



"What Makes A Great Hero?"

by Mark O'Bannon



What Makes A Great Hero?

Great heroes are rare to find, while flat, uninteresting characters are all too common in stories. Why is this so? Some tales have epic heroes while others contain lifeless, boring characters doing the same old things as a thousand average characters in other stories.

Where do characters like Gandalf, Harry Potter, or Sam Spade come from? What makes these characters so compelling, so interesting, so . . . heroic? Are larger than life heroes made by accident? Is it random happenstance? Can you learn how to make the heroes of your own stories truly great?

Where Do Great Heroes Come From?

Epic heroes are created from a combination of things. First of all, you need to think of your hero as someone who is as great as any other of the epic characters from famous stories. Many authors never consider placing their characters besides such greats as Huck Finn, Frodo Baggins, Sherlock Holmes, Conan or Batman. The first step in making a character great is to imagine it in your own mind. When you do this, your subconscious will begin the process of constructing a character that's larger than life. Now, what techniques can be used to make a hero great?

Skills, Powers, Abilities

Give your hero a skill, power or ability that others lack. Luke Skywalker could sense the force. Sherlock Holmes had a keen mind and the powers of deductive reasoning. Not all characters need to be a superhero, but your characters should have some unique ability that sets them apart from a normal person. You could make your hero eloquent, aristocratic, or streetwise.

The Mythic Hero vs. The Everyday Hero

The Greeks thought of a hero as a greater version of humanity. Not a god, but greater than normal mortals, their heroes were capable of doing great things. Aristotle called this kind of person a "**Great Souled Man**." Modern storytelling has featured the "everyday" man, the average person, caught up in a story. These are simply two different styles. If you're writing a myth or if you're combining a myth with another genre, you may want to think of your character as someone who could sit beside one of the Greek heroes. If you want to tell a more routine tale, you can still make your hero great by giving them a powerful personality, by making them a visionary, or you could make them a person of passion, someone who believes strongly in things.

What Makes A Character Interesting?

Character flaws make your hero fascinating to the reader. What weakness does the hero have? Every hero should have a character flaw, something that may be ruining his or her life. For instance, your hero might be arrogant, or perhaps your hero is simply unsure of himself.

When you create flawed characters, the audience immediately identifies with them (actually, the audience identifies with the need for the character to overcome their flaw).

One thing to be careful of when you're choosing a character flaws is to not give the hero a flaw that causes the audience to hate the hero. As a rule, people will not cheer for a hero if he or she harms innocent people.

Values

Great characters have values. Does your hero live by any standards? Bravery, cynicism, friendship, generosity – these are the things people consider important. When your characters have values, they are fighting to defend those values. Otherwise, it's like watching a boxing match where you don't know the participants. One person will win the fight, but who cares?

Archetypes

You may want to match an archetype (or a classical character role) to your hero. Is the character a prince? A hermit? A magician? A shadow? Archetypes have been used in psychology to get a greater sense of a person. An archetype can help you envision an entire range of things that will help you in creating the character. Feel free to combine archetypes in your characters.

The Opponent

Characters are defined by their actions and by the actions of other characters in the story. Have you ever watched one of your favorite TV shows where they removed a character and then brought someone new in? It often throws the whole show off course. This is because characters are defined by the way they interact with the other characters in the story. The relationship between the main character and the antagonist is the best way to define your hero. Your hero will only be as powerful as the opponent. If the opponent is an epic character like Darth Vader, then it will make your hero greater.

Action Steps

Here are some steps you can take to construct a great hero:

1. Can you imagine your hero sitting besides the other great heroes of other tales?
2. What unique skills, powers or abilities does your character have?
3. How can you immediately demonstrate this in the opening scenes of the story?
4. Is your hero passionate about something?
5. What is your hero's greatest desire?
6. What is the main character flaw of your hero?
8. What are your character's values?
9. What classical character(s) does your hero resemble?
10. What kind of opponent is working against the hero, and how does the hero fight back?