

The Liminal Hero

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Abstract:

This critical autoethnography is about my encounters, throughout my life, with the “Western” (liminal) heroes and villains, who came to life on screens large and small. It is about the shifting visions of heroism, villainy, and violence in our culture. It is about walking the borderlands between all these territories. And it is about my own gradual awakening.

Keywords: hero | liminal | shadow | villain | Western

Article:

1966

When I was a kid, the world was lit up with fantasies large and small. Some of these came from the depths of my active imagination; others were fed to me by the purveyors of entertainment who inhabited that fabled fake western town, Hollywood.

When I was a kid, Saturday mornings were for cartoons and Westerns—and, sometimes, cartoon Westerns. What else would we do on a Saturday? My friends and I would walk—well, run, actually—down to the Western Union Office (where you could still, I kid you not, send a telegram), which also housed the town theater. We were always excited, knowing we would be treated to a couple of great *Looney Tunes* or *Merrie Melodies* classics, along with a double feature of cowboy movies. When I was a kid, all I needed was a single dollar, stuffed deep in my pocket. For that, I could buy myself a ticket, some popcorn, and a coke. The ticket, as I said, was for two full cartoons and two movies—a grade B Western, starring someone obscure, and the main “feature,” as often as not starring John Wayne.

When I was a kid, there were no commercials on the silver screen, and previews were clever but minimal. We were in for hours of pure entertainment, and if we were smart, or lucky, we had an extra quarter to buy a candy bar (10 cents), another Coke (10 cents), and a pack of gum (5 cents) so we could make it through the second feature.

Ah, those were the good old days!

And when Bugs Bunny was in a gunfight with Yosemite Sam in the cartoon short, the world was almost perfect! *Hare Trigger*, released in 1945, but oft rerun, was, simply, a classic of the genre.

[Image Omitted]

I distinctly remember going to see John Wayne's latest, *El Dorado*, which costarred Robert Mitchum and James Caan. But first, we got Bugs and Sam, squaring off for their shootout. . . We could hardly contain ourselves.

Meanwhile, television was dominated by serials like *Have Gun/Will Travel*, *Rawhide*, *Wagon Train*, *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, and *Bonanza*. After school, we would run home to watch reruns of our favorite shows.

[Image Omitted]

John Wayne was THE MAN, and we spent countless hours careening through the woods and fields in back of my house, waging battles on the western frontier—only to head back to the movies or the TV to get another dose of our heroes.

We never really reflected much on what we were watching, or on the subtleties of good and evil. We thought, firmly and innocently, that there were good guys and there were bad guys. Like our favorite shows, our worlds were in black and white.

[Image Omitted]

And the good guys won.

And the bad guys died.

But the sixties tumbled into the seventies, and we began to grow up a bit. We began to see shades and subtleties. We began to see in color. We began to see that our loyalties could be shifted, if the formula was right.

And a little critical consciousness began to stir. . .

The Liminal Hero

We began to identify with the bad guys—or, at least, with the semigood guys. Of course, all the characters we had rooted for had flaws. But we had always overlooked those. As long as they had enough swagger, we were fine. Besides, the bad guys were really, really bad.

Or so we thought.

One day, we found ourselves rooting for Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, who were, after all, bank robbers—and thus, ostensibly, at least, the “bad guys.” But. . .they were, really, good guys. Or, at least, semigood guys. And that guy chasing them—well, he was darkly mysterious and ruthless. He carried the qualities of our earlier villains. The tables had turned.

By the late 1970s, the cowboys of my youth had rocketed into outer space. Butch and Sundance gave way to Luke and Han. Our heroes were interplanetary. They still walked with a swagger and carried guns—well, blasters, anyway, or light sabers, or both—in holsters on their hips. Let’s face it. Han Solo slowly talking, buying time while unbuckling his blaster from its holster, under the table, then shooting Greedo, the bounty hunter, is an old west saloon poker game if I ever saw one.

Recently, the tables have turned once again, as outer space has begun to invade the Old West. Aliens have arrived, and it’s the job of a swaggering, amnesiac cowboy to take them down!

[Image Omitted]

Why were we, mostly young men (now a group of old and semiold men), so fascinated with these westerns? What were we seeking? And what did these films satisfy in us? What kind of longing did they answer?

