

Contextualizing Hero-Villain Dynamic in Literature: Narrative, Identity and The Formation of Moral Agency

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Abstract

This study examines the instability of the traditional distinction between heroes and villains by situating these figures within broader narrative, structural, and cultural frameworks. Rather than treating heroism and villainy as fixed categories, the paper explores how their meanings emerge through literary tradition, character function, and narrative perspective. It argues that qualities such as strength, morality, and sacrifice are insufficient as defining criteria, as they are often shared across opposing roles. To address this complexity, the study proposes a flexible model of characterization based on degrees of narrative presence and agency, distinguishing between distant symbolic figures, background characters, and active agents who drive the story. Particular attention is given to the role of narrative perspective in shaping moral alignment, demonstrating how access to a character's inner life influences reader sympathy and ethical judgment. By integrating these approaches, the paper highlights the fluid and relational nature of character roles in literature. It concludes that the categories of hero and villain are not inherent identities but narrative constructs shaped by context, interpretation, and evolving cultural values.

Keywords - Hero, villain, protagonist, antagonist, fantasy, fiction, storytelling, literature.

Introduction: Reimagining Fantasy

Fantasy resists narrow definition because it gathers under its umbrella a vast and varied body of storytelling, often united less by form than by imagination. Rather than belonging to a single moment in literary history, it emerges from a long continuum of narrative practices that stretch across cultures and eras. Although the term itself gained prominence relatively recently as a way to categorize certain kinds of fiction, the impulses that define fantasy—wonder, invention, and the reworking of reality—are deeply rooted in the earliest expressions of human storytelling. The expansion of fantasy as a recognizable literary category gained particular momentum in the period following global upheavals of the twentieth century. During this time, the genre began to attract sustained attention from both writers and publishers, resulting in a proliferation of works that explored imagined worlds with increasing complexity. This development also helped shift perceptions of fantasy from being dismissed as trivial or escapist to being regarded as a legitimate and sophisticated form of literature. The influence of key authors during this period was instrumental in shaping the conventions and expectations of modern fantasy, especially in establishing it as a field capable of serious artistic and philosophical engagement. Despite this apparent modern consolidation, the foundations of fantasy lie much deeper in literary history. Elements commonly associated with contemporary fantasy—such as supernatural forces, heroic quests, symbolic struggles, and imagined realms—can be traced back to ancient myths, epic poetry, religious narratives, and oral traditions. These earlier forms provided a rich reservoir of themes and narrative structures that continue to inform modern works. In this sense, contemporary fantasy does not represent a sudden innovation but rather an enduring imaginative tradition, one that evolves while maintaining continuity with its origins.

Attempts to define fantasy often revolve around its engagement with the unreal or the impossible, yet such descriptions risk oversimplification. Fantasy encompasses narratives that treat magical or extraordinary elements with internal seriousness, constructing worlds governed by their own coherent logic. These worlds may diverge

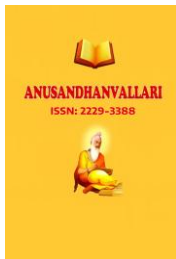


significantly from empirical reality, yet they often serve to illuminate human experience, ethical dilemmas, and existential questions. The presence of magic or the supernatural is not merely decorative but functions as a central organizing principle within these narratives. Because of its broad conceptual range, fantasy overlaps with numerous other literary forms, including myth, legend, folklore, and allegory. This overlap complicates efforts to establish clear boundaries, as many texts can simultaneously belong to multiple traditions. A broad understanding of fantasy therefore includes a wide spectrum of narratives, from ancient heroic tales to contemporary novels set in fully realized secondary worlds. This expansive perspective highlights the genre's historical depth and its capacity for adaptation across different cultural contexts. Within the broader field, distinctions are frequently made between various subtypes, such as those that emphasize immersive world-building or those that blend fantastical elements with everyday settings. These distinctions, however, remain fluid and often depend on interpretive frameworks rather than fixed criteria. Debates over audience, particularly the division between literature intended for younger readers and that aimed at adults, further complicate categorization. Such divisions tend to obscure rather than clarify, as many works operate on multiple levels of meaning and appeal to a diverse readership.

