studied some data and came to the following conclusions that are useful for a better understanding of Baltimore: “In 1999, 70% of the nation’s Black students attended predominantly minority schools (...) Nearly 40% of African American and Latino students attended schools with a minority enrollment of 90–100%. Furthermore, for all groups except Whites, racially segregated schools are almost always schools with high concentrations of poverty” (Orfield 38).

These facts are reflected in the high school of *The Wire*’s Baltimore, where it seems that every pupil is African American in the first class that Prez gives (“Refugees”). Moreover, when the school creates the class for corner kids who are slowing down the class, the situation is similar (“Corner Boys”).

As Orfield points out, the racial segregation seems to be indeed linked with poverty and this is a reality in *The Wire*. The relation between the neighborhood and the school is constant. In the scene in which the corner kids' class is introduced, there is a moment in which all the kids are asked to write down where they see each other in ten years. A few of them decided to write about almost impossible future careers such as NBA player or famous neurosurgeon. The rest of them write down ‘dead.’ The aspirations of these kids are locked in the neighborhood's possibilities. The teacher tells them “You know where you are going and we cannot teach you anything you don't know about that” (“Corner Boys”) and this is an intense reality because the teacher is assuming that there is nothing the school can do in order to get these kids a better future.

This idea of school reproducing the same opportunities and class status prevalent in the neighborhood resembles the conversation that Frank Sobotka had with Bruce the lobbyist about Tang and the possibilities of their kids. In that case, Frank, when he was a kid, dreamed of being an astronaut because he was able to drink Tang, but he ended up as a stevedore like his old man. The dreams of these corner kids are similar, trying to be in the NBA or being a neurosurgeon because the television tells them they will go wherever they want, but the reality is that they will probably end up dead or in jail like their parents and relatives.

Colvin thinks about how they are reproducing the same system and the same rules they have in the street and the neighborhood and says: “You know, we giving them a fine

education. 'It ain't even mine. It was just laying here when I came in.' You know, this right here, the whole damn school, the way they carry themselves, it's training for the street. The building's the system. We the cops" ("Corner Boys").

Another problem that Darling-Hammond discusses is the hiring of non-qualified teachers in schools with a lower budget: "solutions to the shortages created by unequal funding and poor working conditions rush more under-prepared teachers into these classrooms, at a significant cost to student learning" (12). Furthermore, the facts say that "In some high-minority schools, more than 50% of teachers were inexperienced and unqualified" (Darling-Hammond 12).

Prez is the best representative of this situation. He still does not have the qualifications to be a teacher, but he can get a job as a teacher with a program to be a trainee teacher. Regardless of the skepticism seen in the gestures of the school assistant and her colleague, when they hear that he was a police officer in West Baltimore, and he is immediately hired due to this fact ("Boys of Summer"). There is an idea in this scene that it is more important to have an authority figure than an educative one in these schools. Although Prez is a sympathetic character in this season, he is an under-qualified teacher who got a job due to lack of teachers and because of his supposedly authoritative figure. This hiring is seen as a mistake later on with his bad management – at least at the beginning – of the lessons, and it reveals the ideas exposed by Darling-Hammond and others in the previous paragraph.

The juking of the stats in the schools deserves more attention here. Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner in their book *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools* explains the goal and the destiny of the now revised – policy of resting under No Child Left Behind. The goal of this program was the following:

The declared motivation for NCLB was to improve the academic achievement of poor and minority students – that is, to eliminate or at least reduce the achievement gap between whites and minorities. Nevertheless, the outcome has been really different: but there is mounting evidence that our poor and minority students are actually being hurt by high-stakes testing. (2)

The reason for the failure of these exams is that "in our zeal to raise test scores, we have corrupted the very concept of education" (Nichols and Berliner 2). This is something *The Wire* wants to convey in the many approaches they have to the system of tests. Earlier I quoted a conversation in which Prez is told the logic of these exams: "I don't get it. All this so

we score higher on the state tests? If we're teaching the kids the test questions, what is it assessing in them?" and the answer is: "Nothing. It assesses us. The test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving. The scores stay down, they can't" ("Know Your Place").

In a previous scene, there is another discussion between Prez and his bosses. He argues about the way to teach and the importance of standardized tests and says that he pretends to modify the contents to teach for better learning of his students. Nevertheless, the education institution has other demands:

"The thing is it's your curriculum, and you have to stick to it."

