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What is a Hero?

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16 December, 2021

Breaking Expectations: Comedy, Horror, and Heroism

The genres of comedy and horror are both defined by deviations from cultural expectations of behavior. In the case of comedy, characters break expectations, making the audience laugh, while in horror, the same actions instill fear or unease. In either case, deviations may be embedded in the plot, or in the characters themselves. And in either case, these genre elements can be analyzed through heroic frameworks. Heroism has traditionally been defined as the domain of male characters who kill monsters and save the world. But heroism can also be a function of genre— the comedy of *The Favourite* (2018) is firmly embedded in the so-called "epic" heroism of its main character Abigail, who breaks expectations and generates humor through her heroic traits. And the horror of *Midsommar* (2019) is contained within Dani's failure to conform to the expectations of the traditional hero's journey. The frameworks of heroism are agile enough to contain and defy expectations, allowing characters to make us laugh or make us shiver in fear.

The Epic Hero as Comic Figure

The Favourite (2018), directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, is a black comedy drama and follows Abigail Hill, an impoverished young noblewoman and cousin of Sarah Churchill, the Queen Anne's lover and advisor, as she ingratiates herself at court and seduces the queen herself. Unfortunately for Abigail, Sarah hates her for usurping her position.. Eventually, Abigail drugs Sarah, causing her to disappear for a number of weeks. In that time, Abigail marries Colonel

Samuel Masham, solidifying her position at court. Abigail lies to Anne, telling her that Sarah had been stealing money from the kingdom and Anne officially exiles Sarah. Abigail, now officially the queen's favorite, abuses her position and the film ends on a shot of Anne bearing down on Abigail's head as she massages her leg. The film's plot is not especially comedic, and the bulk of the comedy comes from the characters, especially Abigail. It is for this reason that her heroism is best described through Gregory Nagy's traits of epic heroes.

The comedy within Abigail's first meeting with Sarah showcases within Abigail all three of the traits that Nagy proposes in his paper "The Epic Hero: A Companion to Ancient Epic:" the hero is "unseasonal," or in the right place at the wrong time; positively or negatively extreme; and "antagonistic toward the god who seems to be most like the hero" (28). Nagy's project is to describe traits common to epic heroes of the ancient world— Gilgamesh, Heracles, Arjuna, and other typically male semi-divine subjects of epic poetry. But these traits provide a useful framework for thinking about heroism in other characters as well; if that which makes the epic hero heroic is not their journey but a set of character traits, then those traits can also reasonably be applied to characters we usually do not think of as heroic. And because the comedy in *The Favourite* is embedded in the characters, as opposed to the plot, their heroism is best described through Nagy's framework.

In her meeting with Sarah, Abigail is doubly unseasonal and out of place: she is both a noblewoman covered in mud begging for a job and a servant interrupting a lords' game of billiards. As a result, she does not know how to act, leading to the comic aspects of the scene— at one point, Sarah mockingly suggests that Abigail be employed as a "monster for the children to play with" (5:27), to which Abigail responds by growling and putting her arms in the air like

claws (5:32-5:36), her noble status allowing her to interact familiarly with Sarah and her impoverishment preventing her from preserving her dignity.

Her unseasonality is the origin of Abigail's extremeness. Although later in the film she becomes extremely skilled as a courtier and manipulator, here she is extremely unskilled. She is the most ridiculous person in the room, bringing with her stinking mud and swarming flies (4:59) and talking about masturbation (4:52). Her extreme lack of grace is the basis of much of the comedy in the scene— in their book *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik state that the sources of comic surprise are grounded in "the sudden contradiction of expectations" (83). We learn that Abigail is the daughter of a nobleman and therefore expect her to be socially graceful. She fails miserably, and we (and Sarah) laugh.

