

THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE ANTIHERO
For HWA Conference 2019
The "Good Bad Man"—The American West's
Contribution to Antihero History

Let me but remark that the Evil One, with his single passion of satanic pride for the only motive, is yet, on a larger, more modern view, allowed to be not quite so black as he used to be painted. With what greater latitude, then, should we appraise the exact shade of mere mortal man, with his many passions and his miserable ingenuity in error, always dazzled by the base glitter of mixed motives, everlastingly betrayed by a short-sighted wisdom.

—Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

In the final episode of the award-winning TV series *Breaking Bad*, Walter White finds himself trapped in a snowbound car while police hunt for him just outside. Hoping to escape arrest, he prays to whatever God he thinks might listen: “Just let me get home. ... Just let me get home. ...”

With these words, mild-mannered Walt—aka the meth lord Heisenberg—reaches back in thematic time, echoing the same sentiment the Greek hero Odysseus embraced in his famous ten-year journey from the ruins of Troy to his palace in Ithaca.

But Walt and Odysseus share much more than a desire to get back home.

In the psychological complexity and moral tension they exhibit, they stand among a variety of avatars with names like Lazarillo de Tormes, Moll Flanders, Adolph Verloc, Humbert Humbert, Augie March, John Yossarian, Randle Patrick McMurphy.

There’s no one set of pat traits that categorically encompasses all of these characters, though the epithet *antihero* routinely gets slapped beside their names.

But *antihero* defines them by negation, emphasizing what they're typically not—altruistic, honest, idealistic, courageous—which does nothing to explain their appeal. Their attractiveness to readers and viewers is not just enduring but, judging from recent trends in television, inexhaustible. For a mere handful of examples, consider Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*), Patty Hewes (*Damages*), Don Draper (*Mad Men*), Nancy Botwin (*Weeds*), “Red” Reddington (*Blacklist*)—and, of course, Walter “Heisenberg” White.

What *antihero* does get at, though somewhat indirectly, is the fundamental antagonism at the core of this character's existence, the wily rebellion, the refusal to bow. And that helps explain the timing of when these characters have often emerged, for they typically blossom in times of reaction to cherished ideals that, for one reason or another, seem to have grown outdated, if not rancid.

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Some sources point to the disfigured, vulgar, dimwitted Greek soldier Thersites as the true progenitor of the antihero. But he plays such a minor role in the *Iliad* that he seems more a suggestion than a model. Appearing in just one scene, he dares speak “truth to power,” condemning Agamemnon as cowardly and motivated solely by greed (something all the other warriors are thinking but refuse to say out loud).

In contrast, the warrior Odysseus, who rebukes Thersites and beats him until he weeps from shame, possesses enough heft and complexity to present something truly unique, even revolutionary.

This is especially clear when he's compared to the other great warriors in the Achaean camp: Achilles and Ajax.

The *Iliad* is a transitional narrative, dramatizing the eclipse of an era championing heroic values to one prizing rhetorical ones. Achilles and Ajax, despite their limitations—volatility of temper and vanity in the first case, a certain beef-wittedness (Shakespeare’s term) in the other—both represent the courage and ambition for glory typical of the great hero. And both die before the walls of Troy: Achilles in battle, Ajax by his own hand. Their deaths signal an end to the heroic age.

From that point on, Odysseus commands the stage, and he is not just a great warrior. He is also the consummate deceiver, a descendent of both the Olympian trickster Hermes and the thief Autolycus. Known as much for his cunning as his courage, he performs a great many feats of valor but also feigns lunacy in an attempt to avoid combat, corrupts Achilles’s son Neoptolemus by coaching him to lie, deceives Clytemnestra about the death of her daughter, Iphigenia, and famously enjoys the sexual hospitality of Circe and Calypso while dallying on his return to his devotedly faithful wife, Penelope.

It’s this essentially dual nature—a warrior’s warrior on the one hand, a shamelessly amoral opportunist on the other—that keys our fascination. We’re never sure exactly which Odysseus will appear at any given moment, and this creates a kind of character-driven suspense unrivaled in ancient Western literature. The doubt of Moses, the ignorance of Oedipus, the licentiousness of David don’t even come close—underscoring the distinction between a heroic flaw and a psyche at war with itself.

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As it turned out, there would be no hero like Odysseus in Western literature for centuries. His disappearance is largely due to the fact the Romans despised him—he violated their sense of duty, their belief in the preeminence of honor.