Prez: "I can't it's absurd."

His bosses respond: "it is the difference between the state taking over the schools or not."

Prez: "Maybe they should"

Finally, he is told "You don't teach math. You teach the test. North Avenue is all about the No Child Left Behind stuff getting spoon-fed" Furthermore, he is then implicitly threatened by his bosses, "The first year isn't about the kids. It's about you surviving." ("Corner Boys")

Education has the same fate as many of the other institutions. It should be a useful tool, and it ends up being an apparatus demanding irrelevant results that are useless for the benefit of the kids. The reaction when these demands are not fulfilled is similar to the other institutions' ones, as Arin Keeble and Ivan Stacy point out when it comes to the program for corner boys created in the school: "This program is trying to reestablish understanding that had been taken away from the institution (...) However, institutional forces more concerned with lawsuits and test scores eliminate any such reversal of ignorance" (216). Furthermore, this institution only reproduces and emphasizes the social, class and racial differences among American citizens, accentuating the already big social gap among them.

## Freedom of press

“The bigger the lie, the more they believe”

- Bunk (“More With Less”).

The fifth season explores freedom of the press and of speech with the plotline of the *Baltimore Sun* reporters. In this section, the myth that will show up is that the press is an independent and ethical business that will always be watching both government and big enterprises. The sentence in the subtitles is said by Bunk and it serves as an introduction for the plotline of the fifth season but it also represents the moment in which the press freedom and this myth are living nowadays: “the bigger the lie, the more they believe” (“More With Less”).

This myth goes back in time to the first amendment in which the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech became a fundamental part of the United States creed. However, to understand the idea of free speech and freedom of the press in the current context, this article helps greatly: *Freedom of the Press in the Twenty-First Century: An Agenda for Thought and Action* written by scholars Theodore L. Glasser and Timothy W. Gleason. In this article, they explore the myth, the reality, and debate about the future of the press in the United States. First of all, they quote repeatedly throughout the article the sentence uttered by Mr. Justice William O. Douglas in the dissents in a 1972 case of the Supreme Court. He stated his idea of the press’s function in the United States schema: “The press has a preferred position in our constitutional scheme not to enable it to make money, not to set news men apart as a favored class, but to bring fulfillment to the public's right to know. The right to know is crucial to the governing powers of the people” (“Excerpts From Court Opinions in News Case”). This vision about the goal and the role of journalism within society shapes the basics of the myth explained here. *The Wire* asserts that this ideal is no longer real in today’s journalism.

The character of Gus Haynes is the image of the ideal of journalism. He always tries to make his work as precise and correct as possible. He also finds the ethical part of journalism. His obvious nemesis is Scott Templeton who would do anything to get the most sensational piece of news and also to satisfy his bosses’ demands. This scene represents pretty well the situation and reflects the different concerns about journalism these two characters have: The Executive Editor James Whiting requests a group of four journalists of the *Baltimore Sun* including Gus and Templeton to find a Dickensian aspect of the poor kids in the



neighborhoods of Baltimore. Gus had already done a research exploring the causes of the poverty. Nevertheless, Whiting wants to focus on the education system as the main problem. The two other journalists and Gus dissent with this approach since they understand that a bigger context is required in this situation, but Templeton – pretty aware that he will become the protagonist if he satisfies his bosses' needs – agrees and says that context is not that important while his boss commands them to limit the big scope and just focus on the school in order not to get lost in details. This is the moment when Gus decides to argue against that and says: “To do what? To address the problem or to win a prize? What are we doing here?” and he is supported by a colleague who keeps insisting that it is not all about the lack of material or the school dysfunctional bureaucracy. The answer by Whiting is absolutely clear about his goals as a journalist: “But who is going to read that?” The scene finishes with Templeton getting the leadership of the project (“Unconfirmed Reports”).

This sentence by Gus aims to the core of the problem, what is a journalist writing and researching and what for? Justice Douglas thinks that the right to know should be the main focus of journalism and this is why Gus wants to go to the depth of the problem – the whole social illness of the youth in Baltimore - and not to the surface – the deficient and dysfunctional education system. The education system is an important part of the problem, but to focus only on that one because it will get more audience is to avoid the real truth and focus on profitability for the newspaper. It corrupts the ideal role of journalism and the reasons why it is respected and protected by the constitution and the whole system. Of course, in *The Wire*, the press in a similar way to the other institutions is another corrupt institution and its demands are usually not the ones required for the real purpose of journalism.

