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TRANPOSED HEROES: SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR SUBJECTIVE HEROISM

Chloe L. Zaloom and Scott T. Allison

Have you ever found yourself in a debate with friends or family, disagreeing over the moral character of a hero turned villain/villain turned hero, in a classic movie or story? You two just can't agree on whether that person is truly a hero or villain. While there has been a recent push for research into the science of heroism, there remains a similar divide amongst scholars. There are those who believe that heroism can be defined by certain objective criteria. There are others who vehemently oppose this notion and claim that heroism is extremely subjective. These scholars will argue that there is no standard method of measuring heroism; that heroism and villainy are actually in the eye of the beholder. Those who are proponents of the objective approach to heroism have agreed upon certain heroic standards that need to be met. These include the notion that heroism involves taking extremely risky and exceptional actions, for the greater good of society, and in spite of

great personal sacrifice (Allison & Goethals, 2016). While there have been slight modifications or tweaks to these criteria, these standards are generally agreed upon amongst those who prefer the objective approach to heroism science.

Those who lean towards a more subjective perspective to heroism tend to challenge these strict specifications. They point out that most of the criteria are open to vast interpretation and are very much subjective. Subjective heroism scholars will debate how “exceptional” an action has to be, what determines “great risk”, as well as question who sets these thresholds. Moreover, there are often instances where the line between what is considered good versus evil and who is considered heroic versus villainous is quite blurry. Joseph Campbell, a scholar known for contributing ideas that developed critical theories of heroism science, points out the rigidity of the objective approach saying, “You could be a local god, but for the people whom that local god conquered, you could be the enemy. Whether you call someone a hero or a monster is all relative...” (Campbell, 1991).

Campbell brilliantly points out a major flaw to the objective approach: when an individual can be considered both a hero and a villain. This belief is fascinating to scholars who adopt the subjective approach, prompting them to focus on how the people and society perceive and judge heroes and villains, compared to objective scholars who focus mainly on defining heroism. Through this research, subjective scholars have identified three main taxonomies of heroism; situational demand-based, social influence-based, and a social-structure based taxonomy (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017).

In Goethals and Allison’s examination into dimensions of influence, they devised the social-influence based taxonomy of heroism. This taxonomy divides heroes into the following subtypes; trending, transitory, transitional, tragic, transposed, transparent, traditional, transfigured, transforming and transcendent (Allison & Goethals, 2013). In support of the subjective approach, these subtypes attempt to account for the various degrees and forms of heroism that defy objective standards. Specifically, Allison and Goethals’ proposal of the transposed hero is a phenomenal example of how the criteria of heroism can be relative.

TRANSPosed HEROES

Transposed heroes generally “undergo rapid change from either villain to hero or from hero to villain” (Allison et al., 2017). These are individuals who experience a reversal in their status, and either transition from hero to villain or vice versa. These occurrences emphasize the fine line between heroism and villainy. Heroes and villains embody many of the same qualities, yet it is truly a sense of moral obligation that differentiates the two. Transposed villains to heroes exemplify how even those who seem irredeemable can feel this sense of moral obligation, then transition towards becoming a hero and making the right decisions.

In contrast, transposed heroes to villains are also an interesting point of study being that they are epitomes of moral righteousness that have lost their way and turned towards dark and evil actions. Additionally, transposed heroes are a prime example of how heroism is in the eye of the beholder specifically because of this reversal in status. An individual who is regarded as a villain to group A yet a hero to group B, but is then transposed, could very well be considered a new foe to group B and a sudden hero to group A. These two aspects of transposed heroism speak to both the fact that the objective evaluative methods used to define heroism are not so consistent, as well as pokes holes in the idea that everyone in society perceives an individual to be of same heroic or villainous nature.

Transposed heroism often refers to these two types of individuals: the hero turned evil or the villain who found the path to redemption. These two paths are not always the case, however, and there are also instances when a single individual can cycle through states of good to bad and bad to good (Goethals & Allison, 2013). The same individual can be considered either a villain or hero at various stages of their life. This type of transposed hero is especially powerful evidence in favor of adopting a subjective approach to studying heroism. With an in depth look into four case studies; those of Severus Snape, Jerry Givens, the Grinch and Oskar Schindler, this chapter aims to reinforce the subjective approach to studying heroism using transposed heroes as supporting evidence.