As I said, the motifs were simple, straightforward even, at least to our unsophisticated, entertainment seeking minds. Of course, life in the Old West (and later in the “final frontier” of space) was filled with adventure. A hero’s call, a series of obstacles, challenges faced with “manly” nerves of steel, a little flirtation with a lady, villains afoot, helpers who appear out of nowhere, a bit of humor, a bit of swagger, a mishap or two, and some sort of miraculous victory against the odds—these were the essential elements.

But why did these adventure stories call us? What was it in us that made us need them, love them, follow them, and join them? And what was it about them that we longed for, or missed, or hoped?

In this short article, I want to focus my lens on one character, played by three men in three different films. I call him the liminal hero. He is the outsider, the loner who rides in from somewhere else, or who shows up out of the blue, or who lives out beyond the edge of town. He is the antihero. He embodies *some* heroic qualities (like courage under fire) while still carrying qualities that are antithetical to the presumed purity of mission embodied by the classic hero figure. He is often a rogue, a rascal, and a rebel. He is confident to a fault, cocky even. He does not take orders from anyone—even a qualified leader. He is brash and headstrong and, ultimately, courageous, but often very close to foolhardy.

He is a both/and, neither/nor, betwixt/between character.

He is both hero and villain.

And yet, he is neither all the way good nor all the way bad.

He is, as they say, an “unresolved” character.

He lives on the border, between town and wilderness, between civilized and uncivilized, between compassionate and ruthless, between good and evil.

He is both foil and helper to the main hero, balancing out the “pure” good qualities of that character with the more unsavory characteristics of the human shadow (Jung, 1959, 1964, 1989). But, of course, he needs the good guy as much as the good guy needs him. The civilizing influence of the good guy saves him from falling into reckless and vicious brutality, allowing him to use his violent tendencies with restraint, and really only when necessary. His past is often shrouded in mystery; we know little of him until he shows up, but we quickly discover that he is the sort of man who does not take shit from anyone. Sometimes there are indications (both covert and overt) that his past was less than savory, or even tragic.

Sometimes, the suggestion is that this current venture is his (last) shot at redemption.

Usually, that suggestion is correct.

He is Paladin, he is Shane, he is Lucas McCain. He is the Sundance Kid, he is Rooster Cogburn, he is J.P. He is every character ever played by Clint Eastwood. He is Tom Doniphon (John Wayne); he is Han Solo (Harrison Ford); he is Jake Lonergan (Daniel Craig).

Of course, most of the really bad guys are, in fact, really, really bad. They are caricatures—brutal, mean, ruthless, vicious, wild, and arbitrary in their hatred. They may be cunning, but they are not always the sharpest tools in the shed. They seem to carry little, if any conscience. They do not hesitate to kill. They are playground bullies writ large, and almost immediately, we, the audience, begin rooting for them to get their comeuppance.

Liberty Valance, after all, *needs* to be shot.

Meanwhile, the classic hero is pure, innocent, naive. The hero has a clear conscience, because he really has not done much yet in his life. He is Luke Skywalker, heading out on an adventure, to help a princess, not knowing where it will lead him. He is Ransom Stoddard, who naively thinks he can graft the civilized ways of the East (law and order) onto the Wild West. He feels a call to action, to be sure, but he is green. He has no real experience with the brutal realities of the wild. Without help, he would not survive the journey to his enlightenment.

In the classic western iconography, the good guy wears a white hat, the bad guy wears a black one. As critical scholars, we can question that symbolism all day long. But what interests me is the character in the gray hat. I have always been drawn to the liminal characters, the ones who live “betwixt and between”—in this case, on the edge, in the borderlands between the old “uncivilized” or “untamed” west, and the new order. Of course, this new “order” is really the colonial hegemony of the European invasion, itself a brutal, vicious, and greedy enterprise. But we shall let that slide for a moment, in our quest to “get” the semigood guy, who, as I said, is a

liminal character, a mediator between good and evil, between civilization and wilderness, between the Dionysian chaos of the wild west and the Apollonian order of the new world.

[Image Omitted]

What really fascinates me—has always captured some visceral longing in me—is the “bad boy” or “badass” quality embodied by this antihero character. His swagger always spoke to me. I think it was the attitude.

Man, *these* guys had ATTITUDE!

This antihero, this semigood liminal character, walked in a swirling cloud of mystery, sparked some dark energy, and lived on the edge. He was a bad–good, or good–bad guy. He was, shall we say, complicated. He seemed, always, to be one who had, at one time in his life, crossed over into the shadow.

He knew both worlds, and he spoke the language of both.

