

Exploring The Dark Side: The Anti-Hero's Journey

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You have, no doubt, heard of The Hero's Journey. In this article, we will explore the lesser-known ANTI-hero's journey and the uncharted dark side of the passage -- the place where the dark forces live and hatch their nefarious schemes. In real life, it's people like Hitler, Jack the Ripper and Saddam Hussein who personify these dark forces. In story, it's great villains like Voldemort, Hannibal Lecter, Darth Vader and Satan that embody the dark side. Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, Jodie Foster in 'The Silence of the Lambs' and Sigourney Weaver in 'Alien' are heroes. Their actions are motivated and influenced by a higher nature. Macbeth, Scarlett O'Hara and Michael Douglas in 'Wall Street' are anti-heroes. Their actions are motivated by a lower, primordial nature.

The higher nature links the hero to the creative energies that seek to overcome negative states and reach higher states of being. It inspires him/her to seize the day, to be creative and virtuous, courageous and just. It is a source of great power, and it motivates the hero to make sacrifices and to do great things.

The lower nature links the anti-hero to the physical, animal side of his nature. It is an earthbound self that pursues earthly things. Hidden in the matrix of its seductive energies are the libido and the id -- the source of our most basic instincts, appetites and drives, the ones that control hunger, sex and aggression. They compete with the higher nature for influence over the hero and the anti-hero, and they are the principal resisters of all positive change.

The hallmark of heroes is personal sacrifice. They personify the positive unselfish side of the ego, and their journey reveals the upside of the passage. The m.o. of antiheroes is the antisocial act. They personify the negative selfish side of the ego, the side that has given the word 'ego' a bad name, and their journey reveals the dark or downside of the cycle.

Villains become anti-heroes when the story is about them; when we see the process they undergo to become villains. That's the only difference. They are both motivated by the same lower-self impulses. Darth Vader is a villain in part IV of 'Star Wars,' but, no doubt, will be the central character and an anti-hero in Part III, when he is being drawn into the dark side.

On the upside of the passage, the hero resists temptation and goes up the ladder.
On the downside, the anti-hero gives in to temptation and goes down the ladder.

Whereas the hero represents that part of us that recognizes problems and accepts responsibility, the anti-hero is the will to power and insatiable greed, the materialistic, power hungry, tyrannical side of our natures; the side that wants to possess everything it desires, without limit, and control everything it needs. In real life, this is Hitler, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. In story, it is Little Caesar, Michael Corleone and Commodus in 'Gladiator.'

The stages on the upside of the passage are: separation, initiation, integration and rebirth. The actions of the heroes in stories like 'Schindler's List,' 'Armageddon,' 'Braveheart,' 'The Fugitive' and 'Mulan' help to illuminate these steps. The stages on the downside are: attachment, regression, alienation and death. The anti-heroes in such stories as 'Oedipus,' 'Faust,' 'Dracula,' 'Gone with the Wind,' 'Citizen Kane' and, more recently, 'Jurassic Park,' 'Ocean's Eleven' and 'The Score' help to outline this side of the path.

Stories focused on the upside focus on the character of the hero and revolve around getting the hero to join or return to the fight. These stories are about the transformation of the hero's character and show the hero being brought back to a heroic frame of mind and returning to the fight.

Stories focused on the downside focus on the corruption rather than the rehabilitation of some anti-hero. 'Othello,' 'Macbeth,' 'Body Heat,' 'Fatal Attraction' and 'The Godfather' are all focused on the downside. John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' is all about Satan's efforts to corrupt Adam and Eve. 'Macbeth,' which begins on the upside after the climactic battle, is focused on the downside and is all about Macbeth's corruption and guilt. 'Othello' is focused on jealousy and is all about the destruction of the Moor by his servant, Iago.

The goal of the hero is to liberate an entity like a family, a country or a galaxy from the tyranny and corruption that caused a state of misfortune and to create a new unified whole. The goal of the anti-hero is to take possession of an entity and redirect it toward goals that fulfill its own desires and needs, which is to accumulate, control and enjoy everything it needs to satisfy its insatiable cravings for sense objects, security, wealth and territory. In modern terms, we're talking about money, sex, and power. Psychologically, these are the appetites and desires of the lower self taking possession of the conscious self and redirecting its goals.

After the hero completes the upside of the passage, he may, like Adam and Eve, King David or Robert DeNiro in 'Raging Bull,' be transformed into a new anti-hero and be drawn into the downside. When this happens, new dark forces are awakened, and the hero's progress is reversed. And where there was initiation, there is now regression; where there was integration, there is now alienation; where there was strength, there is now weakness; where there was love, there is now lust; where there was unity, there is now polarity; where there was a superhero, there is now a tyrant; and where the hero's humanity was being awakened, the antihero's humanity is being shut down. His generosity has become uncontrolled greed; his compassion has become hatred and loathing. Where there were celebrations, there are now orgies; and where there was a paradise, there is now a living hell.

Sometimes the cycles are continuous. In the 'Star Wars' saga, Darth Vader starts out on the upside as a Jedi, a young hero aligned with the Force, but then he defects to the Dark Side, becomes an anti-hero and helps bring about the state of tyranny. Later, with the dawning of a new upside, a new hero, Luke Skywalker, guided by the Force, emerges to oppose him. These alternating change-of-fortune cycles are the engines that drive this whole process. You can tell which side of the cycle your main character is on by who is initiating the action. On the downside, evil is aggressive, and good is on the defensive. On the upside, it's the reverse -- good is aggressive and evil is on the defensive. Stories that end on the upside end happily. Stories that end on the downside invariably end tragically. The demise of the anti-hero is more often than not connected to his overreach, his uncontrolled passions. The misery the anti-hero creates finally becomes unbearable, and he/she has to be destroyed. A new hero with a vision has to take up the cause and go after them.

In truth, we owe a great debt to fictional villains and antiheroes. They create the problems the heroes have to solve and that creates the need for a story that reveals the inner workings of the dark side of our selves. Without Darth Vader and the Evil Emperor, there would be no Evil Empire, and there would be no need to save the galaxy. Without Hannibal Lecter and Buffalo Bill, there would be no problem for Clarice and the FBI to solve. And without those problems, there would be no revelations concerning the basic struggle between good and evil, and nothing to report in story. Without the actions of these negative forces, there would be very few stories to tell, and the forces that motivated Hitler and Jack the Ripper would remain forever a mystery to us. Coming to terms with the dark side in story helps us to come to terms with the dark side in ourselves.