CASE STUDY I: SEVERUS SNAPE

As Goethals and Allison (2012) point out that, “transposed heroism is quite common in fictional accounts of heroes, particularly in the superhero and horror genres” (p. 131). Furthermore, they argue that “writers of fiction know that people are transfixed by stories involving sudden displays of magic and supernatural power. When these powers are unleashed, heroes are either born or undergo instant transformations” (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Goethals and Allison make a strong point when they state that readers are captivated by stories involving heroes and magic, as evident by the popularity of author, J.K Rowling’s, Harry Potter series. Based on Goethals and Allison’s point regarding how people obsess over magical heroes, it is unsurprising that readers have fallen in love with many of Rowling’s fictional characters, including Harry’s sinister professor, Severus Snape.

Severus Snape is a professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts and the Potions Master at Hogwarts, a prestigious magical school of wizardry. Time and time again, Snape is referenced as mysterious, and is a known threat that undermines the progress of heroes Harry, Ron and Hermione. A little background into Snape’s life history reveals his evil tendencies; it is implied that Snape is friendless and uncared for by his parents, he became interested in the dark arts at a young age, and he ended up involved with pure-blood supremacists. Snape’s passion for the Dark Arts increased his desire for revenge against his childhood nemesis, James Potter, for stealing the love of his life, Lily Evans (Potter). In a misguided attempt to win back Lily’s affections, Snape joins the Death Eaters; a name given to followers of the ultimate villain in Rowling’s novels, Voldemort. A lack of love and support system largely shaped his bitter disposition and unusually cruel behavior later in life. In his mission for vengeance, Snape takes some truly evil measures that brand him as a traditional villain.

When Snape had first joined the Death Eaters, he was the spy responsible for notifying Voldemort about the prophecy foretelling the dark lord’s destruction. Voldemort realized this prophesized hero was the child of Lily and James Potter, Harry, and decided to exterminate the threat. Through great sacrifice, Lily and James managed to protect their son, but at the expense of their lives. Snape had joined the Death Eaters and spend countless years loving Lily

Evans (Potter), only to end up the party responsible for her death. Snape is capable of murder himself when he brings about the demise of his longtime ally Dumbledore, towards the end of the series. In fact, Snape actually revels in creating potions and spells that can be used to torture and kill people. He is credited with creating a charm to make someone mute, enchantments that hoist victims in the air by their ankle and even a spell that causes horrible gashes and uncontrollable bleeding in victims. Unsurprisingly, throughout his time at Hogwarts, Snape was regarded as a harsh disciplinarian.

In his Defense Against the Dark Arts course, Snape was known for terrorizing his students with potions, magic and vicious jabs, all in the name of “education”. The reality of the situation was actually that Snape got some satisfaction out of bullying his students, who are the children of people who had harassed him. Snape’s torment of Harry and his friends continues throughout the entire series until the last book, when Rowling reveals the reality of Snape’s situation to the readers.

Eventually it is disclosed that while Snape may have been the spy that gave information leading to the Potter’s death, he also aimed to thwart Voldemort’s attempts to kill his beloved. Snape actually confessed his betrayal to Dumbledore and begged for his assistance. While Dumbledore was unable to protect Lily and James, he recruited Snape to watch over Harry throughout his life, a vow that Snape kept until his very last day. Snape was able to work as a double agent, deceiving the Dark Lord and gaining inside knowledge into his plans. It is even revealed that there was a prior arrangement in which Dumbledore agreed to Snape taking his life to protect Harry. Every action that Snape has taken, despite appearing mis-intentioned, was actually for the greater good and out of his love for Lily Potter. Snape pays the ultimate price and sacrifices his life in order to deceive Voldemort and give Harry a fighting chance at saving the world.