This debate about the goal of the press leads us to another difficult topic that is the ethics of journalism. Moreover, there is an underlying debate about the finance and the influence of economic and political powers on the freedom of the press. The press has had historically responsibilities beyond money-making as it is said in the article: “the underlying assumption that the media will act in the best interests of the public is the essential underpinning of the idea that the press should be entitled to certain privileges” (Glasser and Timothy 13). But most of the press does not act in the best interest of the public anymore but to survive economically. The appearance of the internet and other press models with lower costs and some of them with the same quality of news creates a tremendous emptiness in the ethic part. It continues with this:

(It) raises a serious concern about the sustainability of standards of journalism ethics with the decline of legacy news organizations where codes of ethics and other professional norms shape journalistic practice and the rise of new organizations that either have no knowledge of or interest in traditional journalism ethics or knowing reject the concept of journalist. (Glasser and Timothy 13)

It happens in the whole plotline that the audience is immersed in a moral debate in which both Templeton and McNulty are delivering the same lie about a serial killer in Baltimore, but the reaction is different. The method of McNulty is debatable morally but the goal is clear and typical for McNulty: Get budget to do the job of the police and catch the bad guys. On the other side, Templeton only has one reason to deliver fake news and it is to further his own career. Furthermore, the reasons McNulty lied the first time were his suspicions about the possibility that Templeton was creating that story. After seeing his reaction and the fact that he was obviously lying, he kept with the lie until the last moment. At the end of the season McNulty confesses to Templeton that he invented that call the same way he did. Templeton just wanted to have sensational news and that is why McNulty felt morally capable to tell him at the end all the truth. He reveals every small act he performed to create the lies and explains his feelings to Templeton:

“And you know why I can tell you all this? Because, you lying motherfucker, you're as full of shit as I am. And you've got to live with it and play it out for as long as it goes. Right? Trapped in the same lie. Only difference is I know why I did it. But fuck if I can figure out what it gets you in the end. But hey, I ain't part of your tribe.”

“You're not serious? You can't...”

“No. No, I'm a fucking joke. And so are you. Now get the fuck out of here.” (“-30-”)

The moral code of Templeton is practically non-existent for his profession and that is why McNulty pulled the lie so far, so Templeton could sink deeper into it and then realize how embarrassing his lies were. On the other side Gus has a deep respect for his job and he has always been suspicious about Templeton's moves and before knowing the reality of the lying situation, he made his thoughts clear: “Our job is to report the news, not to manufacture it” (“-30-”). The idea of creating news to achieve any purpose is against journalist ethics. Nowadays, fake news has invaded the web and it has become a typical move to gain attention

and political success. Nevertheless, this practice is not just linked to journalism but with other ones and this is what happens when Carcetti is furious about McNulty's lies and he gets the response that "it does have a certain charm to it. They manufactured an issue to get paid; we manufactured an issue to get you elected governor. Everybody's getting what they need behind some make-believe" ("-30-").

To conclude this section, there are two aspects to remark. First of all, the prominent role of the press in society will only last if it keeps the ethical part as a main characteristic of its work. Furthermore, the press must be a useful part of society and to do that, it needs to be constantly watching both government and big enterprises. And this is deeply related to the way they survive economically. In *The Wire* the economic stand of the *Baltimore Sun* is in a bad moment and this alters the healthy functioning of the journalism. The importance of selling more was seen in the scene in which Gus sees how he is not able to research and write an article after being asked about who is going to read that piece of news that was well-constructed, researched and with great conclusions. If the institution needs more money, the means to acquire it will not be as ethical as they should, creating constant mala praxis in the journalistic profession.

## Conclusion

The conclusions of this study are the follows:

First of all, a constant contrast has been found between the social American reality and the American Mythology. The analysis of a number of US myths and their comparison with the vision offered in *The Wire* create a struggle between the two visions of the United States.

