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When Myth Meets Man: The Making of a Hero*

by Mark Perkins

God made man, but Colonel Colt made them equal.

Anonymous

The Scenario

The Myth awakes and glides silently from its dark abode. Moving effortlessly through the night, it descends on a sleeping cowboy. The Myth sinks into the man and a Hero is born.

A tall stranger rides into town. At his approach mothers move their children indoors and storekeepers close their shops. He stops before the only saloon in town and dismounts. His spurs jingle in the stillness of the street as he ascends the pair of steps to the board sidewalk. All conversation is stilled when he pushes wide the swinging doors of the saloon. A pair of menacing toughs lounging at the bar take a special interest in the stranger. A look is exchanged between the pair and hands blur toward low-slung revolvers. Gunfire rips through the saloon, shattering the silence.

Pulling his hat low over his eyes, the stranger mounts his horse. He turns his mount toward the setting sun and rides slowly out of town. Behind him he leaves a pair of dead outlaws and a town free of fear.

The Myth

"Heroism feels and never reasons and therefore is always right."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Being a Hero can be a dirty job, but it is not all dusty saloons, back alleys, and dismal swamps. To be a Hero, there are three things you must learn. First, you must express the proper morals; second, you

***WARNING:** Much of this essay has sexist overtones because the type of Hero described here is universally male and subscribes to all of the stereotypically male attitudes.

must obtain a gun and learn to use it; and finally, you must be the best at whatever you do. Having keen eyesight, a strong stomach, and a good hat are bonuses which make life a little easier.

Of the "Big Three," seizing the moral high ground is of utmost importance. As long as your mission is a moral one, you can bend, break, or rampage across the law, human rights, or international relations without fear of retribution. In fact, a moral mission will put all right-thinking people firmly on your side. This sea of public support will allow you, in any way you see fit, to thwart evil cattle barons, track down the vilest of criminal scum, or defend America against the hordes of Heathen Nations who stand ready to unleash a torrent of destruction upon her shores. The moral nature of your mission can also pave your way to public acclaim and great personal glory.

Unfortunately, this road is, more often than not, paved with lead rather than gold. That's why you, as a Hero, must have a gun. The choice of portable personal protection is left up to the individual, but some things must be taken into consideration. You must choose a firearm with which you can be comfortable, which means it should fit both your environment and your needs. Fitting into your environment is the easier of the two requirements, as all you need to do is make a careful selection at your local gun emporium. Just remember, a bazooka may pack more punch, but a Saturday Night Special is a lot easier to conceal in the waste--or is it waist?--band of your pants. Impact, however, is vital in choosing a firearm. You must be aware of the effect your firearm is going to have on those you unleash it upon. Visual stimuli is a very effective deterrent to wrongdoers. For this reason, a .44 Magnum is going to have more of an impact on the average street punk than a Ronko Pocket Pervert Pulverizer will. The mere sight of the first will cause extreme terror while the latter only inspires laughter.

Finding a weapon which fits your needs is somewhat more difficult. You must remember that you will be living with that weapon for the rest of your life. You'll eat with it and sleep with it. Eventually you'll begin to talk to it and finally come to love it, which is why most Heroes are loners. After all, a woman can keep you warm at night, but a gun will keep the chill of death from your bones.

Being able to handle your chosen weapon in an emergency, or just for fun, is an entry level requirement of Herodom. You should practice until you can blast the left wing off an albino mosquito in a blizzard. This may seem extreme, but it's going to be hard to impress your partner if you can't shoot "smily faces" into the anatomy of perpetrators at fifty paces.

Expertise in the care and feeding of firearms is not all that must be mastered in order to be a Hero. You must also be able to speak the language of the street. You must know whom to bribe and whom to threaten; be able to handle a horse or a woman with equal ease; in a nutshell, you must be the best.

Being the best means that no one "out there" is better than you are. You are the fastest gun in the West, the most hardbitten detective ever, or the superest of the super soldiers. You're invincible. Mere bullets are not enough to bring you down, or even to hold your interest for more than a minute. Your friends can leave you alone, in a full body cast, with no ammunition, and night closing in, and you can still rack up a triple digit body count. You can be drunk, drugged, beat up, and shot twice in less than an hour and still solve the crime of the century. No force on earth can stand in your way when you're the best. And if you are not, pick out your casket now 'cause the baddies play hardball too.

