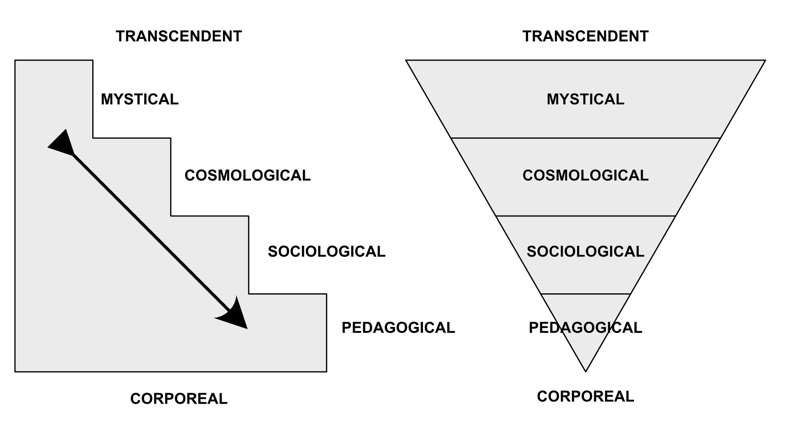
# The Pedagogical Function And The Heroic

### Vocabulary notes

1. I prefer the term “Heroic character” (or, simply “Heroic”) to “hero”; the latter tends to be androcentric in English, and as such tends to perpetuate limiting, gender-binary thinking, as well as promoting exclusion rather than inclusion as a central motif of the Heroic Archetype. While it is true that in many Classical and traditional mythologies, heroism was often the exclusive domain of males (and then only of males of a certain type), a universalist understanding of mythology and of the archetypes recognizes the Heroic as fundamentally inclusive and accessible.
2. For purposes of diversity and inclusion, I use the generic pronoun “they” when speaking of the Heroic in generalities and hypotheticals; however, in reference to existing Classical and traditional myths, the gendered pronouns will be used to refer to Heroic characters commonly accepted to be male or female, or when quoting an original source when the generic masculine pronoun is employed.

The Pedagogical Function, though it is the fourth and “lowest” function on the Mythic Structure Diagram, is in many ways the most important, as it is about the “… experience of being alive”[[1]](#footnote-1), within the context of the other three functions. It is about the question, “How do I do this thing called Life, in a way that fulfills me and expresses my individuality and uniqueness (Pedagogical Function); in a way that is minimally disruptive to the culture and society of which I am part (Sociological Function); in a way that is minimally destructive to the natural environment of which I and my culture/society are a part (Cosmological Function); and in a way which keeps me ‘… in accord with the universal being’[[2]](#footnote-2) (Mystical Function)?” What a typically complex-simple question!

If we simplify the Mythic Structure Diagram as a perspectival image of a set of stairs viewed from above, we see that the exploration of mythology is like walking down those stairs, with each step bringing us closer to our destination, yet each step also having a part of its meaning carried forward from the step above it.

The *content* becomes ever more specific, even as the *context* becomes ever broader. Think of looking closely at a painting of a landscape: the whole picture may be of a stand of trees, but as you get closer and closer, you are able to make out particular trees, then separate branches of that tree, and finally individual leaves on that branch of that tree, but you are still aware that the leaf you’re inspecting is on a branch attached to a tree in a painting of a lot of trees.

## The Nature of The Heroic Archetype

As explained above, all archetypes act as “… vocabulary in the form, not of words, but of acts and adventures…”[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, the fundamental impulse of an archetype is *to act*, to behave in certain ways. This is especially true of the Heroic; its *raison d’être* is to act in response to some event, situation, circumstance (collectively, a Challenge), and for the benefit of others who may be unable or unwilling to act on their own behalf. The Heroic seeks to find (though not always to directly *implement*) a Solution.

This brings us to Campbell’s three Heroic types: Intentional, Accidental (Serendipitous), and Reluctant (Forced)[[4]](#footnote-4). These are by no means exhaustive categories (see below), nor will all “heroic” characters necessarily fall definitively or exclusively into one of these three.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, these categories do serve as a workable wrapper within which to begin to explore the Heroic Archetype.