In the first section of the paper, the American individualism was contrasted with the ideology of Greek Tragedy. In the former, power is seen as invested in the individual. In the latter, it is invested in a higher power. That higher power was the Gods in Greek Tragedy; in *The Wire*, it is the systems and institutions that dwarf the individual. Nevertheless, the idea is the same: There is a negation of the absolute power and dominance of the individual fate. The American Creed and the American imaginary are fully dominated by the power of the individualism and *The Wire* makes a strong reaction to that ideological formation. The transfer of power to the institutions is also an important point. *The Wire* decides to deal with the corruption of the institutions that now are oppressing the lives of its subjects. The individuals do tend to accept the rules of the institutions, and if not they will probably tend to end up expelled from the system, as McNulty does. Simon casts doubt on the power of the individual, and therefore challenges one of the core ideas of the American identity.

There is another interesting concept inserted in *The Wire* concerning individuality, not only as a contrast to the institutional idea of doomed fate but as a symbol of resistance against it. This role of resistance, that is fulfilled mainly by McNulty and that has been compared to the Greek Hubris, represents the loss of individual mastery, and its conversion into a role of resisting against the existing and winning power: The institutions. This configuration opposes to the current stream of American thought, and also to the prototypical cultural product that extols the virtues of the individualism and its constant victory against other different powers. This happens in many fields, but especially film and TV narratives, in which the individual usually triumphs over any difficulty or opposing power.

The American Myths that were examined in this paper are from different times and ideological moments. The common point of all of them is its importance in the American Creed. The City Upon a Hill and American Exceptionalism, in deep relation to each other are a source of pride and a claim that the US is extraordinary. What has been proved during this part is that this extraordinariness that is usually shown off is no longer a virtue in the United

States. If this exceptionality is real, it is under debate whether it is something positive. The absence of positive qualities about this Exceptionalism in *The Wire* is a product of the already explained process of the US's becoming a more ordinary country. This generates many doubts about the United States' futures as a country since many of its historical processes were ground in the idea of being different – and better – than other countries.

The conclusions of the American Dream section are probably the clearest and most radical. As Simon said, it is a lie and it is important to deconstruct it to show the reality of life in the United States. The two examples I chose to challenge the reality of the American Dream were really effective since they represented pretty accurately two important parts of the society. Stringer Bell showed the ambition and cleverness of the people who aim to succeed. On the other side, Frank Sobotka represents the immigrant working class who is willing to work hard every day for the only purpose of living decently. Both kinds of people fail in *The Wire* due to the lies made by the ideology of the American Dream. This Myth encouraged American people to effort to follow their life goals, but *The Wire* suggests that the scenario has changed to one in which no matter the efforts any person make that his or her destiny and outcome will depend on the randomness of the institutions and other times on what any person is willing to please the system and the institutions.

The American Dream is a magnificent idea to encourage people to make the biggest effort to follow their goals. The loss of that incentive is disastrous to the usual way to encourage American people to overcome their situations. Not only that, but the real problem is that now the power that used to reside in individual effort resides instead in the postmodern institutions that play randomly with the destiny of their subjects and that create an uncertainty in the American lifestyle.

Finally, it is important to set the differences of all the previous myths together with the two last sections about the education and the press. These two myths are founded on the core of the United States as a nation, and not that much in its ideals and imaginary. The myth is that public education has been created and developed as a tool for equality and to level the arena for all American citizens. The reality, however, is far from this ideal functioning. The schools actually imprison the kids in their neighborhood and class dynamics. The most important conclusion about the education is that it does exactly the opposite of what it is supposed to do. Instead of being a scenario for equality, it just reproduces the system and the

dynamics of segregation by race and class. This is one of the biggest failures of the United States.

The press is no different from education. Its main function has been corrupted by the economic needs of the companies. The Fourth Estate has been understood in the United States as an institution with the duty to check corrupt as politics and also a scourge of power. *The Wire* presents the press in the present as simply based on audience and economic needs, and disassociated with its original goal.

These two institutions are part of the common idea of the United States as a nation and both, according to *The Wire*, are malfunctioning in relation to their ideal purposes.

*The Wire* is a fictional scenario of the American problems. Many works of fiction deal with these problems, but the way David Simon and his collaborators do it is a totally new approach, challenging all the American Myths and ideals with a bigger and more complex enemy. The creation of the institutions as an almighty God against whom nobody can do anything creates a great hesitation about the true nature of the American values. The loss of power of the individual sets the perfect scenario in which the rest of the American Mythology is questioned and debated. *The Wire* still stands as one of the most acclaimed TV shows ever and it is not for its popularity and audience, but because it raised serious concerns about the true self of the United States. The characters were from every social class, race and they lived situations approachable by an audience who felt their problems as real and plausible.

