
HEROES

IN 1898, GERMAN chemists synthesized a new psychoactive substance that inflated the user's personality, giving him a grandiosity that led him to do reckless and foolish things — to act like a hero. Thus, the scientists called their substance “heroin.”

Like heroin, heroism can be addictive. However, it can also be boring to watch because the behavior it produces is so predictable. Heroes have to *act* like heroes — what a narrow range of behavior that is!

Villains, on the other hand, can act any way they choose, and that's why they are often more interesting than the hero. Darth Vader in *Star Wars* is certainly a more interesting character than Luke Skywalker, just as Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* is more interesting than Clarice Starling.

When people hear the term “hero,” they often think of Superman and other characters that strut around the screen rescuing one person after another. This kind of hero can be traced back to the bold and brave characters in the epic poems of Homer and countless Greek myths. Yet, as popular as such heroes were in poetry, folk tales, and religion, this kind of hero seldom appeared in ancient Greek *drama*.

Oedipus, Medea, Antigone, Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, and many other great protagonists in world drama are flawed, vulnerable, vacillating, and contradictory characters. None of them bears any resemblance to Superman. Nor do the most memorable film characters such as Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, R. P. Murphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. In memorable

popular films, heroism is not a lifestyle; it consists of a few heroic *acts* (see: ANTIHEROES).

Filmmakers know, as their predecessors did, that heroes are almost invariably defiant and incapable of fitting in. But sometimes they lose sight of the importance of the hero's reluctance. Perhaps this is because many producers and studio executives in our time insist that the hero be "proactive," which they think means he needs to be in control early in the film. But this is not consistent with the history of memorable heroes.

The person who rushes into battle and storms to the top of the hill is certainly being proactive, and he may seem to be heroic. But he is also likely to be dead by morning. Heroes are reluctant because no person in his right mind *volunteers* to be a hero.

The villain was a villain long before the hero arrived on the scene, and the hero had no part in turning him into a villain. Nor, if the hero disappeared, would the villain cease to be a villain.

While heroes do not turn people into villains, villains turn people into heroes—it is the hero's *reaction* to the villain that makes him a hero, and when the villain disappears, there is nothing left to be heroic about.

In *High Noon*, Frank Miller decides to return to Hadleyville after being released from prison, which forces Will Kane to save the town. In *The Godfather*, Sollozzo tries to kill Vito Corleone, which forces Michael to save his father's life. In *2001*, HAL sabotages the spaceship and kills its crew, which

forces Dave Bowman to take charge. In these and almost all other memorable films, the hero is not proactive; he is *reactive*.

The hero doesn't become a hero simply because he takes a stand against the villain; he becomes a hero because he stands *for* something. This can be justice, a cause, his family, friends, community, or nation. Invariably, while the villain stands for himself, the hero stands for something *beyond* himself.

Drama has always involved a dialogue between the individual and society, dealing with the conflict between desire and duty (see: DUTY). Heroes don't do what they do to achieve success, win approval, or reap material benefits; they do it because it's "the right thing." Invariably, what is required of heroes is that they sacrifice themselves for some transcendent value.

(See also: HEROES, SINGLE; HEROINES; DEFIANCE;
TRANSCENDENCE)