The Hero–Villain Divide

The figures of the hero and the villain occupy a central place in storytelling, shaping narratives across literature, film, and popular culture. At first glance, distinguishing between them appears intuitive. Audiences tend to identify moral alignment almost instinctively, recognizing figures who represent admirable qualities and those who embody threat or opposition. Yet this apparent clarity dissolves under closer scrutiny. The boundary separating these roles proves unstable, shaped less by fixed definitions than by evolving literary traditions, cultural values, and narrative strategies. One common way of understanding the hero is to treat this figure as the central focus of a narrative, the character around whom events unfold. However, this approach is limited, as it reduces heroism to narrative prominence rather than moral or ethical substance. Many secondary characters perform acts of courage, loyalty, or sacrifice that rival or even surpass those of the protagonist. Similarly, equating heroism with virtue or moral goodness introduces further complications. Traits often associated with heroes—strength, intelligence, determination, and exceptional ability—are frequently shared by their adversaries. In many stories, antagonists possess extraordinary power, strategic brilliance, and even a form of charisma that rivals or exceeds that of the hero. Power alone, therefore, cannot serve as a reliable marker of moral distinction. Attempts to define villains as figures driven by immoral or destructive intentions also encounter difficulties. Contemporary storytelling increasingly embraces morally ambiguous characters who blur conventional boundaries. Figures traditionally associated with wrongdoing—such as assassins, thieves, or outlaws—are often recast as protagonists, admired for their skill, independence, or resistance to authority. At the same time, heroes themselves may engage in questionable actions, exercising violence or imposing their own moral judgments without hesitation. In such cases, the distinction between heroism and villainy becomes less about actions themselves and more about how those actions are framed and justified within the narrative.

Another frequently proposed criterion involves the notion of sacrifice. Heroes are often imagined as individuals willing to place the well-being of others above their own, even at great personal cost. This willingness to endure loss or risk for a perceived greater good has long been associated with heroic identity. Yet even this distinction is not absolute. Antagonistic figures may also act out of commitment to a cause they consider meaningful, sometimes demonstrating forms of sacrifice that mirror those of heroes. The difference, then, lies not simply in the act of sacrifice but in the values that guide it and the perspective through which it is interpreted. A related perspective emphasizes the relationship between power and restraint. Both heroes and villains frequently possess the capacity to shape or dominate their worlds, yet they differ in how they engage with that power. Heroes are often characterized by a conscious limitation of their own abilities, guided by an awareness of potential corruption or harm. In contrast, villains are more likely to pursue power without such restraint, allowing ambition or desire to



override ethical considerations. However, this distinction is historically contingent. Earlier literary traditions often celebrated the acquisition of power as a legitimate goal, suggesting that modern anxieties about power and corruption have reshaped the expectations placed upon heroic figures.

The interdependence of heroes and villains further complicates attempts at clear definition. These roles exist in relation to one another, each helping to define the other through contrast and conflict. Extreme circumstances—such as the fate of a community, a kingdom, or an entire world—serve as testing grounds in which characters reveal their deepest values and motivations. In such contexts, both heroes and villains can be understood as exaggerated expressions of human responses to crisis, embodying opposing approaches to responsibility, desire, and moral choice. Narrative perspective also plays a decisive role in shaping these categories. Stories often guide audiences toward alignment with particular characters, fostering empathy and identification with one figure while distancing others. This process creates a sense of moral orientation, encouraging readers to interpret one character's actions as justified while viewing another's as threatening or unjust. The concept of "otherness" becomes significant here, as antagonistic figures are frequently portrayed as fundamentally different or alien, reflecting broader cultural anxieties and fears. What counts as heroic or villainous, therefore, is not fixed but shifts in response to changing social values and narrative conventions. So, the distinction between hero and villain cannot be reduced to a single defining trait or set of characteristics. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of narrative focus, moral framing, cultural context, and audience perception. A hero may be understood as a figure who commands sympathy and represents values that align with those endorsed by the narrative, while a villain stands in opposition to these values and disrupts the desired order. Though this formulation remains broad, its flexibility allows it to accommodate the wide range of characters found in both traditional and contemporary storytelling.

