



The Superhero and the Villain

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I started this essay before the arrival of COVID-19; now we are well into it. Some call the pandemic a “zombie apocalypse because it—and all pandemics—are invisible threats, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths. More than wars. The need for superheroes is great but what kind?

Originally this essay did not plan on covering the divine and/or mythical heroes, such as Zeus, Christ, Buddha, or the Hindu or Muslim pantheon. Nor those very important persons, who are guided by a moral compass to help others, such as those who work in the front lines on behalf of coronavirus patients. Nor those scientists racing to develop vaccines against diseases. These many men and women are truly the unnamed superheroes of our time.

Originally, this essay was intended to suggest how leaders of certain countries regard themselves as cultural superheroes. Case in point: President Trump portrayed as Rambo by his followers or Russian President Vladimir Putin posing bare-chested while fishing or North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un riding a fierce white steed before launching a rocket. Or the dictatorial leaders of Turkey and Brazil, the authoritarian rulers in China and Venezuela. While these men would like to subsume the hero archetype, they are but small tyrants, in comparison with the imaginative cultural heroes.

The superheroes of the comics, movies, and books which gross over millions of dollars, have been much derided by intellectuals. Author Joseph O’Neill writes in *The New Yorker*: “The elevation of fantasy as a way of investigating the human experience has been taken to a depressing extreme.” While it’s easy to dismiss superhero movies and comics as trash, to do so is simply wrong-headed and out of touch with the world’s common culture. Better

to ask what are the profound human needs reflected in the fascination with supermen or women? How do the superheroes of today evolve from archetypal myths? Are they of any use now?

To we who follow the path of Jungian psychology, we may start with Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey." Here are the basic steps:

The Ordinary World — We meet the potential hero in their milieu.

The Call of Adventure — The adventure starts. S/he can go forth on their own volition, be sent by another, or stumble upon an adventure.

Refusal of the Call — S/he is reluctant to go forward, hangs back.

Meeting the Mentor — S/he is met by a wise one, like Q in the James Bond series, who adds grit and confidence, and keeps the character from acting the fool.

Crossing the First Threshold — The hero commits to the journey, no turning back.

Tests, Allies, Enemies — The hero finds helpers and meets enemies.

Approach to the Inmost Cave — This is the moment of peak conflict within the hero's psyche.

Ordeal — The hero faces their biggest fear.

Reward (seizing the sword) — The hero succeeds.

The Road Back — The hero must deal with the consequences.

Resurrection — The hero's final test.

Return with the Elixir — Triumphant homecoming as a changed person.

Let's briefly consider some examples, two female and two male.

Wonder Woman emerged out of a mishmash of myths involving the Amazon Artemis and the gods of Olympus. In the beginning, she was sculpted out of clay and brought to life by the gods of Olympus.



Figure 1 Egyptian clay figure, more than 20,000 years old. ARAS record number 2Ab.006.

She is the daughter of Queen Hippolyta (and possibly Zeus); her official name is Princess Diana of Themyscira, but when in the civilian world she goes by Diana Prince. Her milieu is a remote island of peace-loving women. She often utters such oaths as “Great Aphrodite,” “Great Hera,” “Merciful Minerva,” “Suffering Sappho.”



Figure 2 *Wonder Woman: Gail Gadot portrays Wonder Woman in the film*

The Wonder Woman story was created by American psychologist and writer William Moulton Marston with the help of Marston’s wife, Elizabeth, and their life partner, Olive Byrne, and Margaret Sanger. The creators wanted to forge a feminist heroine who conquered with love, not fists. But as the tales progressed, her superpowers included the lasso of truth, a pair of bullet proof bracelets, and a

tiara that served as a dronelike projectile. Created during World War II, she was initially supposed to fight Axis forces and other supervillains. Bondage robbed her of her powers. Her Chinese mentor was named “I Ching”, who taught her martial arts and weapons skills (oddly, not divination). In her life with humans, she nursed the wounded.

Her biggest ordeal came when the villain Maxwell Lord attempted to mind-control Superman into killing Batman. She snapped his neck with her lasso. So traumatized by committing murder, she went into hiding for a year.

The public has neither seen the end of Wonder Woman nor the desire for love and peace to conquer villains. Year after year, people send cards at holidays saying “Peace” or hold protests with signs saying “Peace” as if it is an attainable ideal. President Trump could kill an Iranian general and in the next breath declare it was for “peace.” Even James Hillman wrote a book, theorizing *The Necessity of War*.