Furthermore, Snape acted extraordinarily with no expectation of recognition or respect. Harry, his friends, and many respected wizards despised Snape and believed the worst about him. Snape let his reputation suffer and continued to spy for Dumbledore and protect Harry’s life, despite knowing all too well

that many people hated him. Snape expected no admiration in return and acted solely out of the goodness of his heart. It is for these reasons that Severus Snape can be considered a transposed hero.

While Snape is a transposed hero, he is a rather unique example. In the classic sense Snape was a villain; he was a pure-blood supremacist, a Death Eater, and committed crimes with the intent to harm others, namely those who had wronged him. As stated early, transposed heroes are those that have undergone a transformation from villain to hero. This “transformation” for Snape began upon the realization that the woman he loved was dead and it was his doing. From that moment on, Snape adopted new motives and principles in an attempt to right his wrongs. He took great risk in playing double agent and protecting Harry, all based on his sense of moral responsibility to atone for his past. Snape knew the consequence of his decision would be his death but proceeded anyway. Following this line of thought, Snape is the classic transposed hero.

Snape is a transposed hero not only due to his moral epiphany and shift in character, but also based on the perception of his heroism. While there is some debate amongst Harry Potter fans as to whether or not Snape is genuinely a hero or villain based on his past intentions and inner qualities, the debate stems from the fact that it is unclear as to whether or not he was pretending to be evil all along. Assuming this is the case, Snape is still considered a transposed hero to the readers. Even if Snape was never ill-intentioned or evil, he certainly appeared that way to the readers. Appearances are reality and to fans of the series, Snape was in fact a villain. After Rowling reveals his backstory and clues readers in that Snape has given up his evil ways in the name of good, readers perceive Snape as a hero. He has been transposed in the eyes of the reader. Severus Snape, exemplifying the transposed hero, is a convincing example of how heroism and villainy are truly in the eye of the beholder.

CASE STUDY II: JERRY GIVENS

While Goethals and Allison (2012) are accurate in saying that transposed heroism is common in fiction and literature, there are also real instances where individuals have been transformed from villain or “monster” to “hero”. A great example is that of Jerry Givens, a renowned executioner who worked for the

Virginia Department of Corrections for 25 years. From 1982-1999 he served as the chief executioner for the Commonwealth and was responsible for 62 death row executions (Jouvenal, 2013). During these 17 years, Virginia actually fulfilled more capital punishment sentences than any state besides Texas (Jouvenal, 2013). Givens often used lethal injection and the electric chair to end prisoner's lives. The whole procedure involved praying with the death row inmate, preparing their last meal, shaving their head and then administering the execution (Nour, 2016). Throughout this entire process, Givens conviction never wavered.

When Givens took the job in 1982 he was somewhat ignorant to the prison and judicial systems of the United States. In a recent memoir of his career, Givens recalls that he could not understand why people would consciously commit crimes knowing the risk of getting caught was death. He is quoted as saying "a person [has] to be foolish to commit that kind of crime knowing they could be put to death. It's like volunteer suicide" (Givens, 2013). What really drew Givens to the job was an incident that occurred in his childhood that continued to influence him. When he was just 14 years old Givens was at a house party, standing in the corner and admiring a girl. He was gathering up the courage to ask her to dance when a man with a gun burst into the room and open fired; killing the girl. From that moment on, he firmly believed that those who commit crimes like this shooter had, deserved to die (Jouvenal, 2013). He carried this conviction with him throughout his career as an executioner.

Givens' life was shattered in 1999 when he was subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury. Givens and an old friend were charged with money laundering and perjury for purchasing cars with what prosecutors claim Givens knew was drug money. During his trial, Givens alleges that the U.S attorney told the jury, "he is by no means the worst criminal any of us will ever meet, but he did cross the line" (Givens, 2013). The jury voted to convict Givens, who spent at least four years behind bars while maintaining his innocence the entire time. After being forced to resign from the Department of Corrections, the prison guard and executioner who spent countless years enforcing the law suddenly had the law enforced on him. With time to reflect as an inmate, he looked to strengthen his Baptist faith in hopes of making sense of what had happened to him.