### The Intentional Heroic

In some ways, this is the least relatable (more on this later) of the three types. The Intentional Heroic seeks adventure; one might say that they “go looking for trouble”. The Intentional Heroic is already quite self-assured in their abilities to confront and vanquish Challenges; they simply seek an opportunity to display their prowess (usually the more ostentatious the better). Joseph Campbell mentions “… a typical early-culture hero who goes around slaying monsters”[[6]](#footnote-6) (the *Monster-Slayer* Heroic); this is a subtype of the Intentional Heroic — they see it as their job to make the world “safe” for humanity, and they go in search of ways to do just that (more on this below).

### The Accidental (Serendipitous) Heroic

This type of Heroic character is carried *by circumstance* into a situation of needing to act in response to a Challenge. Something unexpected happens which requires a response, and the Heroic character finds that they are the only one who can (or is willing to) act to address the situation.[[7]](#footnote-7) In essence, the Accidental Heroic becomes involved in an adventure by happenstance. The classic example of this heroic type is Alice In Wonderland; she *literally* falls into her adventure by plummeting down the rabbit hole. Yes, she followed the White Rabbit in order to satisfy her curiosity, but she had no intention of going anywhere beyond her familiar and comfortable garden in doing so.

The central motif of this aspect of the Heroic Archetype is codified by Robert Frost’s famous observation that “… the best way out is always through.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, we may not be happy about the situation, but we must stoically accept that it is what it is and work toward a solution.

In Alice’s case, she cannot return via the route by which she arrived. Her only options are to sit at the bottom of the hole and starve, or to act on her own behalf to find another way to get home. She may not immediately know what is the right thing to do, but she knows for certain that inaction is the wrong thing.

President Theodore Roosevelt is supposed to have said: “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing,”[[9]](#footnote-9) often rendered down to the more prosaic “Do something, even if it’s wrong.”

### The Reluctant (Forced) Heroic

This type of Heroic is *compelled* by another’s actions into responding to a Challenge. The difference between the Accidental Heroic and the Reluctant Heroic is subtle but crucial. They are similar in that in neither case is the character actively seeking an adventure. They differ in the nature or source of the Challenge faced, how the Heroic becomes aware of it, and how they react to it (at least initially). For the Accidental Heroic, often the Challenge is simply the result of happenstance, not malice. As J. H. Holmes observed, “The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly — it is simply indifferent.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Or, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, “A meteorite on a collision course with New York City [is only] obeying all the laws of the universe, but it [is] still a damn nuisance.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The meteorite isn’t acting out of malice; it didn’t consciously choose its path, but it still represents a problem to be dealt with.

On the other hand, a foreign army using trebuchets to lob boulders at your castle walls also presents you with a Challenge, but it’s one they’re *forcing* you into choosing whether or not to deal with. You may not have sought conflict, but there it is. A less severe example is when someone else makes a decision which impacts you, and you have to decide how to respond — receiving an unexpected break-up text, for instance. You didn’t choose to upend your life, but it has been upended, and you have to decide how you’re going to adjust. It is helpful to see these three options as points on a continuum:

Continuum graph of the three heroic types, from Intentional on the left through Accidental, to Forced on the right.

… arranged in terms of both the attitude of the character toward heroism and of their willingness to engage with the Challenge. The Intentional can think of nothing they’d rather do;, the Forced would rather do just about *anything* else, and the Accidental is somewhere between the two extremes (and may, in fact, vacillate around the median frequently as the adventure proceeds).

However, the Accidental and Forced types *must* become Intentional (to a greater-or-lesser degree) at *some point* in the process of the adventure. This doesn’t mean that the character must adopt a gung-ho enthusiasm for their situation, but they must become at least resigned to the fact that the best way out is always through. This often results in “The Heroic In Spite of Themself” trope wherein the character struggles (or even petulantly complains), but takes the necessary actions, nevertheless.

The Heroic archetype is the manifestation of the Pedagogical Function, which “teaches us how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances,”[[12]](#footnote-12) as Campbell so poetically puts it. It has manifested in many guises in human cultures around the world and across time, but the heroic *character* is *always* a product of the society which produces it, and thus reflects the stresses its progenitor society is experiencing at the time of the archetype’s emergence (and which it is manifested to resolve).