The fantasy is that peace and love are even possible. But during this COVID-19 virus, demonstrations of people helping people with love in their hearts are everywhere. No drama is complete, it seems, without the labor of love.

Another popular comic book and film superhero is Spider-Man, aka Peter Parker. Peter is an orphan who was raised by his aunt and uncle in New York City, after his parents were killed in a plane crash. He achieved his super-abilities after being bitten by a radioactive spider, which enabled him to shoot out webs that clung to surfaces. Reluctant to use his talents, he tried to hide them. As a typical teenager he suffered wounds of rejection, loneliness, inadequacy, despite being a science-whiz. One day he let a thief go unchallenged, a man who would

later kill his Uncle Ben. Thus, he badly failed his first test and belatedly learned a major lesson (the elixir). His uncle had taught him that “with great power comes great responsibility.”

In college his roommate, Harry Osborn, discovers his identity and becomes a formidable enemy; he kills Peter’s girlfriend Gwen Stacy. In the fictional series Peter faces many enemies over time and has female helpers. But he takes them on and emerges victorious. He is a popular, flawed, humble, sometimes bumbling hero who faces his responsibilities and wins.

He would make a good leader and/or wounded healer. Perhaps like our new president, Joe Biden, whose primary aim is to defeat the coronavirus.

Spider-Man’s story reminds me of Chretien de Troyes’ famous Arthurian Romance about Perceval in that the young boy who wants to be a knight meets the crippled Fisher King, but he fails to ask the question that would heal the injured king. Upon learning of his mistake, he vows to find the Holy Grail again and does so.



Figure 3 *Perceval after he attacked Sir Galahad without recognizing him. ARAS record number 5Fm.109.*

The story emphasizes the importance of humility, compassion, sympathy, and the quest for spirituality (This quality is not pursued by Spider-Man nor any superhero in comics or movies that I know of).

One might say that the Knights of the Round Table were the original superheroes.

The sequels in comics and movies are continuous, giving audiences a chance to feel satisfaction by proxy. People see examples of courage in the face of defeat, which perhaps inspires them to take bolder and more responsible action in their own lives. That goes for parents, teachers, bosses, and presidents.

In sci-fi and fantasy **fiction** we find numerous examples of superheroism, more or less based on human society. In the *Hunger Games* series, Suzanne Collins portrays a North American country (Panem) with a wealthy capital and poverty-stricken districts. Every year children are selected via lottery to participate in televised battles to the death. Survivors win money and food for their community. Katniss Everdeen volunteers to represent her District and participate in the ruthless games, thus answering the Call. Young man Peeta is also selected. They are mentored by a former survivor of the games who has since become an alcoholic from dealing with the traumatic aftermath. (Not unlike soldiers with post-traumatic stress syndrome). The sources for this story include the one in which Minos, King of Crete and ruler over the Aegean Sea, forces the King of Athens to sacrifice seven youths & maidens to be eaten by the minotaur. Brutal governments force people to fight to the death in gladiator games.

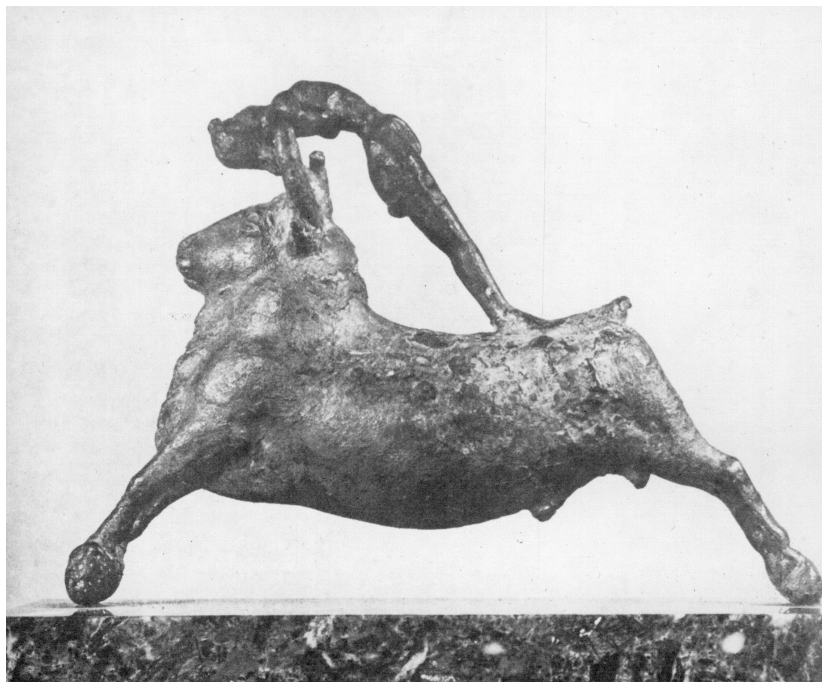


Figure 4 Bull with leaping youth or maiden as compelled by King Minos. ARAS record number 3Cd.072.