The greatest achievement of *The Wire* is to bring to the audience doubts about the reality of their American values and Mythology. The show reflects deeply on these problems and it sets a precedent in the way cultural artifacts can challenge the American values.

## Works Cited

- Atcho, A. "Wired for Destruction? Understanding the Implications of Michael Lee's Degeneration, American Individualism, and the Institution of the Hood in HBO'S *The Wire*". *Previously on: estudios interdisciplinarios sobre la ficción televisiva en la Tercera Edad de Oro de la Televisión*. Edited by Pérez Gómez, M. A. Sevilla: Biblioteca de la Facultad de Comunicación de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2011. pp. 793-806
- Barton, Chris. "The Wire: David Simon Schools USC". *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2008, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2008/03/the-wire-david.html>.
- Bennett, Drake. "Why Are Professors at Harvard, Duke, and Middlebury Teaching Courses on David Simon's *The Wire*?" *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 24 Mar. 2010, [www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this\\_will\\_be\\_on\\_the\\_midterm\\_you\\_feel\\_me.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this_will_be_on_the_midterm_you_feel_me.html?via=gdpr-consent).
- Condon, Stephanie. "Obama: U.S. Must Lead the World by Example." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 28 May 2014, [www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-u-s-by-lead-the-world-by-example/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-u-s-by-lead-the-world-by-example/).
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. "Securing the Right to Learn: Policy and Practice for Powerful Teaching and Learning DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Distinguished Lecture." *Journal of Education*, 2009, pp. 9–21., doi:10.1177/0022057409189001-203.
- "David Simon on why he created *The Wire*" / *Observer Ideas*, YouTube, 22 Oct. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyXNdELqCe4&t=211s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyXNdELqCe4&t=211s).
- Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet violence: the idea of the tragic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. Print.
- "Excerpts From Court Opinions in News Case." *The New York Times*, 30 June 1972, [www.nytimes.com/1972/06/30/archives/excerpts-from-court-opinions-in-news-case.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1972/06/30/archives/excerpts-from-court-opinions-in-news-case.html).
- Glasser, Theodore L., and Timothy W. Gleason. "Freedom of the Press in the Twenty-First Century: An Agenda for Thought and Action." *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, 2013, [www.aejmc.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/AEJMC\\_Summit\\_Report.pdf](http://www.aejmc.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/AEJMC_Summit_Report.pdf).
- Keeble, Arin, and Ivan Stacy. *The Wire and Americas Dark Corners: Critical Essays*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015.

- Kinder, Marsha. "Re-Wiring Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2008, pp. 50–57. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2008.62.2.50](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2008.62.2.50).
- Law, David S, and Mila Versteeg. "The Declining Influence of the United States Constitution," *New York University Law Review*, June 2012, Vol. 87, No. 3, 762-858.
- Love, Chris. "Greek Gods in Baltimore: Greek Tragedy and *The Wire*". *Criticism*, vol. 52 no. 3, 2010, pp. 487-507. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/crt.2010.0052. Hansen, William F. *Classical Mythology: a Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Lynskey, Dorian. "*The Wire*, 10 years on: 'We tore the cover off a city and showed the American dream was dead'", *The Guardian*. 6 Mar 2018. [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/06/the-wire-10-years-on-we-tore-the-cover-off-a-city-and-showed-the-american-dream-was-dead](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/06/the-wire-10-years-on-we-tore-the-cover-off-a-city-and-showed-the-american-dream-was-dead)
- Nichols, Sharon Lynn., and David C. Berliner. *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts Americas Schools*. Harvard Education Press, 2008.
- Orfield, Gary. "Schools more separate: Consequences of a decade of resegregation". Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University. 2001.
- Page, William Tyler. "The American's Creed." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, 4 July 1995, [www.ushistory.org/documents/creed.htm](http://www.ushistory.org/documents/creed.htm).
- Potter, Tiffany and C.W. Marshall. "I am the American Dream. Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction". *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*. Eds. Tiffany Potter & C.W. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2009, p.1-14.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Sheehan, Helena, and Sheamus Sweeney. "*The Wire* and the World." *Jacobin*, Mar. 2018, [jacobinmag.com/2018/03/the-wire-david-simon-hbo](http://jacobinmag.com/2018/03/the-wire-david-simon-hbo).
- Simon, David, "Introduction" in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*. New York: Pocket Books, 2004.