Givens has said that he spent much time in jail reading the Bible, specifically the story of Jesus's crucifixion, which holds a special meaning to the man whose job

was putting people to death. He reflected back to all the people he had taken the lives of and wondered how many of the 37 individuals executed via chair and 25 by lethal injection, were actually innocent (Givens, 2013). Over the course of those years Givens realized that the judicial system, upon which he had placed so much faith, was flawed.

After serving his sentence, the former executioner emerged from prison in 2004 as an adamant opposer of the death penalty (Jouvenal, 2013). Not long after his release, a lawyer and former executive director of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (VADP) named Jonathan Sheldon, had heard about Givens' story and decided to reach out. It was a remarkable discussion between an activist and a former chief executioner; one that paved the way for Givens future path as a vocal opponent and protestor of the death penalty. Givens became involved in VADP, attending regular meetings and actually joining the board around 2009 (Jouvenal, 2013). He began to travel the United States, giving talks about his experiences as a chief executioner and the epiphany where he realized his actions were truly wrong. In 2010, Givens gave a critical and powerful testimony at a state legislative hearing, challenging a bill designed to expand the use of capital punishment to accomplices in murders (Jouvenal, 2013). He told senators that "the people who pass these bills. They don't have to do it. The people who do the executions, they're the ones who suffer through it" (Jouvenal, 2013). Senators have said his raw and emotional testimony moved representatives, who ultimately voted to reject the proposed bill.

Givens' journey is an inspiring one and shows how even people who have been on a dark path can find the light towards redemption. What makes Givens' story so powerful is that it is a factual one rather than fiction or fantasy. Givens started out as a villain of the State, not just witnessing the horrors of capital punishment, but actually being the man responsible for "swinging the sword". His resolve never wavered and his faith in the U.S legal system remained solid. Yet having experienced this horrible injustice, he emerged from prison not as a bitter or angry man set on revenge, but as an enlightened man determined to bring about peace. This is the journey of a true transposed hero. Givens was transformed from someone capable of taking another human life, to someone devoted to educating others in the value of life. When asked what the biggest mistake he ever made while on the job was, Givens replied "biggest mistake I

ever made was taking the job as an executioner. Life is short. Life only consists of 24 hours a day. Death is going to come to us. We don't have to kill one another" (Givens, 2013).

Yet Givens heroic status as someone who has been transposed from villain to savior is up to interpretation. Those who are proponents of the death penalty might argue that Givens was never a villain to begin with. These people would debate that capital punishment is just, and that Givens was dutifully upholding the law. These same people might also say that as a reformed executioner now a determined activist in opposition of the death penalty, Givens is a villainous traitor to his country. Givens as a transposed hero emphasizes the blurry distinction between hero and villain. While Givens may have been a hero to some and a villain to others, he is now a hero to others and a villain to some, highlighting the subjectivity of heroic status.

CASE STUDY III: THE GRINCH

While real life transpositions make for meaningful exemplars, the influence that fictional heroes have on our understanding of heroism should not be underestimated. These fictitious stories are the ones that children hear while growing up. These tales have the lessons that we want young children to internalize. One such classic narrative is the transformation of the Grinch, which is often told around the holiday season. In his tale, there is a villainous green monster, known as the Grinch, who has a severe hatred for Christmas and all things joyful or festive. The Grinch lives on top of a mountain above a city called Whoville. The Whos are fun-loving people who take extreme delight in celebrating the holidays with feasts, gifts, decorations and cheerful Christmas singing. At the start of the story, the Grinch is watching the Whos prepare for Christmas while plotting a way to damper the holiday cheer. The narrator informs the readers that the Grinch's heart is two sizes too small, indicating that he is evil and incapable of love.

Brooding on his mountain top, the Grinch is horrified of the festivities going on below and decides he must put an end to them. The Grinch formulates a plan to dress up as Saint Nick, sneak down into Whoville and prevent Christmas from

being celebrated by confiscating all the holiday decorations. The Grinch, stuck in his evil ways, needed every Who in Whoville to be as unspirited and bitter around the holidays as he was. He makes his way down to Whoville and ransacks houses of all their holiday spirit, a move that is very much illegal. He stole all the presents, stockings, food for feasts, and even Christmas trees.

