

ANALYSIS

Bonfire of the Vanities (1987)



Tom Wolfe

(1930-2018)

"Tom Wolfe the novelist arrived as modern fiction was going bankrupt. Modernism, the revolution in the arts that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century, had delivered all it had to deliver... The age of iconoclastic landmarks like *Ulysses*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Magic Mountain*, *To the Lighthouse*, was long past... The image of the writer and artist as sacred figure, the prophet or shaman who led to the depths of experience beyond the ordinary, was growing faint.

Postmodernism had set in, beginning sometime after the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, bringing in a host of experimental forms--absurdism, fabulism, minimalism, magical realism, metafiction, as Wolfe would detail in his literary manifesto, 'Stalking the Billion Footed Beast,' two years after he had made his fiction debut with the rollicking *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), about race, class, and sex-riven New York City in the 1980s. With such as Gaddis, Pynchon, Doctorow, DeLillo, Beattie, Coover, Carver, Hawkes, Barth, Barthelme, reading had become something of a chore--dry, sullen minimalist works with very little payoff, or maybe big books trying very hard but giving no particular reason to plough through them. (I can read it, a friend said to me of one 800-page number, but why? Truth to tell, though, some of these books did become cult classics, especially with younger men.).... On the whole, things were seeming rather tiresome, aimless, pointless....

Wolfe had already knocked contemporary art and its pretensions off its pedestal in *The Painted Word* (1975)... Then our ever-dissenting white-suited Southern gentleman came up with his new-old idea in *Bonfire*--back to the future with unvarnished Realism in fiction. Instead of shattering limits and erasing boundaries, Wolfe recommended acknowledging the boundaries and presenting what lies within them with minute faithfulness, turning back to the literary techniques of nineteenth century writers such as Dickens and Zola, with their broad social canvas, numerous characters from varied levels of society, and multiple plots and subplots.

Bonfire centered around Wall Street bond trader Sherman McCoy, who starts out as a 'master of the universe,' with his million dollar a year salary and fancy three million dollar Park Avenue co-op. Driving into the city from the airport, 'Sherman could see the island of Manhattan off to the left. The towers were jammed together so tightly, he could feel the mass and stupendous weight. Just think of the millions, from all over the globe, who yearned to be on that island, in those towers, in those narrow streets! There it was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the

irresistible destination of all those who insist on being where things are happening--and he was among the victors!

Not for long, however. As he glides with his married mistress into Manhattan in his Mercedes, the also-married Sherman misses the exit ramp and winds up in the South Bronx. In the ensuing confusion, his mistress takes the wheel and accidentally hits a black teenager. This is built into a huge racial incident, with Sherman as the accused, thanks to a totally unprincipled media and a black, hustler-pastor named Reverend Bacon (a character who turned up in real life a few months after *Bonfire's* publication in the person of the Reverend Al Sharpton). For Wolfe, we were way past the principled, high-minded, colorblind idealism of the civil rights movement. Blacks were not just victims of a racist society, but capable of a full range of human action, including mayhem and race-baiting. And some, like the poor black teenager, actually are victims, of other blacks as well as of whites....

Thanks to [Philip] Roth, as Wolfe saw it, a generation of young talented writers averted their eyes from the outward scene and turned inward, toward preoccupation with words and form and showing off in the act of writing itself.... *Bonfire* was so raw and truthful it was electrifying. It broke through the pieties of political correctness before political correctness in its contemporary sense even fully had that name. By contrast, it almost seemed that all that postmodern experimentation had been more or less an effort at obfuscation, holding back a vigorous confrontation with the realities of contemporary life. Wolfe took it on directly.... Wolfe may have gotten a little ahead of reality with that prediction of power passing to non-white majorities in American cities by the turn of the century, although in some cases this has come to pass, and in general the thrust of his words has turned out to be all too true. The bulk of the novel shows Sherman being systematically divested of what would in our time come to be designated his 'white male privilege.'