This is the essence of Campbell’s *monomyth*; the recognition that the Heroic (and, indeed, all of mythology), is a ubiquitous human expression across all cultures and throughout all time, differing in the particulars of each expression, but universal in substance. The archetypes *never* change, but their expressions across different cultures do. The Heroic also highlights that what *was* heroic behavior in past times may be questionable (indeed, reprehensible) in present contexts (witness both Herakles and Theseus and their unkind treatment of some of the people — especially women — in their lives).

Part of the purpose of the Pedagogical Function and of the Heroic archetype is to help individuals address those circumstances wherein the needs of self-expression conflict with the duties of social obligation. For example, an action which might have been questionable behavior for your grandparents may be a survival necessity for you. Contrariwise, some things your grandparents may have taken for granted as their just due as human beings may today land you in court. As Campbell says, “The virtues of the past are the vices of today, and many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Campbell broadly defined the Heroic Act as “…departure, fulfillment, return”.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this volume, we’ll refer to these as the *phases* of a Heroic Arc.

Broadly, in the first phase (Departure), the Heroic character is made aware of the Challenge they will be facing, commits to the adventure, and enters embarks upon the journey. In the second phase (Fulfilment), the Heroic character encounters difficulties which both test their dedication to the adventure and grow their heroic capacity to deal with the Challenge; acquires allies, identifies antagonists, and either obtains the Solution or the information that will produce the Solution to the Challenge. Finally, in the third phase (Return), the Heroic character brings or communicates to the “Ordinary World” the Solution (or its formulation) to the Challenge.

Departure: Preparation

Fulfilment: Progression

Return: Presentation

Joseph Campbell said that “… all the myths have to deal with … *transformation of consciousness*”.[[15]](#footnote-15) He was referring to both the consciousness of the *individual* and of the *collective*. This is true especially of the Heroic archetype — the Heroic undergoes a *personal transformation of consciousness* which enables or empowers them to contribute to the potential *transformation of a collective consciousness* in which they participate.

Fundamentally, the three phases are expressed in three main aspects:

1. Willingness to Sacrifice
2. Transformation of Personal Consciousness
3. Potential to Change the Ordinary World

By employing broad terminology in the naming of the aspects, it encourages inclusive thinking when contemplating whether-or-not a character’s story arc is heroic; one is not distracted away from recognizing a character as heroic purely on the basis of some particular attribute, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Each of these three phases have certain element*s* which are associated primarily (but not exclusively) with them. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), enumerated the aspects (or steps, as he called them) as seventeen in total. However, despite his largely universalist view of mythology, some of Campbell’s original steps are still predicated on androcentric and Classicist ideas of the heroic. For instance, “The Meeting With The *Goddess*”, “*Woman* as The *Temptress*”, and “*Master* of The Two Worlds”[[16]](#footnote-16). The first two of these assume a masculine Heroic relating to the feminine energy, antagonistically in the case of the Temptress. In the third, the primary problem is in the word “master”, which both carries both gender-biased and socially inequitable connotations.

### Heroism As A 12-Step Program

The most straightforward presentation of the Heroic archetype for an effective study of mythology is encoded in the twelve steps of Christopher Vogler’s Hero’s Journey[[17]](#footnote-17) (as adapted from Campbell’s original 17-step cycle).

The Heroic Journey[[18]](#footnote-18)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Phase** | **Aspects** |
| **Departure** | The Ordinary World |
| The Call to Adventure |
| Refusal of the Call |
| Meeting With The Mentor |
| Crossing the Threshold |
| **Fulfilment** | Test, Allies, and Enemies |
| The Innermost Cave |
| Ordeal |
| Reward |
| **Return** | The Road Back |
| Resurrection/Purification |
| Return With the Elixir |

Vogler both broadened *and* condensed Campbell’s Heroic Arc. The twelve more generalized stages, which served to open the system to mythologies both old and new, remove limitations to its universal applicability. This arrangement also provides a workable framework for the consciously equitable construction of new Heroic paradigms which are both contemporarily relevant and yet timeless. The simplification to twelve “steps” fitted into the three broad categories makes remembering the steps and their primary association to the Heroic Journey easier and more straightforward. It is Vogler’s system which forms the foundation (with some minor modification of terminology) of our exploration of the Heroic Archetype.