This is one reason the Romans traced the founding of Rome to the hero **Aeneas**, preferring the defeated Trojans to the victorious Greeks, whom they considered immoral and corrupt. Virgil in particular seldom referred to Ulysses, the Roman name for Odysseus, without the adjectives *cruel* or *deceitful*.

Glimpses of Odysseus could still be found in the satires and comedies of Menander, **Plautus and Terence**, as well as bawdy Milesian tales such as *The Golden Ass* by **Apuleius** and **Petronius's *Satyricon***. But these representations were largely satiric and lacked the epic stature of the warrior Odysseus.

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The chivalric romance of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance was largely an aristocratic form, and as the Golden Age of Hapsburg Spain began to curdle into corruption and decline, the fantastic adventures of the intrepid **knight errant** were losing a bit of their sheen.

An entirely new form of novel emerged on the **Iberian Peninsula**, based in part on the Arabic genre of *maqamat* and Slavic folktales, such as those featuring **Till Eulenspiegel**, imported from Germany under Charles V. The first novel of this kind appeared in 1554 and was titled ***The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of his Fortunes and Adversities***.

Due to its scandalous subject matter and blasphemous disregard for the Church, it was banned almost everywhere, and the identity of its author remains in debate. And yet it proved not just wildly popular but profoundly influential.

Instead of steadfast knights, these novels featured lovable, wandering rogues and thieves, known as *picaros*, and the stories recounted their morally questionable but never explicitly wicked exploits.

Principally, the stories concerned the plight of the poor, forced to live by their wits in a patently corrupt and hypocritical society. There was often an element of redemptive conversion near the end, despite the blatant attacks on priests and other clerical officials.

In short, we have a return to something like the dual nature of Odysseus, with both virtue and vice residing in the hero's heart, enjoying a tricky equilibrium.

The appeal of the picaresque novel spread across Europe and took solid root in England, where its popularity survived into the nineteenth century in novels featuring **rakish** heroes such as **Tom Jones, Moll Flanders, Barry Lyndon, and Martin Chuzzlewit.**

None of these protagonists were irredeemably evil or, in the end, completely reformed, though the good in their natures tended to overshadow the bad. Rather, all possessed a duality of character forged by the misfortunes of poverty and birth in a society premised on the crowing of virtue amid the worship of privilege and greed.

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As the popularity of the English picaresque novel was cresting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, another type of hero was taking shape. Like the *picaro* and the wanderer, she was a social outsider, but it was temperament rather than class that defined her **iconoclasm.**

A kind of orphan child of Romanticism, he possessed a brooding intelligence that defied the coal-stoked ambition and pompous vulgarity of the Industrial Revolution.

With Hamlet as forebear and Lord Byron as mastermind, this hero gave us the Gothic novel and found himself incarnated in characters as diverse as the Brönte sisters' Heathcliff and Rochester, Victor Hugo's Quasimodo, Alexandre Dumas's Count of Monte Cristo, and the original vampire, Lord Ruthven.

Byron, describing the pirate hero of his verse tale *The Corsair*, provided a kind of template:

He knew himself a villain—but he deem'd
The rest no better than the thing he seem'd;
And scorn'd the best as hypocrites

Or, as Lady Caroline Lamb said of Byron himself, this new breed of icon was “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.”

Again, the theme of defining a new, more authentic morality in a society rotten with falsity found voice in a hero neither evil nor virtuous, but revealing instead an uneasy marriage of both.

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Europe was hardly alone in this reconsideration of what it meant to be heroic. The American West, especially in the hands of sensationalist newspapermen and hagiographic dime novelists, presented a multitude of characters, some working on the side of the law, others conspicuous outlaws, many others occupying a curious middle ground, that were ultimately epitomized in what became known as the “Good Bad Man.”

This new breed of hero was born in the shadow of the Civil War, which exhibited a form of organized butchery never before seen in warfare. He was forged as well in encounters with Native Americans, whose warrior values and imperviousness to suffering seemed “savage” to Christian settlers. Finally, he was set loose in the vast and virtually

lawless frontier which provided safe haven for every variety of desperado, hooligan, renegade, and hellhound imaginable. Given this background, he often found it necessary to be as evil as the day required, given who he had to deal with. It wasn't enough to be upstanding, courageous, and strong. Without a certain devilish cunning, mercenary greed, and willing embrace of violence, this outlaw-lawman couldn't hope to tame the territories in his charge.

None, however, more captures the imagination or better personifies the unique American embodiment of the antihero than **John Henry "Doc" Holliday**.