Lastly, this same scene forms the basis for her antagonism with the "gods." Although there are no supernatural elements to the story, Sarah is a powerful political and social force, effectively ruling on behalf of the queen and attempting to determine the boundaries of the queen's social life. She is the Hera of the story, a jealous lover who, as desperately as she tries, cannot maintain her grasp on power. And if Sarah is Hera, Abigail is Heracles, refusing to sacrifice her own shot at power for the sake of someone else. It is this scene, their first meeting, in which this rivalry is established— Abigail embarrasses Sarah by forcing her to admit in front of her husband and the Prime Minister that they are cousins and that her uncle is "The one who went mad and burnt his own house down, himself in it" (5:11). Although they are not yet political rivals, this embarrassment establishes Abigail as someone for Sarah to resent. And this embarrassment is again a contradiction of expectations— we do not expect cousins to be rivals, and yet they are, and we laugh.

Using Nagy's framework, we see that the existence of each of the epic heroic traits within Abigail is in some way an origin of the comedy of the film. And because the film itself is by no means an epic, perhaps these traits are sufficient for not only analyzing epic heroes, but comedic heroes as well.

Horror and the Other Within

Ari Aster's 2019 horror drama *Midsommar* follows the story of American graduate student Dani Ardor as she visits the Hårga, a small, isolated Swedish community, to participate in their annual mid-summer celebration with her boyfriend Christian and his friends. Although the film establishes from the beginning that Christian is unhappy, he continues the relationship to support her after the tragic murder-suicide of Dani's sister and parents. Their relationship continues deteriorating as they realize that the community that they are visiting is a cult, intent on brainwashing Dani into becoming part of the group and killing the rest of the friends. Eventually Dani is the only American left alive, and she, completing her metamorphosis into the monstrous Other, kills Christian as well. Because the horrifying aspects of the film are embedded in the story, as opposed to the characters, it is most usefully analyzed through the lens of Dani's Hero's Journey, but instead of the typical heroic cycle of descent, trials, mastery, and return, due to her emotional vulnerability, Dani corrupts the return process by failing to resist the temptation stage and perverting the subsequent stages, rendering her fully an Other. The horror elements of the film are best captured through two models of monstrosity, which scholars understand as the basis for all horror— the Othered versus the internal monsters model, and the escaped repression model, both described in their own chapters of *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett.

In her chapter "Eros and Syphilization: The Contemporary Horror Film," Dana B. Polan proposes what I call the Othered versus the internal monsters model, a dichotomy of horror films' own conceptualization of monsters. The monster of the classic 1950s horror film was a manifestation of the Other— she cites the 1958 film *It, The Terror from Beyond Space*, in which "everything conspires to assert the Otherness of the monster – its complete and irrevocable difference from everything the film upholds as the decent everyday world. ... Even the title suggests the difference of the monster by turning it into a mere thing, an 'It'" (142-143). The prototypical 1950s monster is an alien or a foreigner, so destructive that "the desire to deal with the monster through anything other than violence is misguided" (143). In contrast, the monster of the 1970s and 1980s is internal to society. These "new" monsters (Polan's essay was first published in 1982) are "part of the human realm itself"— the horror is "not merely among us, but rather part of us, caused by us" (143). Although Polan arranges this model of differing monstrosities chronologically, it helps us differentiate the various subjects of social anxieties at any given point, and we see both models represented in *Midsommar*, despite the monster taking not the form of a non-human beast, but of a murderous cult.

The other significant model of monstrosity comes from Robin Wood in her chapter "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." Wood draws on the Freudian concept of surplus repression, which she defines as "the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within [their] culture" (108). Her primary example of repression in her reader's everyday life is that of sexuality, wherein an individual represses their innate homosexual urges in order to conform to the heterosexual life set out for them. Although Wood and Polan share similarities in their descriptions of monsters as Other, Wood's conceptualization is not that of an extraterrestrial or foreign Other, but the repressed Other, who

cannot maintain the expectations that we put on it. For Wood, the horror genre itself is "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses: ... its re-emergence dramatized ... as an object of horror" (113). The repressed Other, then, is a manifestation of the Other within ourselves.

Midsommar masterfully uses both conceptualizations of the monster to horrify its audience and disrupt Dani's heroic journey. The Hårga are a perfect foreign Other— they live in the Swedish wilderness, their customs unrecognizable to Dani and the audience. Halfway through the film, the Hårga hold an *ättestupa*— a ritual suicide by the oldest members of the cult, which deeply disturbs Dani and her friends. But as Christian rightfully says, "We stick our elders in nursing homes. I'm sure they find that disturbing" (1:14:04). The Hårga are monsters only outside of their cultural context, as foreign Others, as the embodiment of broken expectations.