Taking his loot up to his lair, the Grinch was determined to get rid of the Christmas spirit once and for all by throwing all the decorations and goodies off the side of the mountaintop. Just as the Grinch is about to get rid of the Christmas supplies, he is suddenly hit with the notion that he has not heard the Whos crying for their lost presents and trinkets. He lifts an ear to hear for the sobs but is surprised when he hears a slight Christmas tune. Led by a young Who, named Cindy Lou, this tune grew louder and was bursting with cheer until all of Whoville was joining in the Christmas carol. The Grinch was taken aback with disbelief. He could not fathom how the holiday spirit could live on when he had stolen all of their Christmas belongings. Then the Grinch has an epiphany as he realized Christmas was not about the presents or the gifts, but about the spirit and joy one gets from being around family and friends. Realizing the error of his ways and inspired by the jubilee, the Grinch rushes to return all the stolen goods to the Whos down in Whoville. It is said that the Grinch's heart grew three times that day and he transitioned from evil villain determined to ruin the holidays to a hero that saves Christmas day. He discovers that what he was missing in his lonely life, was a sense of community and friendship during the holidays.

While the story of the Grinch may be fictional and a little far-fetched, it serves as a great example of transposed heroism for both children and adults. As Goethals and Allison put it, "the transpositions that occur in fictional literature do not occur in the real world, yet somehow they fascinate us. We are emotionally drawn to instantaneous shifts in morality and how these shifts play a role in creating or destroying heroes" (Allison & Goethals, 2016). The Grinch, a villain transposed to hero, is a prime example how not everyone is truly good or evil. The heroic deeds that the Grinch took cannot be objectively measured as heroic based on traditional standards, indicating that a subjective approach is more useful in deciphering the heroism in this Christmas tale.

CASE STUDY IV: OSKAR SCHINDLER

The final case study to be analyzed in this chapter is the true story of an Austro-Hungary business man who saved hundreds of lives during the twentieth century tragedy of the Holocaust. In 1908, Oskar Schindler was born in a German province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now a part of the Czech Republic (Byers, 2005). Schindler grew up in a deeply Catholic household, to well respected and extremely wealthy parents, Hans and Louisa Schindler, who owned a successful machinery business. Schindler was an attractive man who was used to getting what he wanted, which resulted in impulsive philandering and an excessive drinking problem. Schindler was also known as an opportunist and strategic business man. In the 1930's, he sensed that the political landscape was changing with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party (Byers, 2005).

Schindler used this opportunity to join a pro-Nazi activist group and started collecting information as a spy for the German military. He continued to spy until just before 1940, at which time Schindler traveled to the newly invaded Krakow, Poland in search of "get rich quick" scheme (Oskar Schindler Biography, 2015). A sleazy business man with a lack of moral compass, Schindler hoped to profit from the impending war at the expense of the Jewish people. He purchased a former Jewish enamelware factory with the intent on producing goods for the German military. Schindler viewed the Jewish people not as people at all, but rather as a source of cheap labor. He dehumanized them and reduced them to nothing but a means to make more money.

Through many of his Jewish workers, Schindler discovered that many of the local Krakow Jewish people were being sent to Plazow labor camp. He was told of the brutalities and atrocities that occurred there, and he believed the plans for mass extermination of millions of people were terrifying. Using his connections with the German government to convince officials to set up a portion of the Plazow labor camp in his factory. Schindler employed those who were unqualified and unfit to work, in turn sparing roughly 900 Jewish lives with this one action (Oskar Schindler Biography, 2015). Similarly, he negotiated with officials and was allowed to transfer over 700 Jews from the

Grossrosen concentration camp and roughly 300 women from Auschwitz, over to his factory (Oskar Schindler Biography, 2015). Under his care they received the food, clothing, shelter and medical attention; all at the expense of Schindler. Once they had been relocated from the camps to Schindler's factory, they were not forced to work. Schindler purposefully weakened the manufacturing process to make sure his products failed quality-control tests (Byers, 2005). He did this to hide the fact that his workers were not actually producing goods, but actually being rescued. Not only did he spend large amounts of money on the upkeep of his "workers", but he spent obscene amounts of money bribing the German military and government.

