

Sidney Falco – certain cultural considerations

Sidney Falco is a complex character. He has certain positive qualities - engaging personality, good looks, quick mind - which are cancelled by his many flaws – vanity, ambition, envy, just to name a few – which drives him to worship a false god, in the person of J. J. Hunsecker, the epitome of everything Falco wants to emulate. The trouble is, Falco's false god is so flawed that anyone who worships him will be corrupted. Falco's god does not dispense blessings. Rather, he dispenses meanness. Yet, Falco by nature is not inherently mean. He is not ruthless like Eleanor Iselin or Joel Cairo. He wants to better himself socially but is guided by a distorted set of values which he has learned from a culture that is depraved. Falco knows the difference between right and wrong, yet he chooses to do wrong because to do right simply does not pay off. But by doing wrong he pays the price - not for his amorality but because he messes with the wrong people: Hunsecker, Steve, Frank, Officer Kello, Susan, Rita. These people know the street and are aggressive, and when they're hit, they hit back, hard, and Falco is doing everything he can to get a beating. But he is oblivious to that because he doesn't yet realize with whom he is dealing (whores, hustlers and pimps, with Hunsecker the ringleader and the biggest pimp of them all). But he finally learns it, the hard way, when he does something good, i.e., saves Susan's life. Instead of thanks, he gets his butt kicked, and then not once, but twice, first by Hunsecker, who gives him a taste of what is to come, and then by Kello, who finishes the job. Falco's good deed means nothing in a culture in which the most valued form of social interaction is the trading of information for favors. Falco would have done himself a huge favor by having let Susan jump; it would have given him leverage, which would have jump-started his career and earned him the instant recognition that he craved. He would have had the inside scoop on the most sensational story of the year, one that would have destroyed Hunsecker: "Sister driven to suicide by overbearing brother." The resulting scandal would have propelled Falco to instant stardom. It would have made him king of the gossip-mongers.

He would have shared with the world every sordid detail, from how Hunsecker first recruited him to destroy a romance involving Steve and Hunsecker's sister, to how Hunsecker launched a vendetta against Steve, to how Hunsecker ordered him to frame Steve, to how he got the message to rush over to Hunsecker's apartment, to how he arrived just at the moment that Susan was about to jump (of course, he tried to stop her but it was too late), and finally to how Hunsecker reacted after learning that his sister had committed suicide. Everyone involved would have become the subject of the most intense scrutiny, by the police and by the press. Falco's name would have been blasted all over the media. It would have become a media circus with Falco as the ringmaster. The relationship between Hunsecker and Officer Kello would have been revealed. Kello might have quit his job and gone to work for Falco. The whole world would have learned about Hunsecker's cold and ruthless nature. Speculation on the nature of Hunsecker's relationship with his sister would have been rampant. Every gossip columnist in the world would have been knocking on Falco's door for the story, not so much to learn about a tragic death of a young woman but to gather mud to use against Hunsecker, with Falco in charge of the mud pit. But Falco messes up; although brash and pushy, he's not yet cruel; he's still not jaded enough to exploit death; he does good when the situation required that he do bad, like Hunsecker would have done. The moral of story: if you can't be a player, then don't try to play.