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## CITIZENS OR HEROES: THE FALL – AND RISE – OF HEROIC MARTYRDOM

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“She died like a heroine.”

The words, uttered by a German chaplain, sum up the life of Edith Cavell in many ways (“Account by Reverend H. Stirling Gahan,” n.d.). Cavell’s heroism began when she was tending to two wounded soldiers. A British nurse herself, she was stationed in Brussels (occupied by Germany) during World War One. These two wounded, British soldiers begat a massive “ring” that Cavell smuggled out of German territories; they started her heroism. Less than a year later, her efforts were squashed as she was arrested; she was executed two months later (“Who Was Edith Cavell?” 2018).

Here’s the thing about Cavell, though: she was not partisan in regards to her job. Despite her heroism with smuggling the Allied men, she treated all of the wounded soldiers just as if they were themselves: men (“Who was Edith Cavell?” n.d.). Although her “heroic deed” was sided on the side of the Allies,

she actively attempted to make sure all of the soldiers felt cared for and safe with her. Yet, the German government found her guilty of treason, turning her from being a hero for both sides into a villain on one – and a hero and martyr on the other (Rigby, 2015). Thus, she wasn't a hero in the eyes of the Germans until they renounced Nazism.

Cavell is not alone in this sort of reverse-heroism, where one begins as a villain and ends up a hero. That is, due to revolutions and changes in society, those who promoted something previously “villainous” return as heroes after their death, once society has changed. They serve as martyrs, giving up their lives to successfully cultivate change in their society. Thus, their death begets and creates their heroism; the challenges they are faced with on the journey to becoming heroes become too much, and they pass away before their heroism is fully realized.

In other words, those who “fail” before their heroism is fully discovered hit a block at the initiation phase of the hero's journey. Joseph Campbell, the founder of the study of heroism, was the one who initially discovered the hero's journey, the pattern behind every heroic life in classic mythology. Every hero, Campbell posited, undergoes a process – the hero's journey – in which they are transformed through three phases. The first phase is separation (departure), when the hero becomes separated from their familiar world. The second is initiation, when heroes go through painful experiences that will help them to grow. The third stage is the return, in which the hero makes his or her triumphant return to society as a changed person (Campbell, 1949).

However, there is a small, but very interesting, subset of heroes who initially seem to fail the initiation phase. That is, the initiation phase becomes too much for them, and they pass away during their initiation. Often, they are the outliers and outcasts of society who don't fit in to some given societal norm, and as the pressure of being the antithesis of society mounts on them, they are forced to leave their lives too young. Years later, however, these heroes make a triumphant return as martyrs of the cause they often died from – the societal pressure that had weighed them down during their lives is now lifted. For instance, Cavell was executed by the Germans for helping smuggle Allied soldiers across the German border. Germany, since, has disavowed Nazism; thus, they have implicitly disavowed Cavell's execution.

This essay will delve into the lives of two more exemplars of this phenomenon. Both were deemed hero's under one of society's greatest examples of cultural change: the LGBTQ movement. Previously, nearly everywhere across the globe repudiated the concept of homosexuality; no matter what the culture or religion, homosexuality was a sin and went against all norms. Both men wound up dead or destitute because they were accused of gross acts of indecency – that is, homosexuality – which was illegal when they were alive. However, both of them returned in the 21st century as role models and martyrs for a flourishing LGBTQ community that is no longer illegal. This essay will take a detailed look at two of the world's most popular LGBTQ martyrs, Alan Turing and Oscar Wilde. This essay will look at how society can, at the time of the hero, consider the hero a villain – only to have that same villain return to society a half century later as a martyr for the cause for which they were originally killed or silenced.

#### ALAN TURING: HERO OR VILLAIN?

We'll start with Alan Turing. Turing's journey as one of the world's foremost mathematicians began when he enrolled as an undergraduate student at the University of Cambridge. After much success there, he completed a fellowship at the prestigious King's College, where he would meet a mentor and future collaborator, Alonzo Church, whom he would follow to Princeton University. One of Turing's greatest inventions, the Turing Machine, was adapted from his time as a fellow at King's College. In 1939, he joined the British government in fighting World War Two, working behind the scenes as a code breaker (Copeland, 2018).