In the *Hunger Games*, the capital is headed by President Snow, who through reality TV reminds the public of his power, unforgiving severity, and punishment. Peeta is badly wounded and Katniss helps him. Echoes of Artemis can be seen in Katniss' weapon of choice being bow and arrow.



Figure 5 *The goddess Artemis takes aim. Record number 3Ja.130.*



Figure 6 *Katniss: Jennifer Lawrence portrays Katniss Everdeen in the film “Hunger Games”.*

Many trials ensue, as all the Districts join in rebellion against the capital. Katniss’ sister is killed but Katniss is later victorious over President Snow. She and Peeta eventually marry but she refuses to have children for a number of years, because of her own frightful and deprived childhood.

I am reminded of the state of our country, which like Panem, had a president who liked reality TV, the military, and befriending dictators. Those in his way were humiliated and banished. He got away with whatever he wanted, often to the point of lawlessness.

Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the best-selling books ever. The series began with *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, and was continued afterward between 1937 and 1949. Like the Wonder Woman story, it began as a

deep response to the war era—both the author’s experience in the First World War and the years of the Second. The chief antagonist is the Dark Lord Sauron, who created One Ring to rule over all of Middle-Earth, where the hobbits live. The main heroes are the Hobbits—Frodo Baggins, Sam, Merry, and Pippin—they are most like ordinary folk.

Whereas the Dark Lord is like Hitler (Stalin and all repressive dictators) and the plagues that decimate populations.

Long ago the Ring was severed from Sauron’s finger, causing Sauron to lose his physical form and the ring to be lost. Two thousand years later the ring is found by a “river-folk,” the froglike Gollum. Gollum loses “his precious” (ring/power) and Bilbo Baggins, Frodo’s cousin and guardian, finds it. Sauron takes on new shape and forms the realm of Mordor.

Do we not see countless examples of people for whom money is their “precious” and how they build fortresses around it?

Frodo Baggins inherits the Ring from Bilbo but at first refuses the Call to claim it until he meets with the wizard Gandalf, his mentor, who tells him to take it away from the Shire because it’s dangerous to keep that kind of power among the citizenry. With his gardener, Sam, and two cousins, Merry and Pippin, he sets out on his journey. In a battle Frodo is severely wounded but recovers in Rivendell. The group is met with many deceptions and attacks on the perilous journey. Frodo and Sam capture Gollum and force him to lead them to Sauron. Gollum betrays Frodo and Frodo falls prey to a spider’s sting. Believing Frodo to be dead, Sam takes the Ring and fights on alone, but Frodo lives. Frodo seizes the Ring back from Sam.



Figure 7 *Frodo reaches for the gold ring.*

Gollum reappears and bites Frodo's finger off with the Ring on it. Celebrating, he falls into the Fire of Mount Doom, taking the Ring with him. With the Ring destroyed, Sauron loses all power. The hobbits return home at the end of the War. Wounded in body and spirit from having borne the Ring so long, Frodo, along with Bilbo and Gandalf, sail over to the Undying Lands.

In summary, here are the steps in Frodo's epic journey. As in a dream, we can assume all characters are part of our own souls. At first Frodo humbly resists the Call. But Gandalf, his wise mentor, urges him on. Once committed, he is ineluctably drawn forward into conflicts— "things are now in motion that can't be undone." Gollum represents a primitive shadow side that impels him to keep seizing the Ring of Power (his "precious"). Despite all, eventually Gollum falls into the Fire (of transformation) and the Ring is destroyed. The consequences for

Frodo as he makes his way back home to the Shire are that he is broken by the effort to keep the Ring and destroy it. He in fact dies a hero as a result of the struggle as does Perceval in some versions of his story.