Some of the benefits of Vogler’s system are: firstly, that it is *fundamentally inclusive*; Heroic status is not gender-centric, race-centric, or even species-centric. *Any* character which shows a *Willingness to Sacrifice* and experiences a *Transformation of Personal Consciousness*, which leads ultimately to realization of a *Potential to Change The Ordinary World* can be said to have undergone a heroic adventure.

Secondly, Vogler’s system allows for the construction of a story line which is not slavishly formulaic. While certain aspects are more strongly identified with a given phase, they are not necessarily *exclusively* associated with any particular phase. “Meeting A Mentor”, for instance, is enumerated in the Departure phase, but meeting any mentor can actually happen at any point in the journey — the Fulfilment or even the Return phase. While “Tests, Allies, and Enemies” are most commonly found in the Fulfilment stage, any of these may also appear (and often do) in the Departure phase.

Thirdly, Vogler’s system not only lends itself admirably to analyzing existing Classical and traditional heroic mythologies, but it also provides a workable framework for generating storylines that are conscious of current affairs and are, therefore, readily approachable and engaging to contemporary audiences, yet still couched in symbols and metaphors which are universal and eternal.

Vogler, thus, reinforces Campbell’s emphasis that the Heroic archetype was originally intended as an aid, a guide, and a comfort for everyday human life: a guidebook for “how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances.”[[19]](#footnote-19) However, inherent in the *traditiona*l Heroic journey is the limiting assumption that the goal of the Heroic’s actions is, in itself, worthy and worthwhile and beneficial to “the greater good.” History, if not the Heroic’s own society, must see their deeds as laudable, selfless, martyrly, etc. A more modern understanding of the Heroic is less constricted.

Finally, there is Campbell’s lesson that there are two types of Heroic deed:

One is the *physical* deed; the hero who has performed a war act or a physical act of heroism — saving a life, that’s a hero act. Giving himself, sacrificing himself to another. And the other kind is the *spiritual* hero, who has learned or found a mode of experiencing the supernormal range of human spiritual life, and then come back and communicated it.[[20]](#footnote-20) [emphasis added]

The physical deed is the fundamental character of the action-hero movie in the modern medium, and it may apply to any of the three Heroic types, even the Forced, because such a Heroic character is required to perform a physical feat, even if it is the last thing they’d have chosen to be doing.

The spiritual deed is less common in the modern, post-Enlightenment idiom, though such stories are still told from time-to-time. The contemporary analog might be called the *intellectual* deed, in which learning information or adapting one’s thinking to view the situation in a new way is what leads to the discovery and application of the solution.

## The Distributed Heroic

Just as the Trickster archetype can be taken on by more than one character in a story (even at the same time), so it can be with the Heroic. There are three chief expressions of this: 1) the Aggregate Heroic; 2) the Sequential Heroic; and 3) the Partite Heroic.

### The Aggregate Heroic

This is a very common trope in the modern medium; a group of characters of Heroic nature who possess various Heroic qualities and (often widely) varying personalities, working together to address a particularly powerful or widespread Challenge. Two stand-out examples, of course, are Marvel’s Avengers and DC’s Justice League. Each character is Heroic in their own fashion, all are working toward the same goal, and all are displaying Heroic qualities simultaneously, but their individual efforts are concentrated on separate parts of the overall Challenge (with an occasional pairing or grouping for variety).

This expression of the Heroic is a very open-faced expression of the realization that a single person often does not have the totality of the power, talents, and/or capabilities to address all the aspects of a Challenge single-handedly (in contrast to several Classical Heroics — such as Herakles — who acted as individual, free-agent executors of the Solution).[[21]](#footnote-21)

### The Sequential Heroic

In this expression, the Heroic archetype is taken on by various separate characters at different times in the adventure; again, all are Heroic after their own fashion, and usually each has a special talent or ability which is addressed to a specific aspect of the Challenge, but each operates individually, one-at-a-time. The Heroic archetype is passed from one character to another like the baton in a relay race (sometimes cycling through the group several times), as each component of the Challenge is met and dispensed with in progression toward the ultimate victory.