Being a Hero isn't easy, but some things make keeping America safe for Mom, apple pie, and Chevrolet an easy task. Keen eyesight is one of those things. It allows you, the observant Hero, to spot those among the population who wish to do you bodily harm. It is also good for spotting discount ammo, something that is important to the Hero who uses a weapon capable of firing a million rounds a minute. Possessing a strong stomach is also a bonus. It allows you to consume the beef jerky, C-rations, or stale coffee and cold doughnuts on which Heroes feed, and to touch off those rather messy explosions which are such an effective form of "vermin" control without turning that un-heroic shade of green.

The last and most important of the bonus qualities is a good hat. The hat is the Hero's good luck charm, which must always be retrieved when dropped, no matter what the cost. The retrieval wastes precious seconds which allows you to arrive in the "nick of time" to make the heroic rescue, instead of just "in time," which isn't nearly as dramatic. The hat is also the badge of your office. Every good Hero has some form of headgear which acts as a sacred totem.

Analyzing the Myth

There is more, however, that is sacred about a Hero than his hat. Every part of the myth--the morality, the power of life and death the Hero wields, and his ability to succeed--is what elevates him to demi-god status. The basing of his mission in the morals of the majority make the Hero likable (Jones 55). Men who kill and destroy for pleasure are

branded "psychotic" while those who do it "to bring a criminal to justice" are called Heroes. The criminal need not even survive in order to be judged. In fact, it is better if he does not, because he could be acquitted and go on to commit even more mayhem. It is much easier for the Hero to judge him guilty and carry out the sentence.

Along with the authority to judge must go the power to execute. For this reason, the Hero carries death strapped to his leg, or under his arm, or in his hands. Death must also ride in his head because no Hero can shrink from pulling the trigger when it is time for the sentence to be carried out. In order to be a Hero, he has to be ready to take a life, but in keeping with THE MISSION, only to protect a life.

In order to be trusted with the power to judge and execute, the Hero must be an exceptional individual. He needs to be able to survive in the most hostile of environments, among people who want him dead. He must decide who lives and who dies in an instant, by his hand and by those of others. He has to be successful or die trying; he must never fail. He is not allowed failure because, as an American Hero, he is an embodiment of popular American values which stipulate that failure is not to be tolerated.

The American Hero also embodies a type of independence which goes beyond what is acceptable for "polite" society. Part of his character is based in the savage nature of man which excludes him from civilization (Cawelti 47). He walks the line between civilization and the barbarians, the outlaws, the criminals, and the Enemy. He is accepted fully by neither group and is therefore a loner. The Hero needs no one because of the savage skills he possesses. He is perfectly capable of defending himself and prefers to do so rather than be restrained by society. He chooses the wilderness which exists beyond society, whether it is an actual wilderness or a lifestyle which puts him beyond the constraints of civilization (Cawelti 55).

Part of the Hero's separation from society is his alienation from women. The Hero's savage nature clashes with the more domesticated nature of the woman, causing a rift of nearly insurmountable size (Cawelti 61). He can not give up his savage lifestyle for her civilized existence and she can not change hers to be able to participate in his. Love, when it does strike, is dealt with as any other foe would be. The Hero simply grits his teeth and continues on his way, or succumbs and hangs up his gun.

The type of American Hero described here is a living Myth. It is an entity that possesses a life and vitality all its own. It is shaped by the ideals of the American people, drawing its current identity from the culture which created it. The name and face of the man who wears the

mantle of the hero today are interchangeable with the thousands of other Heroes who have come before. Men such as Natty Bumpo, Marshal Dillon, Mike Hammer, and Dirty Harry Callahan express The Myth of the American Hero. It will, however, live on after these Heroes, and others like them, have faded away.

The Hero was born out of the emotional ties people feel for each other and for their country, the need to feel protected, and an urge to oversimplify the solving of problems through violence. A patriotic undercurrent swells beneath the attachment we feel for our popular Heroes. Each one is a defender of something which is held sacred by the nation, whether it is the righting of wrongs, the bringing of the criminal to justice, or the defense of the National Honor. The Hero also is the strong arm of retribution which all of us want to flex from time to time. He is a way for the "common man" to perform uncommon feats and to be a defender of what he holds sacred.

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