# The Pedagogical Function And The Heroic

The **Heroic** archetype is the manifestation of the Pedagogical Function, which “teaches us how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances,”[[1]](#footnote-1) as Campbell so poetically puts it. The heroic *archetype* 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 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.

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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 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.

What 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.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

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[[3]](#footnote-3) (as adapted from Campbell’s original 17-step cycle). This analysis (and template) for the Heroic storyline is applicable to a variety of both ancient and modern heroic figures, but is also not specific to a particular type of Heroic character.

Vogler’s adaptation of Campbells Heroic Journey is not exclusive; nor is it specific to race, culture, society, gender identity, or, indeed, species. A robotic viewpoint character may traverse the entirety of a Heroic adventure.

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.”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, inherent in the Heroic journey is the assumption that the goal of the Heroic’s actions is, 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.

Finally, there is Campbell’s lesson that there are two types of Heroic deed (the spiritual and the physical) and three fundamental types of Heroic character (intentional, accidental, and forced). This formiulation reminds us that Heroic adventures may take any form and that the capacity for extraordinary accomplishment is within us all, regardless of circumstances or nature. As long as there is a “departure, fulfillment, and return”[[5]](#footnote-5), associated with a willingness to sacrifice self, a transformation of consciousness, and a potential created to alter the ordinary world, then a Heroic arc has occurred.

**Exceptional Heroism**

The Heroic principle of the Pedagogical Function has been somewhat upended and overshadowed by the *superheroic* concept. The superhero can often place the capacity for heroism beyond the reach of everyday persons and into the realm of the exceptional and unattainable. (This is not an entirely modern phenomenon: Herakles was more-than-man from the moment of his conception.) 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 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 do. 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 Pedagogical Heroic also provides a foil to a recent negative development in (especially US 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 positive forces 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 allowed* to supplant 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. 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, then, in (controversially) 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), 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: 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.

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. 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.”[[6]](#footnote-6). Most crucially, the audience must recognize and acknowledge *that a terrible price was paid for the 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-but-guilty Trickster-Heroic with the dark-and-impenitent Sympathetic Villain eclipses the original, fundamental function of the Heroic archetype — which was to 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.

A perfect example of a Sympathetic Villain *mistaken* for a Heroic character is Paul Muad’Dib from Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel, *Dune[[7]](#footnote-7)*, 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*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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 *relatability* of the Heroic.

**The Relatable Heroic**

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” has implemented moral relativism to justify anti-social actions by both groups and individuals, so that these affects may be exposed and corrected.

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.

Legends are, by definition, exaggerated stories about actual, historical figures, but their exploits have been hyperbolized after the fashion of tall tales, to the point where they are not humanly possible actions. Abraham Lincoln never walked two miles in a blizzard to return a library book before it could become overdue; 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. Lincoln 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.

**The Feminine Heroic**

This also informs the study of the *feminine Heroic.* By discussing the absolute paucity of Heroic female characters in Classical mythologies, we draw the circle closed by referring back to the feminine energy of the Primal Goddess. Witness Durga and her extreme expression, Kali, slaughtering demon hordes with wild abandon. To say that the feminine is incapable of violence is just as demeaning as all other restrictions that have been placed upon women by male-dominated culture for the past two hundred centuries (or more).

Studying the (admittedly rare) examples of feminine Heroics in mythology has the effect of emphasizing the loss of the balancing power of the feminine in modern, techno-industrial society. The need to recognize the effects of this loss can be seen in an exploration of the relationship of *mythological* awareness to *ecological* awareness, focusing on how the ancient Earth-connectedness of mythology is (or is not) present in modern ecologically minded (green) philosophies and movements.

1. The Power of Myth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Power of Myth. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam* (New York, NY: Apfred A. Knopf, 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frank Herbert, *Eye* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)