

# Scarface and double indemnity: the corporate loss of american morality

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



The 1920's and 1940's were economic boom periods in American history; in the 20's this was due to the rapid growth of investment in consumer economics, in the 40's it was due to the increased industrial production demanded to fight world war two, both economic booms however, produced similar predictable effects in American culture. In both decades there were plenty of legitimate opportunities to make an honest living but as always the allure of illegally making large sums of money quickly was too much for some to resist. These ill-gotten gains almost always come at the cost of having to dish out brutality to our fellow man sometimes innocent, sometimes not. While the gangster culture sponsors this immoral behavior outright, the corporate culture is no different, nurturing a highly competitive, cut throat culture that encourages taking any steps necessary to get ahead colleague and the competition, both while making as much money as is possible. Both Neff and Tony embody these respective ideals as both, albeit a little more blatantly on Tony's part, commit violence against men who have done them no wrong in order to produce monetary gain. This is because the American gangster is, in itself, a dark parody of the American businessman just as the mob is a reflection of any given corporation. Scarface loosely uses the story of real life gangster Al Capone to tell its tale of how American consumer culture corrupts morality while Double Indemnity delves deeper into the idea of the corporate desire to come out on top and make money at all costs, even murder.

Scarface attempts to portray the seductive nature of the gangster lifestyle by presenting a not so subtly caricatured version of gangster life in general and the life of one of America's most famous gangsters, Al Capone. Tony

Camonte is already a bad guy when the film begins; the first time we see him, in fact, is when he is murdering fellow Mafioso “ Big” Louie Costillo on the orders of his friend and mentor, Jonny Lovo. From there Tony only becomes worse as he is seduced by the gangster culture, attempting to seduce Jonny’s girlfriend Poppy and becoming more violent toward those close to him, especially his sister, whom he beats for simply being out dancing with other men, and Poppy, whom he hauls off like a prisoner in their final on screen encounter. Ideals such as honor and loyalty are stripped away as his morality dwindles, once beloved friends such as Jonny and Guino Rinaldo see their violent ends at the hands of Tony as he has Jonny executed for betraying him and personally kills Rinaldo for having a relationship with his highly coveted sister.

While it would be easy to pass off these behaviors as the violent outbursts of an unstable immigrant or as a result of the intellectual lacking’s of a criminal mind, the true explanation lies in one of America’s societal pinnacles, the corporation. When the criminal element consolidated to form the mob, it was no coincidence that it mirrored a corporation’s organizational hierarchy. A clearly defined chain of command and specialized roles in the organization allowed for effective labor division and the adaptation of one immoral system to another. Corporations often use what could be considered aggressive sales and negotiation tactics when dealing with potential clients and competitors. A salesman with a conscience will have to put ideals before the company, and just like a gangster who put anything before his gang, that would end very badly. Tony embodies this business method perfectly in how

he aggressively brought all of the local bar owners under his control, using physical violence and intimidation to jack up the volume of alcohol that each bar was purchasing and never taking no for an answer. In doing so Tony was actually taking over the entire function of the pre-prohibition alcohol trade, producing a product (booze) that the public desired and making it readily available while attempting to beat out the competition. Tony's methods for reducing competition differed out of necessity from those used by actual corporations, where economic deprivation and smear campaigns were adequate for legal corporations, violence had to be asserted in the underground booze trade. Bars were bombed and shot to pieces in an attempt to stamp out competition, all of which was deemed morally acceptable as the only goals of the gangster were the same as those of the corporate business man: to continually gain a larger sum of money, social success, and power.

While the film touches on the fact the media sensationalized the gangster culture, the reality of this glorification of men like Tony goes much deeper and is a large part of how the corporate nature of the gangster contributed to the moral degradation of American culture. The silver screen also played a large role in the rise of the gangster as, " films of the late twenties and early thirties offered the most vivid portrayals of gangsters' businesslike appearance and setting" (Ruth) The gangster was a socially iconic consumer that the media flocked to as a modern day Robin Hood which rationalized all of the crime committed by the gangster. For evidence of this effect, one must look no further than America's most famous gangster, Al Capone.

