

Anti-Hero or Accidental Hero?

The Anti-Hero is not conflicted, he is a goody-goody wuss

Characters like "Dirty Harry," and Jim McClane (Die Hard, 1988) are often described as "anti heros" since their gruff, unkempt, anti-social demeanour conflicts with their do-good, heroic image. On the face of it then, the anti-hero as portrayed by these rogue cops, is a more 'complex', 'nuanced' or, 'flawed' hero. Anti-heroes are, we are told, a little bit evil, or morally ambivalent, not just a bunch of unrealistically, steadfast, moral *goody-goodies*.

I argue here that on the contrary, that the "anti-hero," is in fact even more unrealistically idealistic, moral and "goody-goody" by virtue of their accidental nature.

First of all we hardly need to be reminded what *all* action heroes do; they shoot bad guys and generally destroy a lot of property in the process. Shooting people and wrecking cars are usually seen as examples of undesirable behaviour. The hero remains the target of our admiration and identification due to the existence of the bad guy (it is almost always a male) against whom the hero rises in righteous rebellion. The hero thus is always, at the outset, a degree accidental, dependant upon the entrance of the bad guy for his or her existence.

But is this enough? The best amongst us might urge a hero to back down from action and 'turn the other cheek'. It can at least be argued that, hurting people, even bad people, is bad. To protect heros from this slur, their enemies become progressively more twisted and evil, the number of people that they threaten and that the hero must protect, progressively larger until, Flash Gordon¹ (comic strip 1934, film 1980) and others become "saviour of the universe".

But then somewhere on the way, even this was not enough. Flash Gordon started to get on our nerves. We stopped liking him as much as we used to. We started to get the feeling that he was not such a good guy, that he is, as his name suggests, "flash", egotistical, not so very nice at all.

Incipit the so called "anti-hero". The gruffness, the antisocial, and even irresponsible persona is merely a veneer to allow *an even greater moral purity*; anti-heroes, are not happy in their role, they did not want to be heroes, *their heroics are accidental*.

For example, the McClane character in all of the Die Hard films is an **accidental hero**. McClane just wants to go home to his wife, meet his wife's plane, go back to bed, or retire, but circumstances, events, and some really nasty bad guys **force him to become a hero**. Paradoxically, McClane becomes even more of a hero, because his heroics are accidental.

Above all, the accidental nature of his heroism, protect him from any claim of hypocrisy. Bad guys are generally motivated by self-interest. They seek money or power, or some kind of ego boost, the

fulfilment of a self-centred desire. Selfishness is at the heart of evil.

Die Hard's Jim McClane is however not rescuing people and killing bad guys through any James Bondian desire to be suave, or because he has a big John Wayne² of an ego. Jim McClane does not even want to become involved but (like Clint Eastwood in the Dirty Harry movies, and Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca) a situation arises where he simply has no choice but to step up to the plate. Usually a bad guy arrives at the party that he is attending, or the plane that his wife is on gets hijacked. Lets have a look at some of the scenes in which the accidental nature of the anti-hero becomes apparent.

From Casablanca (1942):

Rick Blaine: "Of all the gin joints in all the world, she walks into mine."

Rick is hiding out in Morocco. Through a series of coincidences, culminating in the arrival of his ex-girlfriend, Ilsa Lund, the embittered, cynical "anti-hero" Rick is catapulted, unwillingly, into the role of the most acclaimed accidental hero in Hollywood cinema.

From Dirty Harry (1971)

Harry Callahan: [after having reported the "211" armed robbery in progress, to the police and biting into his hotdog] Just wait till the cavalry arrives. [Alarm bell rings] Ah, shit.

This scene ends with one of Harry Callahan's most famous lines "You've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya punk?"

The same *being-disturbed-at-mealtime* trope was repeated in the third film in the Dirty Harry series, Sudden Impact (1983), in the scene leading up to Clint Eastwood's most famous line "make my day," though this time Harry is disturbed in his enjoyment of a black coffee. In either case, Harry Callahan allows himself sadistic enjoyment of the suffering of the punks that he is bringing to justice. We forgive him because the viewer knows that Harry did not give reign to his sadistic desire. Harry just wanted to finish his hotdog, or his coffee. His violent course of action - which if he is to take, he might as well enjoy - was forced upon him.

From Die Hard 2 (1990):

Captain (of airport security) Lorenzo: Hey McClane, I've got a first class unit in here: swat team and all. We don't need any Monday morning quarterback.

McClane: Fuck Monday morning, my wife is on one of the god damn planes these guys are fucking with. That puts me on the playing field.

McClane also notices and claims to lament the coincidence, since this is the second film in the Die Hard series.

McClane: Ah man, I can't fucking believe this. Another basement, another elevator. How could

the same shit happen to the same guy, twice?

At the same time, when compared to the hero who takes action into his own hands, the anti-hero lacks the courage of his conviction. He can not step right up to the plate, actively seek a position of responsibility. In that sense he is weak, and that is why, as well as a goody-goody, I call him a wuss. This is why the most grim, gravelly-voiced, strong and macho actors must be used in these anti-hero roles.

¹ In fact even Flash Gordon arrives as an anti-hero. In the first comic strip he is forced to board the rocket stops the comet threatening to destroy the earth.

² John Wayne also portrays accidental, anti-heros such as in "The Searchers" (1956).