Wolfe had taken on what had become a taboo subject, more taboo, possibly, even than race itself, since it grafted onto that subject too--namely, the new wave of immigration that eventually followed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and that interacted with and exacerbated America's native race problem and altogether began to change the country.... Long before this phenomenon eventuated in what is now termed 'identity politics,' Wolfe had declared in 'Stalking the Billion Footed Beast': 'Despite all the talk of "coming together," I see the fast multiplying factions of the modern cities trying to insulate themselves more diligently than ever before'....

Between the pieties preached by the Left, glorifying multiculturalism and diversity, and by the Right, glorifying universalism supposedly transcending all particularities of origin, Americans of all races were not permitted even to discuss the enormous changes happening before their eyes, without being accused of bigotry.... Tom Wolfe was not afraid to take off the ideological blinders, to see reality as it unfolds, and to bring it to the page."

Carol Iannone
"Appreciating Tom Wolfe (1930-2018)"

Academic Questions
(National Association of Scholars, Winter 2018) 31.4: 489-93

"Wolfe's first novel, *Bonfire*, published at the age of 57, was a blockbuster. As a late literary arrival, he was an outsider, out of the loop of established critics and a challenge to the fiction establishment. His novel was Dickensian in its size and its cast of eccentric characters, and he celebrated his fascination with many of the nooks and crannies of New York City--which he unapologetically identified as the greatest city of the twentieth century. It was also a city of classes and--as it always had been--deeply divided by ethnicity. The critic Terry Teachout, who had been following Wolfe from the beginning, identified him in his obituary as 'a card-carrying member of the Grand Old Party of Reality.'

Wolfe wanted to invigorate fiction, a dying genre, and he did not believe film had to win. The problem was simple: 'Dreiser, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner probably didn't have four years of college between them, but from 1950 on, the great majority of novelists came out of university writing programs ...for the postwar realist the only valid experience was his own.' He continued, 'We need a battalion, a

brigade, of Zolas to head out into the wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping, Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property.'

The novel was not dying of obsolescence but of anorexia. 'It needs food. It needs novelists with huge appetites and mighty, unslaked thirsts for America, as she is right now.' Movies are team enterprises that can show you all sorts of wondrous things, but film is constrained by time and by its addiction to technology and, thus, can't explain anything. That's why people will come out of a movie and say, 'it wasn't nearly as good as the novel.'

I liked *Bonfire* very much, but I had an unusual perspective in that I was a smaller version of the 'master of the universe' bond salesman Wolfe writes about. I was selling corporate bonds at Lehman Brothers at that time and living on Park Avenue, so I saw some of the trading room and after hours drama Wolfe describes. I felt and feel now, that Wolfe got everything essential right about Wall Street and the bond business, although he made some stunning errors of detail. For example, his protagonist, Sherman McCoy, was a salesman, and salesmen cannot make or confirm a trade--ever. Only a trader makes that commitment; the salesman simply relays the trader's decision, and traders didn't usually talk directly to customers. This was an important detail in the novel and Wolfe got it wrong.

About the same time Oliver Stone was working on *Wall Street* (released in 1987), a film with a similar theme. John McGinley, who had an important role in that movie, spent a couple of days sitting with me and a young salesman at Lehman so he could observe how bond trading desks operate. McGinley made himself familiar with the business and the movie was generally accurate in its small details. Yet Wolfe's book shows far greater understanding because even while he missed some details, he got the important stuff right. The movie, on the other hand, was a typical Hollywood cliché. Its theme--insider trading--was totally irrelevant and was never part of Sherman McCoy's bond world. Insider trading flourishes in the world of stocks and Ivan Boesky, not bonds. Stock prices can change very quickly, but bond prices don't. Inside information has less value."

Wight Martindale, Jr.
"Tom Wolfe and the Rise of Donald Trump: A Review of Wolfe's Writings"
Academic Questions
(National Association of Scholars, Winter 2018) 31.4: 483-84

Michael Hollister (2019)