There are hints, signs, clues that his past haunts him— that perhaps he fell, or was driven by circumstances—into all out brutality and violence and ruthlessness. It seems that he has, perhaps, emerged from that experience a changed man. But he struggles with his demons. He is drawn to the good in the good guy, even while fully understanding, at a visceral level, the bad in the bad guy.

Thus, he doesn’t just immediately kill the bad guy. That kind of ruthlessness might cause him to tumble into darkness—again. But he also doesn’t lean all the way into goodness. He walks the borderlands. In the end, however, he must choose. In the end, of course, he chooses good. He chooses justice. He chooses to save the community, even while sacrificing himself. In the end, he often makes the ultimate sacrifice to protect those less suited to stand against the brutality of evil.

Anyway, this character always held some kind of mysterious power over me, in ways that other characters did not. The noble idealism and purity of an Obi Wan Kenobi or a Luke Skywalker or a Ransom Stoddard were, quite simply, too bland, too much like my own experiences to be even a little bit intriguing. Give me a Han Solo, with his cocky brashness, or a Jake Lonergan, with his amnesiac intensity, any day.

This was *fantasy*, after all.

We wanted to be like someone *else*.

Besides, every kid who grew up in my era fantasized about kicking some ass on the playground bully one day.

Liminal Transformation

In 1962, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* shot onto the silver screen. And there was the “pilgrim” named Ransom Stoddard, the “civilized” (read “domesticated”) man, played by Jimmy

Stewart, standing in the kitchen doorway, wearing an apron, while the evil, brutal, and vicious drunken scoundrel, Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) humiliates him. And in steps Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), a man who lives alone on the edge of town, a man who does not brook disrespect, and the only man who, mysteriously, Liberty Valance fears.

[Image Omitted]

Throughout the film, Doniphon shadows Stoddard, protecting him as he begins to emerge as the new, reluctant, and civilized hero who will bring order and civility to this wild western town. Along the way, we learn that Doniphon has suffered great loss, that he has lost something precious to him—lost it at the hands of the wild, brutal, savage, mercenary, and evil men who exploit the weak in this frontier. He takes Stoddard under his care, so to speak, attempting to teach him how to be a man in a world where men must stand tall in the face of adversity. Stoddard, an educated man of the East, is “green” and clean—a Pilgrim, as Doniphon puts it, seeking a Promised Land. He needs Doniphon’s help, to gain the kind of courage he’ll need to transform this wilderness into Paradise. But he also brings something to the table—a gentle, tender kindness, and a different kind of courage—the courage of conviction. He is convinced that, in the end, civilization will win the frontier.

As Stoddard’s frontier courage is gradually built up, the ultimate and inevitable confrontation with the bully, of course, does occur. In the classic and climactic shootout scene, Stoddard stands tall, though shakily, and embraces his fate. He must, in the end, stand up for himself. Of course, as a civilized man, he is not a fighter. He doesn’t stand a chance against the ruthlessness and skill of a true killer like Liberty Valance.

But with the help of a mysterious stranger, standing in the shadow, anything is possible.

And a legend is born.

As the 1960s faded into the late 1970s, and our nation grappled with the aftermath of the Viet Nam War, Watergate, and the energy crisis—and the Technological Age, grafted onto the Age of Anxiety, came into fruition—we needed to redefine, or at least refine, our Western heroes. What we really needed, after the unrest of the sixties, and the horrid musical/fashion disruption of disco/polyester, was, of course, the Space Cowboy.

Luke Skywalker, having “accidentally” bumped into Obi Wan Kenobi, with the help of a couple of wayward droids, determines, after a poignant moment when he discovers that Storm Troopers have slaughtered his adoptive parents, that he will follow Obi Wan and “learn the ways of the force.” But to accomplish this mission, they have to get off the planet. Enter Han Solo, swashbuckling Space Pirate, the good–bad rogue whose ship, the Millennium Falcon, is the “fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy.”

Han, like his counterparts in the old Westerns, is a mysterious character, an outsider, a gambler, and a smuggler who apparently has a checkered past. He has a bounty on his head. Of course he will help the kid and the old man—for the right price. And, for good measure, he has a large and powerful sidekick, the Wookie Chewbacca. As their adventure unfolds, they rescue a princess,

battle Storm Troopers, get trapped in a garbage crusher, and confront the ultimate villain, Darth Vader. And along the way, Han grows fond of the kid, and the princess, but he still holds some cards in his pocket, not fully revealing his motives or intent.