But Dani herself also becomes a monster, her inability to conform to "predetermined roles" and expectations of grief effectively Othering her. We expect her to complete the Hero's Journey, but She is unable to move past, to repress, the trauma of her family dying, and when she is given an outlet and community to express her feelings, the temptation is too strong and she gives in, fails in her journey, and becomes a monster.

The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell describes and codifies the typical heroic cycle, which he calls "the hero's journey" in his seminal 1949 work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The hero's journey is a 17-step summary of plots of the archetypal hero story that spans across cultures and traditions— Campbell even goes so far as to argue that this description is completely universalizable (28). Although the exact order of the steps varies from story to story and heroes do not necessarily go

through every step, the cycle as a whole is quite uniform¹ and follows a strict structure. The hero begins their journey in the mundane - not necessarily the real world, but a state of status quo - where they receive a call to adventure. After gaining supernatural aid, the hero crosses a threshold into an otherworld, where they defeat evils, overcome trials and resist temptation. At the end of the journey, the hero travels back to the mundane, where they are changed for the better.

Dani follows this beginning of this hero's journey almost perfectly— she is called to adventure by Christian and his friends and crosses the threshold into the otherworld on the plane ride to Sweden, where she has a moment of doubt crying in the plane bathroom (23:00). Once in Halsingland, where the cult is located, she is frequently given magic mushrooms and other mind-altering drugs (28:03). These drugs assist in the cult's efforts to brainwash her, but they also serve as important supernatural aids, assisting her in her path to breaking down the emotional walls she put up after the death of her family. She is welcomed by the cult elders (39:29-40:18) - influential and powerful figures in the community who may be conceptualized for the purposes of this paper as deities of sorts - and begins her road of trials, which does not conclude until the very end of the film. Dani's strict adherence to Campbell's hero's journey stands in contrast with the latter half of the film, during which she significantly alters each of the stages.

Interestingly, Dani never refuses the call. Instead, Christian does not want her to go with them and even tells his friends that although he invited her, he only did so to smooth over tensions in their relationship and that she will not be going (18:57). This is a foreshadow to a

¹ The full journey is as follows: 1) Call to adventure; 2) Refusal of the call; 3) Supernatural aid; 4) Crossing the first threshold; 5) Belly of the whale (moment of doubt); 6) Road of trials; 7) Meeting with the goddess; 8) Temptation away from the true path; 9) Atonement with the Father; 10) Apotheosis (tragedy leading to ascent to divinity); 11) Receipt of the ultimate boon; 12) Refusal of the return; 13) Magic flight; 14) Rescue from without; 15) Crossing the return threshold; 16) Master of the two worlds; 17) Freedom to live

later moment in the film when Dani attempts to leave the cult early, inverting the typical Refusal of the Return stage. Right from the beginning of the film, Dani's relationship with her visit to the Hårga is contrary to what Campbell describes as typical of heroes. However, because this small deviation from the expected cycle does not disrupt the overall structure of the journey, it alone is not sufficient to conclude that Dani is not a Campbellian hero.

Immediately after the *ättestupa*, during which the oldest members of the cult commit ritual suicide, the outsiders who witness the ritual are horrified, and two of them decide to leave (1:09:25). and Dani, who has remained calm throughout the ritual, overhears a cult elder, explaining the practice. She says, "Those two who jumped have just reached the end of their Hårga life-cycle and you need to understand it as a great joy for them ... We view life as a circle, a re-cycle ... Instead of getting old and dying in pain and fear and shame, we give our life as a gesture, before it can spoil ..." (1:04:55 - 1:05:50). During this speech, the camera twice cuts to a shot of Dani, a calmly intrigued expression on her face (1:05:25; 1:05:47). This moment is the beginning of Dani's temptation stage, when the monstrous Other begins to lose its monstrosity. Her ongoing struggle with the temptation to join the cult is the main driver of the plot for the rest of the movie. Where a typical hero would either become stronger by resisting temptation or prove themselves by first giving into temptation and then pulling away from it, Dani attempts to resist but fails, proving her new allegiance to the Hårga by sacrificing Christian to the cult's deity at the end of the film.