- Simon, David. "The Escalating Breakdown of Urban Society across the US", *The Guardian*, 6 Sep. 2006. [www.guardian.co.uk/media/sep/06/wire](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/sep/06/wire)
- Simon, David. "Interviewing the Man Behind *The Wire*." Interview by Meghan O'Rourke. *Slate*. 1 December 2006. [www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all](http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all).
- Simon, David "The Wire: David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy" interview by Cynthia Littleton. *Variety*, 7 March 2008. <https://variety.com/2008/tv/news/the-wire-david-21043/>.
- Simon, David. "An Interview with David Simon." Interview by Nick Hornby. *Believer Magazine*, 20 July 2018, [believermag.com/an-interview-with-david-simon/](http://believermag.com/an-interview-with-david-simon/).
- Teixeira, Ruy Antonio, and Joel Rogers. *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Temperley, Howard and Malcom Bradbury. "Introduction to American Studies." *Introduction to American Studies*, Pearson, 2006.
- "Transcript of Reagan's Farewell Address to American People." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Jan. 1989, [www.nytimes.com/1989/01/12/news/transcript-of-reagan-s-farewell-address-to-american-people.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/12/news/transcript-of-reagan-s-farewell-address-to-american-people.html).
- Wheeler, Mark. "A City Upon a Hill: *The Wire* and Its Distillations of the United States Polity." Political Studies Association. London Metropolitan University, 2014. [doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12044](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12044)
- Wilson, Galen. "The Bigger the Lie, the More They Believe: Cinematic Realism and the Anxiety of Representation in David Simon's *The Wire*." *South Central Review*, vol. 31 no. 2, 2014, pp. 59-79. Project MUSE, [doi:10.1353/scr.2014.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2014.0015).
- Winthrop, John. "A City upon a Hill" in O. Collins (ed.), *Speeches that Changed the World*, Westminster: John Knox, 2005. pp. 63–65.
- Žižek, Slavoj "The Wire, or, What to Do in Non-evental Times", in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, London: Verso. 2012 pp. 91-113

## Episodes Cited

- “-30-” *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Clark Johnson, Home Box Office, 2008.
- “A New Day” *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Brad Anderson, Home Box Office, 2006.
- “Backwash” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Rafael Álvarez, directed by Thomas J. Wright, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Bad Dreams” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and George Pelecanos, directed by Ernest Dickerson, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Boys of Summer” *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Joe Chappelle, Home Box Office, 2006.
- “Collateral Damage” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Ed Bianchi, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Corner Boys” *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by Richard Price and Ed Burns, directed by Agnieszka Hollan, Home Box Office, 2006.
- “Dead Soldiers” *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, written by David Simon and Dennis Lehane, directed by Rob Bailey, Home Box Office, 2004.
- “Ebb Tide” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Ed Bianchi, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Hard Cases” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Joy Lusco, directed by Elodie Keene, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Hot shots” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Elodie Keene, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Know Your Place” *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by Kia Corthon and Ed Burns, directed by Alex Zakrzewski, Home Box Office, 2006.
- “Late Editions” *The Wire: The Complete fifth Season*, written by David Simon and George Pelecanos, directed by Joe Chappelle, Home Box Office, 2008.

- “Lessons” *The Wire: The Complete First Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Gloria Muzio, Home Box Office, 2002.
- “Middle Ground” *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, written by David Simon and George Pelecanos, directed by Joe Chappelle, Home Box Office, 2004.
- “Mission Accomplished” *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Ernest Dickerson, Home Box Office, 2004.
- “Moral Midgetry” *The Wire: The Complete Third Season*, written by David Simon and Richard Price, directed by Agnieszka Holland, Home Box Office, 2004.
- “More With Less” *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Joe Chappelle, Home Box Office, 2008.
- “Port in a Storm” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Robert F. Colesberry, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “Refugees” *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by Denis Lehane and Ed Burns, directed by Jim McKay, Home Box Office, 2006.
- “Storm Warnings” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Rob Bailey, Home Box Office, 2003.
- “The Buys” *The Wire: The Complete First Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Peter Medak, Home Box Office, 2002.
- “Unconfirmed Reports” *The Wire: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by David Simon and William F. Zorzi, directed by Ernest Dickerson, Home Box Office, 2008.
- “Undertow” *The Wire: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Steve Shill, Home Box Office, 2003.