This is often seen in suites of novels which are all set in the same milieu, but in which each title is dedicated to a particular character (often, but not always, addressing an entirely independent Challenge than that faced by other Heroic characters in other books, and sometimes in entirely different historical periods of the setting).

### The Partite Heroic

This trope is about as common as the Aggregate Heroic, and has a somewhat longer history. In this configuration, the archetype of the Heroic is shared among several characters (usually either two or three, but rarely more), simultaneously, and each character represents a specific aspect of Heroism. However, in this case, it is more as if the characters represent personality traits of a single individual, such that the Heroic archetype is wholly present only because all of its component parts are present.

An excellent example of this is found in *Star Trek: The Original Series[[22]](#footnote-22)*, in which McCoy, Spock, and Kirk represent, respectively, the affective/subjective aspect of the personality (McCoy); the practical/objective aspect (Spock); and the motivational/applicational aspect (Kirk).[[23]](#footnote-23) This implementation can be found in the earliest trilogy of *Star Wars[[24]](#footnote-24)* movies, in which Luke can be seen as the Kirk-like character; Han as the Spock-like character; and Leia as the McCoy-like character — though there is hardly a point-for-point correspondence.

Another way this can be implemented is by assigning the spiritual/intellectual aspect of the deed to one character, and the practical/physical aspect of the deed to another character. A very good example of this can be seen in *Independence Day[[25]](#footnote-25)* (1996), in which David Levinson (played by Jeff Goldblum) comprehends the intellectual aspect of the Challenge (that the signal shared between the alien craft is, in fact, a countdown, coordinating their simultaneous destruction of several major population centers around the world), and Captain Steven Hiller (played by Will Smith) understands and is conversant with the physical aspect of the Challenge (actively countering the aggressive and destructive actions of the aliens).

While Hiller is engaged in piecemeal dispatching aliens who are in the act of killing humans[[26]](#footnote-26), Levinson reasons out the aliens’ organizational structure, finds its weakness, and formulates a counterattack which will eradicate the threat at its source Ultimately, for the solution to be implemented, both must come together and act in concert: Hiller flies the salvaged alien craft to their Mothership, where Levinson infects their computer system with a virus which causes it to catastrophically malfunction, and they leave behind a nuclear weapon which destroys the craft, thus “cutting the head off of the snake”.

## The Relatability of The Heroic

All archetypes must exhibit *relatability* in order to be effective. The audience must be able to see some aspect of *themselves* and their *personal experiences* in the character and the situation. In other words, the archetypes must evoke *empathy*.

This is certainly so of the Trickster (discussed elsewhere), but for no other archetype is relatability so crucial as for that of the Heroic. As Campbell says in The Message of The Myth episode of *The Power of Myth*:

What the myth has to provide [is] to give life *models*. And the models have to be appropriate to the possibilities of the time in which you’re living.[[27]](#footnote-27) (emphasis added)

This takes the form of a two-fold exploration:

1. Determining whether or not particular Heroic characters represent a model of behavior and/or achievement that is actually, realistically attainable by the members of the audience; and,
2. Discovery of how the “anti-hero/dark hero/sympathetic villain” (see below) has implemented moral relativism to justify anti-social actions by both groups and individuals.

This effort also involves exploring and clarifying the distinction between myths and legends, the conflation of the two having been the root cause of the ascendance of both the superheroic and the sympathetic villain over the true Heroic.

### Legend vs Myth

Legends are, by definition, *exaggerated stories* about actual, historical figures, whose exploits have been hyperbolized after the fashion of tall tales, to the point where they are not humanly possible actions. Relatability suffers when you aren’t able to achieve such a similar feat; your societal training tells you that you are a worthless excuse for a human being as a result. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, was a real, flesh-and-blood, historical human being, but he was far from superheroically infallible. The same goes for George Washington, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Charlemagne … the list goes on.

The Heroic isn’t perfect or infallible; the Heroic succeeds *despite its inabilities* by *overcoming* them, not by circumventing them.

This takes us directly to the next topic….