Although the tension of Dani's struggle with temptation is not fully resolved until the very last scene, once that struggle begins, the rest of the steps of the hero's journey become corrupted, occurring either in reverse or incorrectly. Dani reverses the typical Refusal of the Return stage, in which the hero resists their inevitable re-entry into the mundane, by attempting

to go home early, saying "I just really need to not be here right now" (1:06:01) after witnessing the *ättestupa*, a surprising remark given her eventual decision to stay in Sweden. Later, the Master of Two Worlds stage occurs incorrectly. In the final act, Dani spontaneously starts speaking Swedish without realizing it (1:46:57) and becomes May Queen (1:47:34), a position of spiritual authority within the cult, demonstrating her supernatural mastery of the otherworld. But because she stays with the Hårga at the end of the film, she is denied the typical mastery of her mundane world.

In all, every step of the journey after temptation is in some way accounted for, yet distorted, made monstrous— Dani makes peace with her dead parents, but she does so by participating in a murder cult; she goes through apotheosis by becoming the May Queen, yet she is unfamiliar with the duties associated with the role and is thus unable to perform the required tasks (1:51:40); she gains the freedom to live, but must do so within the cult. By completing the cycle, she becomes a hero, but because she does so in a corrupted way, her heroism is also corrupt.

Heroic Traits

But why is Dani susceptible to this corruption in the first place? I propose that the answer lies with Sidney Hook's heroic traits. In the chapter "The Hero as Event and Problem" in his 1943 book *The Hero in History*, Hook puts forward six traits common to heroic narratives and characters, both real and fictional. These traits, none of which Dani or her story possess at the beginning of the film, are: leadership; presence in cultural narratives, especially aspirational narratives told to children; saviorship; metaphorical parental status; influence over followers; and the exceedingly vague "great [person] in history" (3-26). These traits are distinct from Nagy's

epic heroic traits in that they concern themselves with narrative and real-world influence to a much greater extent than Nagy's personality traits.

At the beginning of the film, after her sister kills their parents and herself, Dani falls into a deep depression, unable to complete her schoolwork (20:44) and lying in bed all day (12:55). She is powerless, and when she arrives at the Hårga's commune, she is offered community, acceptance, and a type of agency for the first time in the months since her family's death. She sees an opportunity to be part of something larger than herself when she sees photographs of all the previous May Queens (47:35) and throughout the film when the women in the community invite her to participate in activities of daily life, first when she helps make food at 1:23:53. Later, when Dani is participating in the May Queen competition with her new friends in the community, we see her smile for the first time (1:42:12). Although the Hårga's way of life is Other and therefore monstrous to Dani's companions, Dani herself experiences it as a welcome reprieve from the grief embedded in her mundane world.

Through participation in the life of the community, especially the May Queen competition, Dani experiences a taste of what it is like for one's story to have Hook's heroic traits. As May Queen, Dani's photograph will be posted next to the photos of past May Queens, embedding her within the cultural narrative; she has influence over the rest of the community, as they only begin eating the post-competition feast once she begins (1:50:12); and she plays a role in spiritually saving the community through choosing who to sacrifice to the cult's "Deity of Reciprocity" in order that the "great cycle" of life may continue (2:11:03). Having been denied access to these traits by grief, trauma, and her unhealthy romantic relationship, her inability to resist their temptation is inevitable. In the final shot of the film, Dani, watching Christian burning alive, smiles once more (2:22:27).

Midsommar derives its power from its masterful justification of Dani's atypical decisions— as one commenter on the full movie available on YouTube put it, "If you were more satisfied at the end rather than scared—the movie did what was intended" (comment by Katie Bohan), and by asking the viewer to consider if they would have done anything differently. Although Dani tries valiantly to resist temptation, her personal circumstances and vulnerability, combined with the love and acceptance that she feels for the first time within the Hårga community make it inevitable that becoming the Other that she fears at the beginning is more appealing than a return to realities of the mundane world. It is the broken expectation of return that horrifies us and forces us to question: Would I do anything different?

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