Here is where Turing rose to fame. The governments of Poland, France, and England had been working to try to crack the Enigma – the principle encoder of the German army. Turing's arrival helped spur the Brits to the invention of the Bombe, a massive code-breaking device that would eventually decipher nearly 2 messages per minute every day. For his efforts, he was recognized with honors and awards (Copeland, 2018).

Unfortunately, Turing's story then turned somewhat bleak. In 1952, Turing was convicted of acts of gross indecency – that is, homosexual acts – which were illegal in Britain at the time. He was sentenced to a year of hormone therapy (chemical

castration) – an act that labeled him a criminal, and immediately ended his governmental career. This conviction led to his presumed suicide, and it was not until 2009 that the British Prime Minister apologized for Turing’s treatment, and it took four more years for him to be granted an official pardon (Copeland, 2018). However, one important thing to note is that Turing was never necessarily upset about his punishment – he was, however, worried that his reputation would mar his discoveries and inventions for the future. In a letter to a friend, he is quoted as describing the discovery of his sexuality in this way:

*“Turing believes machines think  
Turing lies with men  
Therefore machines do not think.”* (Couch, 2014)

It is horrific, especially in the decade of the 2020s, to think that one’s sexual orientation may “prove” them to be a liar, or a fraud. However, because of society’s borders, Turing had to worry himself about the idea that people might consider his discoveries unusable due to his sexual orientation. He was not worried about his reputation, nor about what would happen to him as a homosexual individual, but was instead worried about what his reputation would do to the advancement of society.

Here, then, is where we round back to the hero’s journey, in which society plays a major role. The first interesting aspect of Turing’s life is that he had not one, but two, heroic journeys that he was taken on. His first occurred during his life, when he joined the war and fought as a code breaker. He was thus removed from society, as much of society was not actively trying to contain and halt the war. He was then faced with the initiation of breaking the Enigma, which would have been a massive hurdle and obstacle on his way to becoming a hero. He then returned to society, with honors and awards being bestowed upon him.

Then, though, Turing is forced to undergo another hero’s journey. Just at the peak of his career, he is called a criminal on the basis of acts of indecency. He is separated from society via his criminality, and is faced with the initiation and obstacle of being forced to undergo chemical castration – an action that will ultimately kill him. Herein, then, is the most fascinating part of his second hero’s journey: his return to society. As activism surrounding the legalization of LGBTQ marriages and relationships begins, Turing becomes a martyr for this

culture, someone who died for the cause that others are fighting so hard for. Thus, his return to society occurs when his name is cleared in the early 21st century, transforming him from someone who used to be the antithesis of societal morals to one who displays the best of them.

Thus, Turing has become a hero anew; he has, even post-mortem, completed the final lap of the hero's journey. But how was that leg completed? It's interesting to think about the fact that Turing's journey might not have been completed without some help from others along the way – namely, the shifting of societal norms. That is, had society not shifted, Turing might have not become a hero, and would have remained a villain in the eyes of many.

Thus, we have an example of what has occurred with so many who “push the boundaries” of society. Although they may be seen as a villain, as someone unidealistic, they become a hidden leader of a societal shift and change; they become sparks for a communal change in morals and ideals. We've seen this shift time and time again, in different scenarios: feminism, civil rights, voting rights. One person, or one group of people, pushing the pendulum so far in the other direction that society has to take a hard look at where its values currently lay. These people can be as normal as Cavell, going about her daily work as a nurse while secretly smuggling soldiers across the border to safety; they can be as prominent as Turing, who hid his secret life away from the public while rising to becoming one of the most important theorists and inventors of our time; or they could be as flamboyant as Oscar Wilde, who changed the course of history by showing that even exceedingly accomplished artists did not always adhere to the morals that their societies set forth.

#### OSCAR WILDE: REPUTATION IS THE DEMISE

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation” (“Oscar Wilde,” n.d.). There is no better way to introduce our next exemplar, Oscar Wilde. Unlike Turing, Wilde was born into a family with two parents who were already somewhat well-known: his father was a well-respected doctor, his mother a poet and author. He studied, on scholarships, at Trinity College (Dublin) and Oxford (Beckson, 2018).