## Exceptional Heroism

### The Problem of The Superhero

The Heroic principle of the Pedagogical Function is somewhat upended and overshadowed by the *superheroic* concept, [[28]](#footnote-28) because the superhero can often place the capacity for heroism beyond the reach of everyday persons and into the realm of the exceptional and unattainable. A viewer/reader may be able to empathize with the moral/ethical dilemmas of a Tony Stark or Kara Danvers, but they will likely *never* experience the beyond-the-ordinary technologies or personal powers to which “heroes” such as Iron Man or Supergirl have ready access.

Thus, these superheroic characters can be admired, even imitated, but never actually *emulated*; you may sympathize with their human aspects and their personal moral and ethical struggles, but you can never hope to achieve what their superheroic counterparts achieve. In fact, it is a common trope for the superhero to chide their companions (and, by extension, the audience) “don’t try this at home,” or for them to steadfastly refuse to be accompanied by a “mundane” companion because whatever actions they are about to engage in are “… too dangerous,” with the implication “…for anyone else but *me*.”

### The Problem of The Dark Hero/Anti-Hero/Sympathetic Villain

The proper understanding and implementation of the Pedagogical Heroic also provides a foil to a recent negative development in (especially U.S. American) society: the ascension of the “sympathetic villain” (also-known-as the *anti-hero* or *dark hero*) as a *replacement* for the Heroic.

The sympathetic villain is a *fully legitimate* archetype, which explains harmful behavior by a character toward others as the result of their reactions to injustices or injuries they’ve suffered through the caprice of nature, or the malevolence of others. People sometimes *do* become dark and anti-social as a result of traumatic personal experiences, and it is valid for mythology to recount their stories *as cautionary tales*. They also serve as protagonists for redemption stories, in which someone who has fallen into personally damaging or morally reprehensible behaviors comes to recognize the error of their ways, reform their attitudes and actions, and remake themselves as a more positive participant in their culture/society. These are all realistic human situations and have value in both their formulation and their communication, but they should always be recognized as *exceptions to the true Heroic arc*, and neither synonyms nor substitutes for true Heroism.

The dark-heroic and/or sympathetic villain archetype *must not be confused with the* *Heroic*. These characters may be pitiable, but they are *not* moral exemplars to be emulated. The danger of allowing the sympathetic villain to usurp the Heroic’s place is that it serves to “excuse” harmful behavior as inevitable — or, worse, justifiable, as well as promote results over process.

It is all-well-and-good to sympathize with what made the Joker or Darth Vader what they are; it is another thing altogether to set them up as positive role models (which they aren’t, and weren’t intended to be). This is why we should prefer the term “sympathetic villain” (certainly to “dark hero”); because, it emphasizes that these characters are not, *in any way*, Heroic in the mythological sense.

There may be some value, however, in declaring the sympathetic villain to be “the poor man’s Hero” in modern popular cultural expressions. If the Heroic is accessible *only* to the mega-rich or the super-smart (or the alien or semi-divine[[29]](#footnote-29)), then “the rest of us” must make do with the second choice — the character whose heart is in the right place, but whose methods are morally questionable at the best of times.

The inevitable result of this contraversion of the archetype is this: if the “everyday person” wishes to defeat the forces of “evil” in their own lives, they must resort to villainous means to do so. The *ends come to justify the means*, and *success is paramount*, regardless of the *process* of its accomplishment. Therein lies the danger.

The gateway to this rationalization is, of course, the Trickster-Heroic, often spoken of by Campbell himself: the Heroic character who is willing to break a rule here-and-there in order to uphold the wider Rule of Law, or more fundamental moral truth. Of course, the Heroic *must* sometimes engage in distasteful acts in order to achieve their ultimate goal. This actually forms a part of the sacrificial nature of the true Heroic — they sacrifice their morality, their serenity, or even their very humanity, to defeat the “big bad” and put the universe to rights once again.

But the difference between the Trickster-Heroic and the Sympathetic Villain is that the former experiences and expresses guilt and shame over having to use such means. As Kahlil Gibran wrote, “Oftentimes, I have hated in self-defense, but if I were stronger I would not have used such a weapon.”[[30]](#footnote-30).

Most crucially, the audience must recognize and acknowledge *that a terrible price was paid by the Heroic for their success,* and that such solutions should only ever be implemented in the direst of circumstances when *all other possibilities* have been rendered ineffective or unachievable.