Capone knew how to win the trust of the public, “ the press followed Capone’s every move avidly, and he was able to gain public sympathy with his gregarious and generous personality” (History. com), generosity that included opening one of the first soup kitchens during the depression that produced headlines such as “‘120 000 meals are served by Capone Free Soup Kitchen’ [in] the Chicago Tribune” (RHP). Acts such as this allowed Capone to remain a positive figure and “ as anti-Prohibition resentment grew, a dissident who worked on the side of the people” (History. com), this status being ascribed to a violent gangster caused American morality to adapt to this new dark corporate system and contributed to the decline of American morality as a whole.

Double Indemnity provides a picture of how the corporate system itself wears down morality and twists men into cynical parodies of the helpful agents that they publicly claim to be. This bastardization can be seen in how all three of the film’s major company men, Norton, Keys, and Neff, act within the corporate system. Upon discovering that a double indemnity amount must be paid out to the widow Detrichson, Norton berates Neff for having sold the policy in the first place and attempts to set both Keys and Neff to the task of helping him find a loophole that the company can use to avoid paying off. Before Norton even makes his first and only appearance in the movie, Neff tells Phyllis that, “ knows more tricks than a car load of monkeys”, which perfectly sums up the slimy tactics used by Norton in his meeting with Phyllis. Upon meeting Phyllis, Norton attempts to railroad Phyllis into signing a release saying that her husband’s death was suicide

and that she voluntarily gave up her claim to the money, even though the company has no evidence to point toward suicide.

Although Keys never commits a crime or attempts to cheat actual victims, this does not mean that he has not been affected by the twisted nature of corporate America. He possesses a deep resentment for the company's policy to selling insurance to anyone, even the clients who he perceives as being at risk of submitting a false claim. This twisted morality is lowered further still when it becomes apparent that Keys is not motivated by justice when pursuing false claims, but simply by a desire to come out on top, having never let a client put one over on him. This lack of compassion can also be seen in how he treats those close to him, especially his ex-fiancée, whom he had investigated and then dumped due to her low class background, allowing Neff to describe her as "a tramp from a line of tramps". His only hints are staying with Neff (after calling the police to come arrest him) and the moment of despair he appears to feel in the film's alternate ending, when, following Neff's execution, he searches for matches to light his cigar and realizes that Neff will never be there to give him a light again.

The most dramatic example of moral degradation in the film is that of the main character, Walter Neff. Neff's first moral chip fell away when, after many years of working to stop people from cheating the system, Neff began to think about how he could cheat the system and get away with it. Although he didn't believe he was on the pathway to murder after the first time Phyllis mentioned wanting the policy for her husband, it wore on him until a short

time later, “ It dawned on me that I was still holding that red hot poker, I hadn’t walked out on anything, the hook was too strong”. After realizing that he would be killing Mr. Dietrichson for the insurance payout, the last bit of Neff’s morality seems to fall away. Neff gives into greed and decides on a complicated plan that, while paying out twice the normal insurance amount, has a much higher likelihood of failing. He also rationalizes the murder he has committed by simply believing that he could get away with it so why wouldn’t he do it, nothing about Phyllis’s abuse at the hands of her husband, nothing about wanting to hurt a corrupt system, just pure hubris. He feels no remorse for his crime and continues his relationship with Phyllis until Keys starts to apply the pressure that would ultimately be Neff’s undoing. Once Keys scrutiny becomes intense, Neff decides to cut ties entirely and devises a plan to rid himself of the situation. He decides to frame the boyfriend of the Mr. Dietrichson’s daughter, Nino Zachetti, for his role in the murder and hang Zachetti and Phyllis out to dry. In a dark twist, Neff is shown to be so monstrous that upon Phyllis telling him that she wouldn’t let him leave, he threatens to kill her and, after she shoots his shoulder, follows through with his threat. Carrying his hubris to the very end, Neff attempts to escape justice by fleeing to Mexico, believing that he is capable of overcoming even a physically devastating gunshot wound.

The moral failings of Neff and Tony are not just accepted, they are celebrated in American culture as they both strive to achieve the true American dream, an obscene amount of wealth. This twisted version of the American dream exists due to the corporate culture that wishes to be placed

above the law so that it can profit without fear of backlash from the public. Films like these that portray criminals in this light show how the corporate culture serves to normalize crime and glorify its result (capital gain), thus degrading morality as a whole. As long as we as a culture continue to worship the all mighty dollar, as corporate America does, we will continue find our country to be morally lacking.