

James D. Redwood – Commentary on “The Angel of the Tenderloin”

“The Angel of the Tenderloin” follows in the wake of “The Summer Associate,” which was published in Issue 33 of the *Notre Dame Review* (Winter/Spring 2012). Both stories reflect the author’s concern with the lingering effects of the Viet Nam war on returning American veterans who have, on the surface, seemingly made a successful transition back to “normal” life and are forging ahead with their lives and careers. But that success is indeed only on the surface, and these soldiers-turned-lawyers are anything but normal. In fact, their wartime experiences have left them both deeply scarred and barely able to function in the workplace or outside it. But there is a marked difference in the degree of dysfunction of these two attorneys which becomes apparent as each story progresses and the main character confronts his ethical responsibilities to his client. In “The Summer Associate,” for example, lawyer Carlton Griswold is guilty at most of failing to show enthusiasm for the client’s cause, which might arguably implicate his ethical duty to show competence and diligence in pursuit of the client’s interests, under ABA Model Rules of Professional Responsibility 1.1 and 1.3, respectively. Yet, perhaps fortunately, the client suffers no harm from Griswold’s marginal dereliction.

The same cannot be said of attorney Mansfield in “The Angel of the Tenderloin.” He is, at the very least, guilty of the far more serious offenses of breaching the client’s confidences without permission (ABA Model Rule 1.6) and laboring under a debilitating and potentially disqualifying personal conflict of interest under Model Rule 1.7. Although in this story as well the client ultimately incurs no injury, it is certainly not for Mansfield’s lack of trying. In both cases the lawyers are haunted by their Viet Nam past, and taken together, the two stories suggest that the greater misconduct committed by Mansfield, when compared to Griswold, is the result of the concomitantly greater trauma which he suffered (and inflicted) while he was in Southeast Asia.

Lest any potential reader be tempted to head for the exit because of the above references to law, I should add that the focus of this latest story, as of “The Summer Associate,” is on character and the human drama posed by the fact that although all of us must try to live for the present and the future, our past, whether it be a happy one or otherwise, and whether we would like to suppress or blazon it, is never as far behind us as we might imagine. And whatever shape which that past may give to the motley and ever-evolving congeries of qualities which go into the making up of our present “character” has a very real impact indeed on how we relate to those around us and how we conduct even the most mundane affairs of our lives. I hope that “The Angel of the Tenderloin,” and “The Summer Associate” before it, succeed, at least in some small measure, in conveying these points.