# The Relatability and Relativity 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.[[1]](#footnote-1) (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 — certainly not by exploiting them.

This takes us directly to the next topic….

## 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….”[[2]](#footnote-2)

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.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

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 over-quoted dictum that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As former CIA operative Amaryllis Fox says in a YouTube video: “Everybody believes they’re the Good Guy.”[[5]](#footnote-5) She elaborates:

An al-Qaeda fighter made a point once during a debriefing; he said “All these movies that America makes like *Independence Day* [[[6]](#footnote-6)] … and *Star Wars* [[[7]](#footnote-7)] — 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.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

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?”[[9]](#footnote-9) 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*.[[10]](#footnote-10) [emphasis added]

What this tells us is that heroism *is* relative. However, there are caveats: 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*, 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.*[[11]](#footnote-11),[[12]](#footnote-12)

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 Solution to the Challenge, 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.

### The Problem of The Superhero

The Heroic principle of the Pedagogical Function is somewhat upended and overshadowed by the *superheroic* concept, [[13]](#footnote-13) 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 a 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 White Hat Hero

The superheroic dilemma is tangentially related to (and in part an outgrowth of) the *circulus in probando[[14]](#footnote-14)* problem of the Heroic character who is successful *only* and *solely* because they are the Heroic character. The term comes from the fact that in many early cinematic and televised entertainments, the Heroic character was immediately identifiable by the fact that “he’s the guy in the white hat.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

A black and white logo

Description automatically generated with low confidence

The first modern appearance[[16]](#footnote-16) of this trope appears to have been in the 1903 short film, *The Great Train Robbery,*[[17]](#footnote-17)and it became ubiquitous thereafter.

It is used to great effect in melodrama productions, but this realm also points out the shortcoming of the trope: both the Heroic and the Villain are two-dimensional and self-referential. The Villain is villainous because that is what villains are, and the Heroic is heroic because that is what Heroics are. The Villain has no other motive than being villainous; the Heroic has no other motive than being Heroic.

The reason this works so well in melodrama is its very unrelatability to modern eyes; no one is wholly good or wholly evil. Villains have motivations (nefarious though they are), and Heroics are subject to fallibility.

One of the earliest examples in literature of pushback against the Medieval White Knight stereotype is, of course, Miguel de Cervantes’ *Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605-15)[[18]](#footnote-18), in which a minor nobleman becomes so enamored of chivalric romances that he decides to restyle himself into a knight-errant[[19]](#footnote-19).

A well-known example of re-thinking this overly simplistic view is depicted in the Alignment Grid, originally popularized by the fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D)[[20]](#footnote-20).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Lawful Good | Lawful Neutral | Lawful Evil |
| Neutral Good | True Neutral | Neutral Evil |
| Chaotic Good | Chaotic Neutral | Chaotic Evil |

The purpose of the grid was to clarify that characters have a variety of motivations, ranging from rigidly structured (Lawful) to flexibly indefinite (Chaotic), and from externally directed (Good) to internally directed (Evil). The Lawful alignments are often considered the most difficult to maintain, as they are adamantine in their expectations; a Lawful character (of any moralistic variety), is required to always behave according to the code of conduct associated with their particular race or occupation, and never vary from it.

Thus, the White Hat Heroic would fall into the grid cell of Lawful Good, whereas the Black Hat Villain would fall in to the grid cell of Lawful Evil, and those are just not relatable modes of behavior to modern sensibilities. An “evil” character may perform a “good” act if it promotes their “evil” agenda; and, a “good” character may enact an “evil” deed if the long-term result of doing so will forward the cause of “good”. The flexibility of these alignments places them firmly in the Chaotic realm (which is the most realistic and relatable to modern players).

This awareness has led to dark heroism being redefined along a continuum on which even the extremes are not rigid, and in which the backstory and motivations of the so-called “anti-heroic” character are very much taken into account.

TVTropes.com[[21]](#footnote-21) defines six types of anti-hero:

**The Classical**: A self-doubting and self-preserving protagonist for whom the audience feels sympathy and whose success they wish, but not one to which they would entrust the defense of their lives.

**The Disney**: A protagonist with a fundamentally Heroic nature, but lacking the confidence of a true Heroic.

**The Pragmatic**: Motivated by Heroic ideals, but morally indefinite, though no worse than neutral, and tending to stay in the “good” range most of the time. Nevertheless, they are “big-picture” oriented and willing to “do what needs doing”, even if morally questionable. Some Pragmatic Anti-heroes are more violence-prone than others.