Beyond the Hero–Villain Binary

Discussions of narrative often begin with the familiar opposition between heroes and villains, yet this binary captures only a small portion of the complexity found in literary characterization. Stories rarely consist of neatly divided moral figures; instead, they present a spectrum of roles that shift in significance depending on narrative structure, thematic focus, and reader perception. Recognizing this diversity is essential, as it reveals that characters cannot be understood solely through rigid labels but must be examined in relation to their function, presence, and degree of engagement within the story. Literary theory has long attempted to classify characters into distinct categories, often based on their narrative role, psychological depth, or generic context. Such classifications can be useful, but they frequently become too restrictive, reducing dynamic figures to simplified types. In practice, characters operate within a fluid system in which their importance derives not only from what they represent but also from how they interact with the narrative world and with the audience. A more flexible framework, therefore, allows for a deeper understanding of how different kinds of characters contribute to the overall structure of a story. One effective way to approach this complexity is to consider characters according to their level of narrative presence and agency. Within this perspective, three broad groupings emerge: those who exist primarily as symbolic or distant figures, those who form part of the narrative environment without significantly shaping its direction, and those who actively drive events and embody the central tensions of the story.

The first group consists of figures who remain largely indirect or abstract within the narrative. These characters are often known through reputation, memory, or second-hand accounts rather than through direct interaction. They tend to function as archetypes, representing ideals or extremes—such as absolute authority, ultimate evil, or legendary virtue. Because their inner lives are not fully revealed, they are perceived in simplified, often exaggerated terms. Their role is less about personal development and more about establishing the stakes or moral framework of the story. Such figures can exert immense influence over events despite their limited presence, shaping the motivations and actions of more visible characters. In contrast, the second group includes those characters who populate the narrative world without significantly altering its course. These figures contribute to



the texture and realism of the story, grounding it in a sense of everyday life. They may provide support, context, or momentary interaction, but they do not engage directly in the central conflicts that define the narrative. Their importance lies in their ability to create a believable environment, offering a backdrop against which more prominent actions unfold. Without them, the story would lack depth and social dimension, yet their individual arcs remain largely undeveloped. The third group encompasses characters who occupy the center of the narrative and whose decisions shape its direction. These figures are defined by their agency, complexity, and evolving nature. Unlike more distant or static characters, they are presented with psychological depth, often revealing conflicting motivations, moral ambiguities, and internal struggles. Through techniques such as focalization and detailed characterization, the audience gains access to their thoughts and emotions, fostering empathy and a nuanced understanding of their actions. It is within this category that traditional distinctions between heroism and villainy become most unstable, as characters may display both admirable and troubling qualities simultaneously. A crucial aspect of this framework is the recognition that character roles are not fixed. A figure who appears distant or marginal at one point in a narrative may later emerge as central, while a seemingly dominant presence may recede into the background. Similarly, shifts in perspective can transform how a character is perceived, revealing new dimensions that challenge earlier assumptions. This fluidity reflects the dynamic nature of storytelling, where meaning is shaped not only by actions but also by the way those actions are presented and interpreted. Another complication arises from the fact that characters rarely maintain consistent patterns of behavior. Contradictions, transformations, and moments of ambiguity are integral to their development. Rather than undermining classification, these variations highlight the need for interpretive flexibility. Broad patterns of motivation and action often provide a more reliable basis for analysis than isolated moments, allowing characters to be understood as evolving entities rather than static types. By moving beyond rigid categories and focusing instead on degrees of presence and agency, this approach offers a more adaptable framework for analyzing literary characters. It accommodates both traditional archetypes and modern, psychologically complex figures, acknowledging that narrative roles are shaped by perspective, context, and thematic purpose. In doing so, it provides a clearer foundation for examining how characters function within the broader structure of storytelling, without reducing them to simplistic or exclusionary definitions.