Although **Wyatt Earp** defended him to his dying days as one of the most loyal and courageous men he ever knew, Doc Holliday had few other friends. The wives of both Wyatt and Virgil Earp detested him, and **Bat Masterson** described him in largely unflattering terms, saying he had "a mean disposition and an ungovernable temper, and under the influence of alcohol was a most dangerous man." Doc's reputation was so profoundly negative in Tombstone, it was used against the Earps in the trial following the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. But none of the negativity could quite dispel the lingering fascination with an intelligent, well-spoken, highly literate Southerner trained as a dentist who became not just a successful gambler but one of the most feared men in the West.

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As the foregoing suggests, this maturation in the tradition of the antihero paralleled a similar development in the depiction of the hero, who evolved from the incorruptible vessel of virtue found in the chivalric romance to a more nuanced, complicated, flawed human being.

In truth, this hero had been with us since the time of Greek tragedy, though Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, emphasized that the hero should err not through some fault of character but a mistake in judgment. Even so, his term for this error, *hamartia*, gradually came to be understood as the hero's tragic flaw.

And as the English novel of self-improvement gained popularity in the early nineteenth century, heroes became capable of positive change. They were not prisoners of their flaws but, through insight, were capable of overcoming these limitations. In fact, the very definition of hero changed to incorporate this notion of inherent flaw, willful insight, and deliberate self-transformation.

But the skepticism that has traditionally given rise to the antihero remained unconvinced that such positive change was always possible—or desirable.

Even as Freud's development of psychoanalysis hinted at the potential for curative insight, his concept of the Unconscious so often resembled a monstrous darkness that it often seemed the best that even the sanest mind could hope for was an uneasy truce with its demons. And creativity in particular seemed to require a willingness to risk imbalance.

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The vision of the divided hero, a person equally capable of infamy or greatness, with a moral compass never pointing squarely toward true north, continued to haunt the Western tradition, especially amid the feverish partisanship and ideological rigidity that characterized the twentieth century, with its seemingly constant warfare and its mastery of propaganda.

The concept of nobility and the heroes who embody it took a serious hit in the trenches of the World War I, and the carpet-bombed cities of World War II. The **Holocaust** and **Hiroshima** redefined our understanding of Hell and the kind of soul that might inhabit it.

Slaughter and butchery are not ennobling, especially when systematized. A sense of the random, the meaningless, infected the Western psyche. The abyss wasn't just waiting. The abyss was us.

As World War II drew to a close, and for a decade afterward, we saw a flood of B movies and paperbacks characterized as noir, with morally compromised heroes straining to grab that alluring, illusive brass ring.

The pushback was both fierce and fun—**Joseph McCarthy**, **Joe Friday**, **Doris Day**, **Technicolor**, **CinemaScope**—and so the antihero remained a kind of cultural shadow. But he reemerged with a vengeance in the sixties as the Vietnam conflict wound down, putting the lie to the jingoistic sloganeering of the Cold War, appearing in such neo-noir classics as ***Cool Hand Luke***, ***Bonnie and Clyde***, ***Mean Streets***, ***Midnight Cowboy***, ***Catch-22***, ***The Killing of a Chinese Bookie***, ***Dog Day Afternoon***, ***Taxi Driver***, ***The Godfather***, ***Chinatown***.

But the forces of idealism, conformity, and normalcy struck back again, rising up against the dark tide. We got box office blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. We got Ronald Reagan's "**M**orning in America".

It didn't take long for this largely contrived optimism to grow stale. The nineties arrived, and as novelist **Dennis Lehane** has remarked, trying to describe the reasons behind but another resurgence of noir—which he considers **working-class** tragedy—it

was clear the so-called prosperity of the Clinton economy and the dot-com boom was a massive house of cards.

There seemed to be a lot of money flying around, but it was landing less and less in middle-class neighborhoods, never mind the working class, let alone the poor. And writers, as always, responded to the Great Lie with characters who saw through the hypocrisy and refused to play nice.

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It's tempting to believe that the proliferation of antiheroes on cable TV since the appearance of *The Sopranos* in 1999 is a continuation of the neo-noir resurgence of the preceding decade. The housing collapse revealed the Bush economy to be an even worse pump-and-dump scheme than the tech stock disaster that plagued the previous regime.

Call it the "New American Anxiety," the recognition that something's gone horribly wrong and won't get better, especially as long as politics continues its degeneration into what **Henry Adams** blithely described as the systematic organization of hatreds.

The antihero seems perfectly suited to the time. Dread smothered all hope while the chattering class indulges in a sanctimonious orgy of blame. The Socratic ideal of the just man, who takes satisfaction solely from his own virtue, seems not **only** ancient but quaint.