Schindler is another great example of a transposed hero in real life. He started out as a selfish individual who was only concerned with making money. He dehumanized the Jewish people and reduced them to nothing more than a means to make money quickly. After being faced with the injustices and hearing tales of brutalities against the Jewish people, Schindler came to recognize his workers as humans who had been exposed to ruthless slaughter. This came to be his only motivation Schindler had for risking his life, fortune, and the safety of his family. He was arrested twice and had to bribe officials to avoid punishment (Byers, 2005). Schindler takes great personal risk and sacrifices much, with the aim of alleviating the suffering of as many Jewish people as possible. He has been transposed from a greedy businessman to a humanitarian and hero in this inspiring story of redemption.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter does not aim to discredit the objective approach to heroism or undermine its value. There are benefits to analyzing heroism using an objective approach, which include clear standards and guidelines for determining an individual's status as hero, villain, or bystander. Furthermore, it is beneficial that some aim to objectively define heroism, since a clear definition could expand the knowledge and growth of heroism science. Instead, this chapter seeks to explore the idea that there are instances of heroism or villainy that cannot be accounted for by the current objective definition of heroism. Transposed heroes are exemplars for why it is valuable to consider a

subjective technique when evaluating acts of heroism (Bennett, Efthimiou, & Allison, 2020).

The case studies in this chapter serve to identify various types of transposed heroism. There are instances when someone has committed genuinely evil actions with the intent to harm or exploit others. These people have had some kind of epiphany or revelation and realize the error of their ways. They then shift their behavior to act heroically. People will debate whether an individual who is making up or preventing an evil action of their own doing, can really be considered a heroic savior (Allison, 2015). Some will argue that this redemption makes the individual a hero, while others will disagree. This conflict is a great example of the type of transposed hero that emphasizes the fine line behind villainy and heroism. Likewise, there are instances where an individual is considered both a hero and a villain to different groups of people. When this individual undergoes transposition, they then hold the opposite heroic or villainous status in the eyes of those groups, further stressing that heroism is more subjective rather than objective. There are also cases where an individual may appear to be the villain, but they are actually the hero all along. They have been despised by people until it is revealed that their actions have heroic intentions. This highlights how easy it is for someone who is viewed as a villain to suddenly be regarded as a hero. This idea also hints that while transposed heroes can either be morally, spiritually and physically transformed, they can also be transposed in their perception as a hero.

This chapter briefly mentioned Goethals and Allison's idea that transposed heroism is often seen in fictional circumstances or in literature (Goethals & Allison, 2013). This is an interesting point that hints at the idea that transposed heroism might occur more frequently in fictional narratives compared to real life. An interesting point of future research could be to validate or reject this notion, and perhaps aim to decipher why. Are literary transposed heroes a reflection of the authors desire to transpose themselves? Is there some major obstacle in the real world that does not exist in fiction that prevents or dissuades transposition? These are valid questions that could guide potential research directions.

Furthermore, in both reality and fiction alike, there seems to be more cases of a villain transposed to become a hero than vice versa. Time and time again there are stories of a villain or terrible human who has committed some heinous

actions, then ends up finding redemption and atoning for their past mistakes. This theme of redemption is very prominent for transposed villains to heroes.

However, there seem to be far less cases where a hero or saint gives into their dark temptations and turns evil. This could indicate that there is some quality that heroes possess, that villains do not, that makes them less susceptible to corruption and evil temptations. Future research into the rate of hero to villain, versus villain to hero transpositions could prove invaluable. Further studies could also aim to identify if heroes possess such an incorruptible quality, and what that attribute is. While these subsequent directions for heroism research are compelling, the objective of this chapter is not to overanalyze traits of transposed heroes. Rather this chapter is designed to use case studies of various types of transposed heroes to stress how these heroic courses cannot simply be explained by the objective definition of heroism. Instead, adopting a subjective approach to studying heroes proves to be effective in interpreting varied heroic journeys.

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