

Why is it important to see heroes fail?

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A hero is often defined by their positive qualities: nobility, honour, courage, victory. The list goes on. For years, films have often portrayed heroes as such, often not deviating from the norm. They portray heroes as flawless figures, or draw attention away from their flaws.

If a hero has no flaws, or never fails, the character can become boring. If there is no external or internal obstacle to overcome, they can stagnate. Bringing a character to their lowest point, such as by having them lose all they care about, or resign themselves to a life of isolation, can prove to introduce a more interesting and “human” version of a protagonist. Be it through their own mistakes, or due to misfortune, having a hero work their way back up to being a hero can sometimes feel like more of a victory than a flawless hero saving the day once again.

So, why is it important for a film to show a hero fail?

The culture surrounding heroes is, arguably, at an all-time high. With Marvel pumping out three superhero films a year, and children and adults alike engrossed in a world of heroes, the idea of a hero is as prevalent now as it's always been. Kids will always have heroes to look up to.

My generation had heroes like *Spider-Man* and *Harry Potter* at the fore-front of the big screen. Through my dad, I was introduced to the likes of *Indiana Jones*, Christopher Reeve's *Superman* films, and most importantly in my life, *Star Wars*. During my childhood years, the Star Wars prequel trilogy films were released. Admittedly, while these were my entry into the Star Wars universe, my dad made sure I watched the original trilogy alongside the newer films.

In terms of how heroes are presented, the first Star Wars, now referred to as “A New Hope”, more or less follows the exact structure of the hero's journey, and falls in line with the conventions of fantasy film.

We're introduced to Luke Skywalker, the story's hero, in his “Ordinary World”. He then receives his “call to adventure”, then meets “the mentor”, and refuses the call. Shortly afterwards, his ordinary world is tipped upside down, and he accepts the call to adventure. He soon meets his enemies, or in this case, the broader enemy of the Empire, meets his allies, and faces a test. Luke prepares himself for the upcoming changes to his world, in this case, the acceptance of the Force and his path to becoming a Jedi Knight. His adventure through the Death Star to save Leia serves as the death of his former self and the birth of the new, heroic Luke Skywalker. He then suffers the consequences of his journey through the death of his mentor, Obi-Wan. On the road back, Luke finds himself reignited, which moves forward to the “last-minute danger”, being the assault on the Death Star. Finally, this culminates in Luke's “mastery of the problem”, where he uses the force and his mentor's guidance to destroy the Death Star, go home, and be celebrated for the hero he is.

With the first film having such a light-hearted, up-beat ending and overall tone to it, you can imagine my reaction as a child when watching *Empire Strikes Back*. The film carries the sombre tone throughout, and ends on a dark, yet hopeful note. Luke fails throughout the film, culminating with him losing a hand, as well as being brought face to face with the truth that the man who killed his mentor, and who he thought killed his father, was in fact his father. His character is deconstructed throughout the course of the film and brought to the lowest point. He failed to save his friends, failed to complete his training, and failed in his fight against Vader. As a child, this mortified me. The

image of Han Solo frozen in carbonite, or Luke's hand and lightsaber flying tragically down the pit... for a long time, Empire was my least favourite of the original trilogy.

Empire was essential in normalising mine and the audiences' perception towards watching their heroes fail. It is revered as a bold new step for the space opera genre, and film as a whole. It toyed with what was expected from a kid-friendly action film, breaking the conventions commonly associated with the genre, and helped the notion that the fact that protagonists of a film can fail become culturally accepted.

However, to hark back to an earlier point, that does not mean that Empire neglects the concept of the hero's journey entirely. Elements of the theory are still present within the story and characters in Empire. Even if the journey is not in sequence or completed, Empire still conveys archetypes and conventions expected within a hero's journey. However, it was an important step into helping audiences accept that their heroes could fail. Other films, such as *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* helped with this, and pushed the conventions of a hero beyond what was expected.

In terms of Empire's importance for showing a hero fail, the film means a lot to myself personally. It was the first time I'd watched something that didn't end with the heroes succeeding. It helped me understand that it was alright to fail, and that doing what you consider to be the right thing and going against what you're told to do can be a positive character quality.

A more contemporary example of a film featuring a tragic hero is *Logan*, a film which features a "former" hero who chooses to waste away and wait for death. Throughout, Logan himself doesn't necessarily fail in his goals, but rather is the perfect representation of the completion of the hero's journey, despite his own personal losses. He spends the first third of the film outright refusing the call to action, and only reluctantly accepts it when he is forced out of his home. On reluctant heroes, Jacob Nordby said;

"They rise to the occasion, and although they are often beaten and bloody by the story's end, they avenge a wrong or vanquish a foe. They often deal with inner demons, weaknesses, and doubts about whether or not they will succeed in their mission. Their misgivings, insecurities, and general ordinariness allow us to identify with them and believe that perhaps we, too, might be heroes-in-waiting." (Nordby, 2016)

Reluctant heroes are an important representation in film as they allow the audience to see a side of a hero one would normally not see. In the case of Logan, Logan's reluctance is representative of his past failures, and by refusing the call to action, he is arguably failing all over again. Though he ultimately succeeds in his overall goal, Logan fails repeatedly throughout his journey. He fails at his primary goal of keeping his mentor, Xavier, safe. He fails to take Laura to North Dakota himself, with Laura doing most of the work. And finally, inarguably his most triumphant moment in the whole film, while he does save the group of children, he fails at taking them to their final destination. Logan arguably also fails as a father, not appreciating Laura until his dying moment. The film reaches its conclusion with Logan's death, leaving a feeling of both success and failure hanging over the ending.

Like Empire, Logan ends with an overwhelming sense of hope. The antagonists of the story are all dead, and Logan himself has inspired the next generation of heroes.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi features another example of this, Luke's character arc in the film being centred around his past failures. He was unable to train his nephew or protect him from the dark side, wasn't there to save his friends and stands by as they die now, and he failed the galaxy by exiling himself. His past failures make his triumphant return even more satisfying, helping inspire

hope in the Resistance, and living up to his legend. His failures help exemplify his transition into becoming a hero. Luke failing helps ground a character who has held a cultural dominance for over forty years as being unflawed and wholly perfect. The character becomes realistic again, and as such, becomes relatable.

From Luke Skywalker to Batman, John McClane to Indiana Jones, films need heroes. Film audiences need heroes. And it's important to show heroes fail. To remind people that even if you fail, you can become a hero. However, it isn't important to show that heroes can fail for the sake of seeing them fail. Showing a hero fail is only important if you show how they build themselves back up, to watch them succeed. To inspire someone, to find peace, or a purpose. To sacrifice themselves for something they consider worth saving. To fight against all odds when there is no other way. To show that failure isn't the end, but the beginning of a path towards something greater. And while you might not be trying to save the whole galaxy, or facing down some super-powered being, you too can make a difference, despite any setback.

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