**The Unscrupulous**: Still good-intentioned, these are the darkest yet; often hard-hearted and sometimes outright vicious, they tend to be driven more by vengeance than justice, and are often concerned with any collateral damage caused by their efforts.

**The Nominal**: Heroics bordering on sociopathic, they are amoral at best, and often actively malevolent — they might be said to be only slightly “better” than the Villain. They act on behalf of the “good”, but for their own reasons, which are often quite selfish. The audience may be able to sympathize with their results, but cannot help questioning their methods.

**The Sociopathic**: Lacking any fundamental capacity for empathy, these protagonists show a supreme disregard for the sanctity of life, and are certainly not above what would usually be seen as villainous behaviors in the pursuit of their goals. This category is tantamount to the Sympathetic Villain (see below); the audience understands their goals and motivations, and cannot morally challenge their *intentions*, but also cannot morally condone their *methods*.

This very relativity in the understanding and expression of the Heroic character and the Heroic act has led to a confounding and confusing public apprehension of the true nature of heroism.

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

The above leads inevitably to a discussion of a recent negative development in (especially U.S. American) society: the ascension of the “Sympathetic Villain” 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*.

The Sympathetic Villain also serves as a protagonist 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[[22]](#footnote-22)), 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 emphasize a 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.”[[23]](#footnote-23).

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.

Joseph Campbell emphasized this to Bill Moyers:

…there’s a fourth function of myth, and this is the one that I think today everyone must try to relate to, and that’s the pedagogical function: how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

What Campbell was implying by the phrase “live a human lifetime” is to be fully actualized (à la Maslow), which means to acknowledge responsibility for the results (positive *and* negative) of the actions you *choose* to take.

Confusing the dark-and-impenitent Sympathetic Villain with the dark-but-guilty Trickster-Heroic eclipses this 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. 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[[25]](#footnote-25)*, 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*.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Beware of heroes. Much better [to] rely on your own judgement and make your own mistakes.[[27]](#footnote-27)

This sentiment is also captured in the Latin admonition *Sceleste ne timeas, sed time hero* (Do not fear the villain, but fear the hero).

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. Niccolò Machiavelli and Bernard Crick, *The Discourses* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1970).  
   Note, however, that Machiavelli clearly states that the doer is condemned — a part of the quotation which is frequently omitted. [↑](#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. There seems to be no consensus on who originally stated this, or when. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Former Undercover CIA Officer Talks War And Peace*, performed by Amaryllis Fox, YouTube, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Independence Day*, directed and screenplay by Roland Emmerich, performed by Will Smith, Bill Pullman, and Jeff Goldblum, Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *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-7)
8. *Former Undercover CIA Officer Talks War And Peace*, performed by Amaryllis Fox, YouTube, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 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-9)
10. 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-10)
11. “it is true art to conceal art”; meaning that the best art conceals the means by which it is achieved. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This, then, 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 could be considered to have automatically disqualified themselves from deserving the title of Heroic. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is not an entirely modern phenomenon: Herakles was more-than-man from the moment of his conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Latin, “circle in proving”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This was particularly effective in the black-and-white era of movies and television. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though the concept goes back much further, to Medieval romances where similar roles were assigned to the White Knight and the Black Knight. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Richard W. Etulain, *Re-imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote Of La Mancha,* (N.P.: Forgotten Books, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A “roving” or “wandering” knight. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Dungeon Masters Guide: Special Reference Work : a Compiled Volume of Information Primarily Used by Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Game Referees, including Combat Tables, Monster Lists and Encounters, Treasure and Magic Tables and Descriptions, Random Dungeon Generation, Random Wilderness Terrain Generation, Suggestions on Gamemastering, and More*, rev. ed. (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. TVTropes, "Analysis / Anti-Hero," TVTropes, accessed February 25, 2023, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Analysis/AntiHero. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See above for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam* (London: Heinemann, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 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-24)
25. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, a division of Chilton Company, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Frank Herbert, *Eye*, a masterworks ed. (New York: Berkley Books, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas D. Clareson, *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction: The Formative Period (1926-1970) (Understanding Contemporary American Literature)* (n.p.: University of South Carolina Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)