Narrative Perspective and Moral Alignment

Any attempt to understand character roles must also account for the decisive influence of narrative perspective. The way a story is told—who speaks, who is followed, and whose thoughts are revealed—profoundly shapes how characters are interpreted. Moral alignment in literature is rarely an inherent property of a character alone; rather, it emerges through the narrative lens that frames actions, intentions, and consequences. A figure perceived as admirable in one account may appear deeply troubling in another, depending on the degree of access granted to their inner world and the context in which their actions are presented. Perspective functions as a powerful tool of alignment. When a narrative invites readers into the consciousness of a character, it fosters understanding, if not agreement. Motivations that might otherwise seem unjustifiable become intelligible when viewed from within. This process does not necessarily absolve characters of wrongdoing, but it complicates moral judgment by revealing the tensions between intention and action. Conversely, characters who remain distant or opaque are more easily reduced to simplified roles, often becoming embodiments of threat, order, or abstraction rather than fully realized individuals. This dynamic is especially significant in modern storytelling, where authors frequently challenge stable moral categories by shifting or fragmenting perspective.

A single narrative may present multiple viewpoints, each offering a partial and sometimes conflicting account of events. Through such techniques, readers are encouraged to question the reliability of any singular interpretation and to recognize that moral clarity is often constructed rather than given. The result is a narrative environment in which characters cannot be easily fixed as wholly virtuous or entirely corrupt, but instead exist within a continuum of ethical ambiguity. Furthermore, narrative perspective influences not only how characters are judged but also



how they understand themselves. Self-perception within a story can diverge sharply from external evaluation, creating tension between identity and action. Characters may view their own choices as necessary or justified, even when those choices produce harmful outcomes. This disjunction underscores the complexity of moral agency, suggesting that the distinction between heroism and villainy often lies as much in interpretation as in behavior. The role of perspective also extends to the broader cultural context in which a narrative is produced and received. What is framed as heroic in one setting may be questioned or reinterpreted in another, reflecting shifts in collective values and concerns. As a result, the categories of hero and villain remain historically fluid, continually reshaped by changing modes of storytelling and evolving ethical frameworks.

Outlook on Existing Literature

Across literary traditions, characters designated as “heroic” or “villainous” often function less as moral absolutes than as narrative positions that reflect shifting ethical, psychological, and social tensions. As Northrop Frye argues, literary archetypes are not merely character types but structural functions within narrative mythologies that organize cultural meaning (Frye). Similarly, Vladimir Propp’s structural analysis of folktales demonstrates that “hero” and “villain” are roles defined by action within narrative sequences rather than intrinsic moral essences (Propp). In this sense, hero–villain dynamics operate as interpretive frameworks through which literature constructs, interrogates, and destabilizes moral agency. A foundational example of this fluidity appears in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where the titular character transitions from celebrated warrior to tyrannical figure. Initially framed as a heroic defender of Scotland, Macbeth’s moral descent is not simply a shift from good to evil but a gradual reconfiguration of agency under the influence of ambition, prophecy, and political pressure. The witches’ ambiguous pronouncements destabilize moral certainty, suggesting that villainy emerges not from inherent corruption but from interpretive vulnerability and ethical choice under uncertainty. Lady Macbeth’s invocation to “unsex me here” further complicates moral identity by linking power, gender, and transgressive ambition, illustrating how villainy is often constructed through violations of normative moral and social codes rather than absolute ethical deviation.