Confusing the dark-and-impenitent Sympathetic Villain with the dark-but-guilty Trickster-Heroic eclipses the original, fundamental function of the Heroic archetype — which was to remind and prove to the audience that it is possible (and preferable) to succeed against hardship and evil, *not by adopting the methods of your adversary*, but by holding to a higher moral and ethical standard than theirs, and if you must engage in immoral or unethical acts to achieve your ends, the results and consequences of those acts are *yours and yours alone*, and cannot be rationalized or handed-off to anyone else.

A perfect example of a Sympathetic Villain *mistaken* for a Heroic character is Paul Muad’Dib from Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel, *Dune[[31]](#footnote-31)*, a fact which Herbert, himself, addressed on more than one occasion:

*Dune* was aimed at this whole [dangerous] idea of the infallible leader, because my view of history says that mistakes made by a leader (or made in a leader's name) are amplified by the numbers who follow *without question*.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The study of mythology, then, must also include the effort to restore the true, original characteristics and examples of the Heroic, which needs to be revived in modern society. So, the study of mythology must also address the *relativity* of the Heroic.

### The Relativity of The Heroic

To say that the actions of the Heroic must be acceptable or justifiable within the context of the story leads us into the realm of moral/ethical relativity expressed in the famous dictum that “the ends justify the means”, expressed by Niccolò Machiavelli as “for although the act condemns the doer, the end may justify him….”[[33]](#footnote-33)

This brings us back around to Campbell’s observation: “The virtues of the past are the vices of today, and many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

At one level, this statement codifies that actions seen as Heroic behavior at one time may not be acceptable conduct in contemporary circumstances. Theseus’ abandonment of Ariadne, for instance, was considered appropriate and even imitable behavior in Classical Greece, but would likely be denounced as reprehensible in many sectors of contemporary culture.

Also, the relativity of the Heroic forces us to confront the Just War Theory dictum that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” As former CIA operative Amaryllis Fox says in a YouTube video: “Everybody believes they’re the Good Guy.”[[35]](#footnote-35) She elaborates:

An al-Qaeda fighter made a point once during a debriefing; he said “All these movies that America makes like *Independence Day* ([[36]](#footnote-36)) … and *Star Wars* ([[37]](#footnote-37)) — they're all about a small, scrappy band of rebels who will do anything in their power with the limited resources available to them to expel an outside, technologically advanced invader, and what you don't realize,” he said, “is that to us — to the rest of the world — *you* are the Empire and we are Luke and Han; you are the aliens and we're Will Smith.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

During the conversation between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell in The Hero’s Adventure episode of *The Power of Myth*, Moyers asks, “So, does heroism have a moral objective?”[[39]](#footnote-39) Campbell answers:

The moral objective is that of saving a people or saving a person, or saving an idea. [The Heroic] is sacrificing … *for* something, that’s the morality of it. Now you, from another position, might say that [that] something … should not have been realized, you know. That’s the judgment from another side. *But it doesn’t destroy the heroism of what was done — absolutely not*.[[40]](#footnote-40) [emphasis added]

What this tells us is that heroism *is* relative. First: the success (value) of a heroic act is not measured solely by its *results*, but also by its *means* and its *intents*. This is encoded in the first attribute of the Heroic act — *willingness to sacrifice*, which is focused on selflessness.

The Heroic character acts to address the Challenge with no thought for their own personal well-being, but also with no expectation of potential reward or accolades (in other words, there is also willingness to sacrifice one’s own ego, as well as willingness to sacrifice one’s life).

Taken to the logical extreme, this means that the most Heroic of all characters are actually those whose heroism is humble, unostentatious, or even unnoticed, similar to Kant’s assertion that an act is not moral if the actor derives some personal advantage from it, and also to the Latin maxim *ars est celare artem[[41]](#footnote-41)*

This is problematical for the Intentional Heroic, because according to this assessment, a character engaging in heroism with the aim or expectation of praise and/or recognition automatically disqualifies themselves from deserving the title of Heroic.

There is a tangential relationship, here, to the third attribute of a heroic act — that it produce a *potential to change the Ordinary World*. The operative word is “potential”; a change need not actually be produced in the Ordinary World in order for the act to have been heroic. To say that an act is not heroic because the Challenge is not defeated is to judge the action solely by its results, and ignore the intentions. The best person to find the Solution isn’t always the best person to apply it; the Heroic often can only obtain the Solution — the Ordinary World must actually apply it. If they choose not to do so, their choice does not eradicate the heroic nature of the deed.