It didn't take long for Wilde to create a reputation for himself. When he was in his late 20s, he found himself the subject of a periodical, who cited Wilde for his "unmasculine" affinity for the arts. He peaked with the publication of his only movie ("The Picture of Dorian Gray") in 1891. Many of his publications dealt with the concealment of some major immorality or secret, which eventually led to his characters' demise. In fact, in an 1889 poem, Wilde insinuated that he himself was one of these characters (Beckson, 2018).

And here is where Wilde's initiation occurred. The Marquess of Queensberry, whose son was close with Wilde, accused Wilde of sodomy. Wilde then sued the Marquess for libel – an act that led to his ultimate demise. When the case turned unfavorably on Wilde, he was arrested, with two years of hard labor in prison. When he was released, he was completely bankrupt, and fled to France. He died a few years later (Beckson, 2018), but was pardoned in 2017 (McCann, 2017).

So, again, one could say that Wilde had a double journey – except Wilde's journeys were parts of other journeys. He was separated from society when he received a well-rounded education; his initiation occurred when he began to be ostracized for his affinity for the arts; and his return occurred with his literary success. However, he underwent a second hero's journey, as well. He was separated from society when he began to be ostracized for his affinity for the arts. He was initiated when the case against the Marquess flipped on him. And his return – post-death – occurred when he was pardoned, becoming a hero for a burgeoning LGBTQ community. Thus, once again, also, his heroism came about through changes in society – when society changed, so did his status as a hero (or a villain).

#### SOCIETY AS A FORCE OF CHANGE

Now, it feels necessary to clarify why these two exemplars have become "reborn" heroes. The fact that these two exemplars are both heroes for the LGBTQ community is not mere coincidence; neither, though, were these two chosen simply because they recognize that branch of the population. Those two were chosen because they only became heroes because society changed course. When they died, they were seen as villains in the eyes of society because their actions were illegal;

when they reemerged as heroes, it was because society had, by then, accepted and legalized acts of homosexuality (Allison et al., 2019; Goethals & Allison, 2019). In that same vein, we can look at famous feminists (think Susan B. Anthony) or those that fought for civil rights and integration (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.). There is a remarkable distinction we must make between how these exemplars became heroes. It is not, necessarily, that society changed them; it is that they changed society. Though neither Anthony nor King were necessarily “villains” in the eyes of society prior to their deaths, both of these sects of protestors fought the status quo. They both became heroes because they defied society, and thus they changed it.

While Turing and Wilde did not necessarily change society while they were alive, society changed while they were dead – and thus they transitioned posthumously from a villain into a hero. They gave their lives so that other might understand the depths of their despair and inequality, that they might incite a form of change. It is clear, then, that there is a bit of a chicken-before-the-egg puzzle here: did these heroes change because of their community changing, or did their community change because of them (thus making them heroes)?

This paradox is absolutely fascinating, and one that will be focused on for quite a bit more of this paper. The interesting thing about Turing and Wilde is that they did not transform society; society transformed them. They did not actively seek out their heroic status – how could they, when they passed away too soon to realize that they were even remotely heroic? And they were not the ultimate, catalyzing force that drove society to change. So, how did they become heroes?

#### TRANSFORMING SOCIETY – OR TRANSFORMED BY SOCIETY?

Here, then, is where we run into another intriguing paradox: can heroes be heroes if they themselves do not transform society? Here is where the concept of heroic martyrdom comes into play. By giving their lives to incite change, they served as martyrs for their community. A lot of the current research overlooks is the concept of heroic martyrs, because they tend to be the antithesis of the “prototypical” hero. They don’t necessarily transform society. They don’t necessarily win glory immediately. They typically aren’t idolized or admired when they are alive.

However, there needs to be a shift in how we perceive these heroic martyrs, and we need to view them in the same light as other, more “obvious” heroes.

One of the reasons for this oversight of heroic martyrdom is that these are heroes who have initially failed. They weren’t immediately successful, and when compared with people who developed cures for diseases or pulled someone from the wreckage of a car crash, they don’t immediately strike one as heroes. Allison and Goethals (2017) argue that one of the benefits of the heroic transformation – which many would undergo during the initiation phase – is that this transformation allows for the ability to transform society. They also argue that the two types of transformation applicable are the self and society (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Thus, we land ourselves in a perfect in-between: how can we argue that these two were heroes, if their hero’s journey was halted in the initiation phase, and therefore they weren’t able to experience a transformation of their society?