Luke, meanwhile, does study the ways of the Force, and so prepares himself for the final climactic battle, in which he will fly a fighter onto the Empire's Star Destroyer, and hope to make a shot into an opening, a ventilation shaft, which serves as the proverbial chink in the Evil Empire's armor, so to speak. But on his approach, Luke's mission bears the ultimate threat, directly from the ultimate bad guy—none other than the menacing Darth Vader, who is flying close on his tail. Vader has Luke squarely in his sights. It looks like all is lost.

But, out of nowhere, out of the darkness of space, that mysterious stranger appears and rescues Luke, who, in turn, saves the day.

In 2011, Universal Pictures released *Cowboys & Aliens*, starring Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford. This time, the bad guys are brutal, murderous, and just hell-bent on destruction. This time, the bad guys are alien invaders, and it's up to the mysterious amnesiac stranger, played by Craig, to save the townspeople. The stranger just shows up one day. And he has prodigious fighting skills. But, of course, the cowboys are outgunned by the aliens, and thus the stranger must use his wits to outwit them. . .

And so, out of nowhere . . . this mysterious stranger, the good–bad tough guy, appears . . .and saves the day.

The aliens are vanquished.

The community is saved.

And so it goes.

[Image Omitted]

Coda

Who is this mysterious stranger?

He is the liminal man.

He lives in the between-place. Between the “wild” and the “civilized.” Between memory and forgetting. Between life and death. Between good and evil. He patrols the borderlands. He is strong, bold—a man of action. But he is also the wounded warrior. He is both—hero and antihero. He is haunted by what he remembers, and by what he does not. He seeks redemption, and he may only get one shot. His weakness—his point of vulnerability, his wound—could be his undoing. His wound may seize him, may yet destroy him. But he will fight to the death to stitch the wound, to close it. He will be scarred, but he will survive. He is the liminal man.

Again: Who is this mysterious stranger, this liminal hero?

What is his origin?

Viewed one way, he is Hermes.

Hermes, the Greek god of liminality.

Hermes, the child/adult, the God of betwixt and between.

Hermes, the messenger.

Hermes, the trickster.

Hermes, the thief (Brown, 1990; Jung & Kerenyi, 1949).

Hermes, the celebrated, the feared, the stealthy, the wingfooted: He who brings aid (and news) to those who live “inside” society.

Hermes, the translator, father of hermeneutics.

Hermes, the magician, who brings to consciousness the resources necessary to resolve conflicts.

Hermes, the traveler, who helps mere humans cross between worlds—between heaven and earth, between earth and the underworld.

Hermes, the creator and the destroyer.

Hermes, who teaches us what we need to know about ourselves.

An intriguing feature of this particular hermeneutic archetype, this liminal hero: This stranger just “shows up,” seemingly out of nowhere. Where he comes from is always shrouded in mystery. There are hints and signs—memory flashes, fragments of stories, little innuendoes—that his past is troubled, that he has emerged from darkness, from death, and from the underworld.

Perhaps his origin is really found in the dark (anti)hero that lives in us all. Perhaps he lives in—and emerges from—the human shadow, from that part of us we don’t like to face, but which we *must* face, if we are to become whole (Jung, 1989; Zweig & Abrams, 1991).

And so, this liminal hero, this character from “out there” (or “in there”) comes to visit us. Hermes, as I said, just shows up, seemingly out of nowhere. And, in so doing, he offers us his gifts. His gifts are gifts of raw ruthlessness, tempered by human compassion. His gifts are in the realm of trickery, and consist of problem solving, improvisation, and sleight of hand skills. His gifts are grit and determination and courage. His gifts are from the human shadow, even as he makes his way into the light of daily encounter.

He offers his gifts. And in the offering, and the acceptance, of these gifts, we, in turn, become something new—fully integrated humans, with all those both/and qualities needed to survive on this earth. In the end, we are all good/bad, courageous/terrified, compassionate/ruthless, hero/villain, shadow/substance, neither/nor, both/and.

I am, you are, we are . . . Paladin, and Shane, and Lucas McCain. We are the Sundance Kid, Rooster Cogburn, J.P. We are every character ever played by Clint Eastwood. We are Tom Doniphon, we are Han Solo, we are Jake Lonergan.

We are all liminal heroes.

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Bio

Christopher N. Poulos is an associate professor and head of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. An ethnographer and philosopher of communication, he teaches courses in relational and family communication, ethnography, dialogue, and film. His book, *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy*, was published by Left Coast Press in 2009. His work has appeared in *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Communication Theory*, *Southern Communication Journal*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Communication Research*, and in several edited books.