Similarly, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the creature complicates the hero–villain binary by occupying a liminal moral position shaped by rejection and social alienation. Although initially devoid of malice, the creature develops destructive tendencies as a response to systemic exclusion and emotional abandonment. Shelley’s narrative structure invites readers to reassess moral responsibility: Victor Frankenstein, the creator, assumes the role of a “tragic villain” through negligence and refusal of ethical accountability, while the creature embodies the consequences of moral neglect rather than innate evil. This inversion aligns with Romantic critiques of Enlightenment rationality, emphasizing that moral agency is socially produced rather than biologically determined. A further destabilization of the hero–villain binary can be observed in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where moral identity is literally split into dual selves. Dr Jekyll represents the socially sanctioned rational self, while Mr Hyde embodies repressed desire and transgressive instinct. Yet Stevenson resists a simple moral allegory; instead, he reveals that both identities coexist within a single subjectivity. The narrative suggests that villainy is not an external intrusion but an internal structural possibility of the self. This psychological fragmentation anticipates modernist and psychoanalytic readings of moral agency, where ethical behavior is understood as the negotiation of competing internal drives rather than adherence to fixed moral categories.

In contrast, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* initially appears to reinforce a clear moral dichotomy between the heroic fellowship and the corrupting force of Sauron. However, even within this high-fantasy framework, moral agency is distributed across characters in complex ways. Boromir’s moral failure arises not from inherent villainy but from the corruptive influence of the Ring, which externalizes latent desires for power and protection of his homeland. Gollum further complicates the moral landscape as both victim and perpetrator, illustrating what Tolkien describes as “pity” as a moral force shaping narrative resolution. Frodo’s eventual failure at Mount Doom



destabilizes the heroic ideal itself, suggesting that moral endurance is finite and that heroism is contingent rather than absolute. Joseph Campbell's monomyth framework in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* situates heroism as a transformative narrative journey in which the protagonist encounters and integrates shadow elements of the self (Campbell). However, contemporary literary criticism has challenged this universalist model, arguing that such structures risk oversimplifying moral complexity. Post-structuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes instead emphasize the "death of the author" and the instability of meaning, thereby opening interpretive space in which hero and villain are not fixed identities but reader-dependent constructs shaped by cultural and ideological contexts.

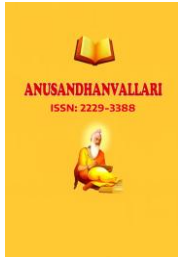
More recent literary and critical approaches further emphasize the ethical ambiguity of narrative identity. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov embodies a philosophical challenge to moral absolutism by attempting to justify murder through utilitarian reasoning. His subsequent psychological torment demonstrates that moral agency is not merely cognitive justification but embodied ethical experience. The novel ultimately resists categorizing Raskolnikov as either hero or villain, instead presenting him as a site of moral struggle where guilt, ideology, and redemption intersect. Across these texts, moral agency is seen not as an inherent property of character but a dynamic process shaped by social structures, psychological conflict and narrative perspective. The oscillation between heroism and villainy thus reflects broader cultural anxieties about autonomy, power, and the limits of ethical certainty.

Conclusion

The exploration of character roles reveals that the traditional opposition between hero and villain is far more intricate than it initially appears. Rather than representing fixed and universally applicable categories, these figures emerge from a network of narrative, cultural, and interpretive factors. Their meanings are shaped by historical traditions, by the distribution of power and agency within a story, and by the perspective through which their actions are understood. By moving beyond rigid definitions and examining characters in terms of their presence, function, and narrative framing, it becomes possible to account for the diversity and complexity of literary representation. Figures once regarded as purely symbolic may acquire depth through reinterpretation, while central characters reveal contradictions that resist simple classification. The interplay between distance and intimacy, action and reflection, further complicates attempts to impose clear boundaries between moral opposites. Ultimately, the distinction between hero and villain rests less on inherent qualities than on relationships—between characters, between narrative voices, and between text and reader. It is through these relationships that meaning is constructed, challenged, and transformed. Such an understanding not only enriches the study of literature but also highlights the enduring capacity of storytelling to engage with the complexities of human experience, where certainty is rare and interpretation remains open-ended.

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