Parks (2017) has an idea: what if their tendency toward heroic action was inhibited due to, say, societal pressures, or cultural norms? Both Turing and Wilde were forced to reckon with the fact that their way of being and their life ran against the cultural norm. In fact, Britain, at the time of Turing, was undergoing a something akin to a “witch hunt”, wherein men who called in crimes were often found at the guilty end of gross indecency. Police were quick to arrest any man who displayed any amount of homosexual tendencies. No matter what the crime was that the police had been called in for, they would disregard it if there were the chance to make an arrest for the crime of “gross indecency” (Bedell, 2007).

There was a similar feeling toward homosexuals in Ireland in the 1800s. In fact, the Offences Against The Person Act of 1861 deals with the idea of homosexuality explicitly under its “Unnatural Offences” section: “Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable...to be kept in penal servitude for life...”. In fact, the Act goes even further: “Whosoever shall attempt to commit the said abominable crime, or shall be guilty of any assault with intent to commit the same, or of any indecent assault upon any male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor...” (Offences Against The Person Act, 1861). Thus, not only did committing homosexual acts come with a life sentence, but simply being regarded as having attempted to commit an act of homosexuality would be seen as a crime. And, if it were not



already obvious, there is a clear opening here for arrests to be made on the mere assumption that one is a homosexual.

Thus, what Turing and Wilde were doing was inherently illegal. They were pushing the boundaries of society while hiding behind the shadows – they did not want to necessarily change society so that it would adapt to them, but they did want to enjoy their lives the way they pleased. Thus, the cultural norms of Britain stopped the men from advocating for LGBTQ rights while they were alive, as they would have been arrested for their acts of gross indecency and had their reputations marred, and their advocacy would have been disregarded.

#### ARE MARTYRS HEROES?

This concept, then, is the first example of how heroic martyrs should be considered “heroes” just as much as any other hero. Even if a transformation of society is necessary to be considered a “hero”, one cannot disregard those who were forced to evade society for their own personal well-being. In fact, it’s fascinating that the one thing that the men ended up as martyrs for was the thing that stopped them from being heroes at the time they were alive.

Unfortunately, we cannot simply determine “heroism” by proving that the cultural norms of society impeded their attempted heroism; we must first acknowledge that their heroism was involuntary. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) stated in their initial definition of heroism that heroism: 1) is directed toward others in need; 2) is voluntary; 3) acknowledges possible risks and costs; 4) is pursued while willing to accept the anticipated sacrifice; and 5) is pursued with the hero accomplishing their action without the inherent necessity of external gain. While both Turing and Wilde served others in need and recognized the potential risks of the intimate relationships, we cannot validly argue that any of these other criterion of “heroism” are true of them. Their heroic actions were not voluntary (unless we can count Turing’s suicide as a heroic action that turned him into a martyr), nor were they prepared to accept or acknowledge any potential sacrifice or external gain because they were unaware that they were heroes. The way that society viewed them was as villains, as the antithesis of “normal”; they were not trying to fight against this notion.

So here we are, caught in a place of wondering whether heroic martyrdom makes one a hero. We can argue that their heroic actions were potentially impeded by cultural norms, but we cannot argue that their heroism was voluntary. There is a fundamental gap in the literature in regards to heroes who have become heroes post-death; do their actions count as voluntary? Do we acknowledge that any obvious heroism may have been precluded by cultural norms?

Thus, there must be a new definition of heroes created, one that includes those who have only recently come heroes due to the ever-changing society. To do so, we need to look at some of the current principles of heroism as they do or do not relate to both Turing and Wilde, and begin to dissect and unravel the notion that heroic martyrdom is somehow below other forms of heroism.

#### WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Both of these characters were social heroes, which are described by Kinsella et al. (2017) as persons who risked personal sacrifice in the face of their society. This idea is different from the aforementioned theory that stated that a necessary facet of heroism was the recognition that heroic actions require personal sacrifice, because in this case, this theory is simply stating that social heroism involves some kind of personal sacrifice, not that the person necessarily needs to acknowledge that their actions are potentially sacrificial. In fact, the article gives the explicit example that martyrs are considered social heroes (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017). Thus, we can retain the idea that they are social heroes.