But there's another, far more practical reason for the antihero's newfound popularity. In an era of long-format storylines, where a show's narrative arc doesn't stop at the end of this week's episode—it continues not just to the end of the season but on to

the next and the season after that—the psychological depth and moral complexity of the antihero provide a greater range of dramatic action than a hero constrained by virtue.

Just as with Odysseus, we're never quite sure which half of the divided self will appear in any given scene, and that helps sustain suspense. Tony Soprano's careening between loyalty and cynical narcissism, the clash of Don Draper's capacity for genuine kindness despite an obsession with his fabricated image, **Patty Hewes's** scorched-earth careerism balanced against a scathing, ruthless honesty, especially about herself—each exemplifies how a soul at war with itself creates a dramatic engine with limitless possibilities.

Which returns us finally to good old Walter White. In the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad*, Walt learns he has terminal cancer and wants to provide financial security for his family, something he realizes is impossible given the new economic reality and his meager salary as a high school chemistry teacher. But this awakens in him something deeper, a need in the truest sense of the word: *to live*.

That war between familial love and a dying man's resurgent self-interest created the defiant **Frankenstein** we came to know as Heisenberg, with his need to avenge himself against all those who sold him short or stole his promise. He wanted a vengeful, pristine excellence, not mere success.

In the final episode, Walt reveals this exact same divide, though deepened and deftly articulated through five brilliant seasons. Challenged by his wife, who refuses to hear one more time that his criminality came from nothing more than a desire to care for the family, he stands exposed, and finally admits the dark ambition that also drove him: "I was good at it."

Like the tragic hero, the antihero stands before a vast, impersonal force—not God or fate but hypocrisy, or the end of an era. Unlike the tragic hero, he avails himself the weapon of amorality, plumbing the darker aspects of his nature. This provides an excellent means to dramatize the seemingly endless struggle between the proud, resourceful individual and the corrupt society that gladly would crush him. And though his turn toward the darkness may help him survive, it also taints whatever victory he manages to come by.

It's a great dramatic trope, with little risk of seeming irrelevant, especially given America's current trajectory. We may see the antihero recede into the shadows for a while, as he has before, but it's unlikely he'll vanish anytime soon.

Then again, it may be that the wholesale hypocrisy, corruption, and sanctimonious rage of the current era may tilt dramatic impulses in a new direction toward credible virtue. Such was the view expressed by the actor **Brendan Gleeson** after his appearance in **John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary***, a film centered on Father James, a priest trying his best to help the people under his care in a small Irish town:

[A]t this point, with the distrust that's there and the disillusionment with leadership that is so acute, we need some kind of a focus on taking the irony out and taking the antihero element away. Are there people to aspire to? Can people be strong enough to withstand all of this disillusionment? Maybe the time is right for people to emerge from the easy cynicism and try to get back to a place where we can actually believe in people and trust people to have proper motivations. I think it's doubly important, now that we see so many people failing. When the norm is an antihero, there's a serious loss when you cannot portray a decent person on screen without it becoming slightly sentimental or feeling like it's unrealistic. This [character, Father James] is a seriously flawed man with a lot of failings in his life that he continues to struggle with. He's not a cool, clean hero. He's a very, very ravaged man, who's fighting as hard as he can. I think he's

more inspirational, in that way. 

Exercises

- If you have a character in your story you believe would make a strong candidate for an antihero, describe the qualities that make her heroic. (Hint: Look to her Yearning and to those attributes you discovered while exploring her Persistent Virtues.) Then do the same for the qualities that make her immoral. (Hint: similarly, look to her Resistance, especially Flaws, and her Pathological Maneuvers.) Assess the relative weight, i.e., influence upon the character, of these two opposing inclinations. Are they in balance, with neither having a distinct upper hand? If not, what could you change to make it that way? Try to imagine a situation where she has to choose between acting kindly or cruelly, for example, or patiently or angrily, peaceably or violently. What determines which option she takes? How do you know? Analyze the moment in detail—what was it about the situation, the others who were there, what had happened just previously, that impelled the character to act one way rather than the other. Now envision working your way through your entire story with just that sort of delicate equilibrium—can you see yourself continuing indefinitely? Or do you instead see a need to create some kind of reckoning? (Remember that those two options are not mutually exclusive.)

¹ “Brendan Gleeson Talks CALVARY, Collaborating with John Michael McDonagh, Reteaming for THE LAME SHALL ENTER FIRST, HEART OF THE SEA, and More,” Christina Radish, *The Collider*, August 12, 2014.