Compare an addict who feels great power when he's imbibed his drug of choice. He can do or say anything and feel on top of the world. He may ruin relationships and lose his job before recognizing how the drug has broken him. But if he lives soberly, he becomes a humbler man, possibly even a hero in his ordinary life.

Essential to the struggles of superheroes is the **villain**, the ultimate shadow force that eats away at the hero's inner wounds. Wonder Woman is too good, too idealistic, expecting too much of others. Peter Parker, Spider-Man, is rendered weak by his feelings of inferiority. Too trusting, he risks getting stabbed in the back by those who are jealous of him.

Katniss cannot take on the formidable President Snow without helpers. Even then she relies on a trick to deceive him. Recall how in the story of *Amor and Psyche* by Apuleius (as interpreted by Erich Neumann) one of Psyche's tasks is to get fleece from the fierce golden rams. These rams are like powerful generals, dictators, corporate bosses. One cannot approach them directly, only by subtle means. Psyche is advised to collect the fleece left on the reeds when the rams go down for water.



Figure 8 *The ram with golden fleece represents tough potency. Record number 2Av.053.*

Corporations are maskless “villains;” they have immense power over their employees; it’s difficult to contend with a bureaucratic villain, except through indirect means.

In *Lord of the Rings*, the Dark Lord Sauron is a dictator, like those who pop up everywhere in every age. Gollum, Sam, and Frodo all try to seize the power too but in the end anyone who tries to hold onto it is ruined.

The most famous villain is “the Joker.” NY Times journalist Ross Douthat declares: “Arthur Fleck, the Joker-to-be, is a damaged man-child with pre-sexual romantic fantasies of secret lineages and untapped greatness, whose destructive

arc is close to perpetual adolescence.” He’s a criminal mastermind, a psychopath, a trickster, a killer. The Joker has fought Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman. He regrets nothing and is not interested in rehabilitation.

Some audiences cheer him out of fascination as much as the hero. Representing fearlessness, irrationality, anarchy, and chaos, does he appeal because our inner selves harbor diabolical tendencies too?



Figure 9 *The face of the Gorgon. Record number 3Ja.029.1*

Our inner gorgons may appear as anger, revenge, cruelty, dishonesty, pettiness, judgementalism, physical or psychological domination/manipulation. Anyone

who's tried to write, play a sport, compete for a job knows the "devil" who shouts in the background, "you're no good" and "it's useless to try."

Jung, when a child, saw a turd on the steeple of the village church, and knew it was God's will that he see it. Ever after, he acknowledged the soul's struggle with evil (e.g. *Answer to Job*.)

Dictators may subject their citizenry to poverty and torture, but the Joker has no official power over people. He's an independent force from which we must fight to free ourselves. Artist-poet William Blake wrote that there is a place in us where the devil cannot reach. We must reach that place. For Jung it was love as expressed in 1st Corinthians 13.

Jungian analyst and author Murray Stein called this coronavirus pandemic a "world shadow" infecting all our psychic lives. "I see this shadow spreading over the globe like a solar eclipse. The sun is covered by the shadow of death....We are being asked to walk through the shadow of death. The question is: will we be able to use this experience for individuation? Or will it just pass like a bad dream of the night that when we awake we are happy to be free from?.... The challenge will be to learn from this experience and to carry the learning forward afterwards."

[Murray Stein interview with Dr. Joseph Henderson, [Chiron Publications.com/a-world-shadow-covid-19](https://www.chiron.com/a-world-shadow-covid-19); accessed 4.15.20]

While adolescents and adults may flock to superhero films, comics, and books out of love for fantasy and storytelling, we are currently living in a sci-fi world and have the opportunity for a vast transformation of consciousness on a general collective level. I daresay many of us have gone through dark nights of the soul during this pandemic and enforced shutdown. Death of loved ones, panic

attacks as we lie awake at night, mentally tormented in our isolation and loneliness, perhaps our own illness. Perhaps as Viktor Frankl, survivor of the concentration camps in which his wife, mother, and brother perished, we should not despair but ask “what do we owe the life that was given to us.”

We are all on a hero’s journey, we all face adversaries, and we all want insights into our difficulties. We identify with the heroes, and if we are smart, we also recognize the villains (and villainous thoughts). Let us emerge out of these dark times more conscious heroes, protecting our light.

Unless otherwise noted all images are from Aras Online. New York: The Archives for Research in Archetypal Symbolism; available from www.aras.org. Accessed 16 & 17 January 2020

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