Both Turing and Wilde also meet the criterion for the functions of heroes. Kinsella et al. (2017) describe that a hero must have an enhancing, moral modeling, and protecting function. In the enhancing function, heroes will motivate, inspire, and provide roles models to society; I don't think we can argue that both Wilde and Turing have those functions. The moral modeling function of heroes argues that heroes help people understand society's norms, virtues, and models, and decide for themselves whether they want to adhere to these established norms. This argument is very important to note – it does not say that heroes encourage people to act toward the established norms; rather, it simply says

that heroes provide a moral guideline from which people can determine their own actions. Thus, because Turing and Wilde went against the morals of society, they can be seen as heroes – they provided society with that mirror on which to reflect themselves. The protecting function involves “doing what no one else will, helping, saving, guiding, and acting against evil or danger”. It is important, especially in the case of heroic martyrs like Turing and Wilde, to look at how they acted against evil or danger. Both of them were jailed or treated with chemical castration due to their lifestyle – a lifestyle that they were told was illegal. Thus, they were, in a way, acting against what they deemed to be evil or dangerous, or at least dangerous to what they believed in.

Both men also meet the criteria for heroic transformations, as defined by Allison and Goethals (2017). The heroic journey implies that this transformation occurs directly after the initiation phase; but how can these exemplars be heroes if they did not complete the initiation phase, and therefore did not have a self-transformation? In the heroic journey, I think there is a general over-conceptualization that heroes must transform themselves so that they may be considered heroes. Nothing could be further from the truth. Allison and Goethals (2017) argue that there are specific subtypes of heroic transformation, the first being the transformation of the self or of society. It is not necessary that the hero experience this transformation unto his or her self; perhaps the hero, as the authors say, “serves as the catalyst for the transformation in others”. This concept, then, would go along with the fact that society transformed them; when heroes serve as the catalyst for societal change, that societal change will loop back around and make them a hero.

In an interesting way, we can also apply some of Kohen et al.’s (2017) steps to heroic development. Expansive empathy – the idea that one acts heroically because they feel empathetic toward someone – is often associated with heroes, the ones who complete the heroic actions. In the case of heroic martyrs, however, the expansive empathy is retroactive, and something that is actually placed in the hands of the non-heroes – those who are making the martyrs a hero. By feeling empathetically toward the hero, they make the hero a hero – they recognize the sacrifice that the hero made for them, and feel empathetic to their plight, thus making them a hero.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Both Turing and Wilde fit the criteria for heroism throughout much of this research. The only facet that they really do not fit into is the idea of their heroism being voluntary – something that is quite literally impossible for them, given their circumstances. But isn't it fascinating that we are establishing that heroism is based on the concept that one is in the right place at the right time, and not on how much a person contributes to society?

There are a few directions in which I think this question could be resolved. Future research should delve further into the hero's journey, especially the possibility of expanding the initiation phase. It is possible for one to, essentially, fail their initiation phase, and become reborn as a new hero. The hero's journey tends to establish that one must make it through the departure stage and through the initiation phase before returning to society. However, the hero's journey needs to be readjusted to account for those who fail in their initiation phase – there needs to be room for them as a hero, as well.

Which leads us into the next categorization of heroism we need to account for: martyrdom. There is very little research on those of those who failed their initiation phase but returned as a hero through societal changes. Without taking these persons into account, we are probably missing several people who fought the status quo in their day, but whose names go unknown because they were held silent in their time.

What everything boils down to is the fact that there needs to be a change in the perception in our society of what makes a hero a hero. Heroes aren't always the ones who have biopics made of them, or the ones who make the front cover of newspapers because they foiled a terrorist-bombing plan. We need to recognize that there are heroes who are giving their lives on a regular basis to help us understand that certain societal changes must be enacted to progress our society further. We could argue that those children dying of cancer are martyrs for the cause of cancer research, because they are giving up their lives so that cancer research can progress further. We don't yet call them heroes, because our society has not yet developed a cure for the cancers that have caused them to pass away. However, I guarantee that when that cure is found, those children who have

passed will be considered heroes to the families of future children who have been diagnosed with the same type of cancer and are now saved.

Just because one passes away should not be an exclusionary criterion for how whether or not they are seen as heroes. We must expand our vision to be inclusive of those who have passed away, and those who are not “obvious” heroes. Those who have become martyrs for society through changes in the status quo deserve just as much importance and infamy as the others.

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