Thus, we see that it is possible to have either a successful heroic act (the Challenge is prevailed over), or an unsuccessful heroic act (the Challenge prevails) — but the *act remains heroic, regardless*. The tangential connection is this: even if one’s heroic act is, indeed, successful, *it need not be known to nor acknowledged by anyone else in order to have been heroic*. It is the *potential* to generate change that is the important factor, not whether-or-not change was, in fact, brought about.

So, a Heroic character may in fact return to the Ordinary World with the answer to the challenge (see The Elixir, below), but encounter resistance or apathy in applying it. We see this in stories where society rejects salvation because the savior doesn’t reflect their expectations of who or what their rescuer “should be”.

Nevertheless, the Heroic has provided the potential to overcome the Challenge, which act was, indeed, heroic, whether or not the “customer” chooses to acknowledge either the value of the act or of the Solution. Again, to judge an action unheroic because no one appreciates it or its achievement is to measure it by the wrong standard.

Indeed, some of the most poignant stories involve a Heroic saving someone else from themselves, the worth of which is not recognized (at least immediately) by the person(s) being saved. Think of a conscientious parent preventing a child from engaging in an action with dangerous short- or long-term consequences: often, the child’s immediate reaction is “I hate you!”; and only later do they come to realize and acknowledge the wisdom and love inherent in the parent’s resolute restriction.

1. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In fact, the most interesting and compelling heroic characters often frequently vacillate between the three types! [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This forces us to realize that choosing is *always* acting; thus, when responding to a Challenge, choosing *not to engage* is still taking an action — an action not to act. Action is absent only when the possibility of choice is absent; for instance, in the adage “fight, flight, or freeze” only in “freeze” mode is action absent, because the possibility of choice is absent. The “freeze” response, being characterized by paralytic indecision, makes choice impossible — you are not refusing to act, you are inactive due to an inability to decide which action to take. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Theodore Roosevelt, "Theodore Roosevelt Quotes," TR Quotes, accessed February 21, 2023, https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Quotes/In%20any%20moment%20of%20decision%20%20the%20best%20thing%20you%20can%20do%20is%20the%20right%20thing%20%20the%20nex. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Haynes Holmes, *The Sensible Man's View of Religion* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1932). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (Place of publication not identified: HarperCollins, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. There is a strong connection here to Heroic Relatability, discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Star Trek*, performed by William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and DeForest Kelley, aired 1966-1969, on Desilu Productions. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One might even draw parallels to Freud’s divisions of the personality, such that Kirk represents the Id, that part which expresses needs, drives, and desires (the Challenge) and ultimately engages in the action of addressing them; Spock represents the Ego, which formulates various logical and practical approaches to addressing the Challenge posed by the expressions of the Id; and McCoy represents the Superego, which assesses the moral and ethical ramifications and consequences of the Ego’s solutions before they are implemented. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, directed and screenplay by George Lucas, performed by Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, Lucasfilm / Twentieth Century Fox, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Independence Day*, directed and screenplay by Roland Emmerich, performed by Will Smith, Bill Pullman, and Jeff Goldblum, Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Here, he is expressing the *Monster-Slayer* primal aspect of the Heroic. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This is not an entirely modern phenomenon: Herakles was more-than-man from the moment of his conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See above for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam* (London: Heinemann, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, a division of Chilton Company, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Frank Herbert, *Eye*, a masterworks ed. (New York: Berkley Books, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Niccolò Machiavelli and Bernard Crick, *The Discourses* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Former Undercover CIA Officer Talks War And Peace*, performed by Amaryllis Fox, YouTube, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Independence Day*, directed and screenplay by Roland Emmerich, performed by Will Smith, Bill Pullman, and Jeff Goldblum, Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, directed and screenplay by George Lucas, performed by Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, Lucasfilm / Twentieth Century Fox, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Former Undercover CIA Officer Talks War And Peace*, performed by Amaryllis Fox, YouTube, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. “it is true art to conceal art”; meaning that the best art conceals the means by which it is achieved. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)