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Rebel or Victim: Journey of American Fictional Protagonist from Hero to Anti-Hero

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Abstract: The American imagination is non-conformist and anarchistic; it searches for a place outside of the conforming pressures of society. American hero attempts to create a world which is compatible with his individual characteristics. Instead of fighting from the inside, he embarks on journey to find utopia by "lighting out for the territories." Further, in American context, society has always been imagined as an intrusive force which encroaches on the lives of individuals and as such 'the encroachment of society upon the self' has been one of the perennial concerns of American fiction. American hero as an Adamic 'innocent' figure takes plunge into a 'New World' and is soon confronted by an ugly reality of evil. The hero, who once started his journey as an initiate, ends up as a rebel-victim, especially in the novels written after World War II. In post-war American fiction the hero has been replaced by anti-hero; an existential victim struggling hard to find his lost self in the whirlwind of mass society. The present paper attempts to trace the journey of American fictional protagonist from hero to anti-hero with special focus on the fictional protagonists of post World War-II American novel.

Keywords: America; Novel; Hero; Anti-hero; Society; Self, Post-War

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INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth century and the twentieth century American novelists have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for crafting profound, enduring protagonists. Functioning not merely for entertainment, these characters served as vehicles for socio-cultural critique as they were often positioned in direct ideological conflict with their contemporary societal ethos. Consequently, the traditional American fictional hero transforms into an unconventional figure—one who courageously challenges the institutional dogmas and cultural conformity. Within American literary tradition, society is rarely depicted as a passive backdrop; instead, it operates as an invasive, oppressive force that systematically encroaches upon individual autonomy, inevitably compelling the protagonist to confront and resist its suffocating pressures.

Within the American literary canon, the concept of the "New World" has historically been interpreted with literal earnestness. Rather than symbolizing a regained Eden, America was envisioned as the primordial paradise—a blank slate offering humanity a radical second chance. This preoccupation with renewal birthed an entirely distinct protagonist: a hero unburdened by European historical baggage, poised at the absolute precipice of experience. As R.W.B. Lewis, in his book *The American Adam* (1955), famously notes that the defining trait of this American 'Adam' was an essential innocence, explicitly mirroring Adam before the Fall. Figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James all crafted variations of this initiatory protagonist who

existed as "morally prior" to his surrounding environment (Lewis 1955, pp. 128-129). While James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer*—a fiercely self-reliant youth emerging seemingly from a vacuum—is the first hero to plunge into this landscape, he merely anticipated a lineage of increasingly complex, tragic figures. With the subsequent emergence of Hawthorne and Melville, the American hero-quester descended into a much darker thematic universe. Consequently, the Emersonian ideal of the "single genuine self against the world" evolved into a solitary, isolated self, pitted against an inherently hostile and indifferent reality (Lewis 1955, p. 195).

The literary evolution of the American hero as an Adamic figure originates with Natty Bumppo, the protagonist of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. However, the transition from Bumppo to Robert Montgomery Bird's Nathan Slaughter marks a profound shift in the hero's psychological composition as a direct consequence of confronting a raw, untamed environment. Slaughter represents the subversion of innocence; he is a peaceful man fundamentally transformed by an encounter with absolute malice. Consequently, Slaughter emerges in American fiction as the inaugural archetype of the outraged Adam, "hurled out of Eden by a visitation of the devil" (Lewis 1955, p. 109). In the subsequent works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, this pristine, Adamic personality is largely supplanted by the isolated hero who exists in perpetual conflict with societal norms. The protagonists of Hawthorne and Melville are characterized by their complexity and tragedy—disillusioned, fragmented figures navigating a fallen world.

Indeed, the trajectory of the American novel from Cooper to Hemingway can be read as a continuous re-enactment of this profound sense of alienation and existential isolation. While protagonists such as Hester Prynne, Captain Ahab, Huckleberry Finn, and Santiago exhibit remarkable heroic endurance, their struggles ultimately serve to amplify the tragic dimensions of their narratives. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain established a prototype for the American fictional hero whose predicament remains archetypal to this day. Reality is filtered through the innocent yet troubled perspective of the adolescent Huck, whose gaze is fixed upon a frontier where "the present and future have been merged into an organic presence of the past" (Rao, p. 3). This boy-hero cultivates his selfhood by escaping from the suffocating society; characterised by false religiosity, hypocrisy and violence. Huck's adolescent resistance symbolically represents "an affirmation of the dream of freedom and a limitless self-expansion as constituting the education of the American Adam" (Rao, p. 3). Conversely, Henry James conceptualizes a distinct educational trajectory for his protagonists. Unlike Twain's reluctant adolescent, the Jamesian hero is receptive to the expansive possibilities of life; nonetheless, these characters ultimately falter in their uniquely American missions.

On the other hand, the twentieth-century American novel seems to have diverged very little from its foundational trajectory; rather, its inherent conflicts intensified, its characters grew more complex psychologically, and its thematic dimensions also expanded considerably. During and immediately following the First World War, the American literary tradition experienced a profound era of growth and maturity. By the mid-twentieth century, an elite cadre of authors—including Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Farrell, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud—had cemented their status as major literary figures. Rather than fracturing the established tradition, these novelists perpetuated it. Much like their nineteenth-century predecessors, their protagonists remain in perpetual friction with their respective social orders. In the works of Thomas Wolfe, for instance, heroes grapple helplessly with their environment, ultimately succumbing to defeat. Conversely, John Steinbeck's protagonists lament the corporate exploitation of the common man while paradoxically maintaining faith in social reform, whereas James T. Farrell's characters are depicted as the tragic casualties of a hopeless socioeconomic system. Ultimately, these mid-century protagonists inherit the vital traits of Cooper, Melville, and Thoreau's archetypes, continuing to dramatize the plight of the isolated individual stranded on the periphery of society.

The American protagonist operates essentially as a rebel, striking a balance between an existential struggle for survival and a reformist impulse toward social institutions. In the literary landscape following the

Second World War, this figure is repeatedly thrust into the disruptive and fracturing rituals of the material world. This dynamic is prominent in foundational texts such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*; in each, the protagonist endeavours to engage with the breadth of human experience without ever fully capitulating to society's deterministic categories. Though historically and socially distinct—comprising Ellison's nameless Black protagonist, Salinger's alienated adolescent, and Bellow's eccentric Chicago Jew—these characters are bound by a shared legacy of "moral priority" inherited from their literary ancestors. Consequently, each protagonist embodies the latent potential of the classical American hero, directly reflecting the lineage of their Adamic predecessors such as Arthur Mervyn, Pierre, Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, and Huckleberry Finn.

In the narrative landscape of post-World War II American fiction, the protagonist's trajectory undergoes a fundamental shift: the figure who initially embarked on a journey as a naive initiate ultimately ends up as a rebel-victim. This paradigm is especially pronounced in the works of Jewish-American novelists such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. Furthermore, within the contemporary cultural landscape, the idealistic archetype of the innocent American Adam has been, as R.W.B. Lewis (1955) notes, "frowned quite out of existence" (p. 195). Instead, the modern protagonist emerges as an existential victim, striving desperately to reclaim a fractured identity amidst the disorienting vortex of a mass society. Prominent literary theorists like Ihab Hassan contend that the protagonists of post-war fiction are best understood as anti-heroes. Critically, this classification denotes a shift in the caliber and efficacy of the character's outward actions, rather than a diminution of its inner passions—a profound emotional depth that the traditional hero and the anti-hero continue to share. Ultimately, these protagonists represent a highly idiosyncratic archetype of heroism. Rather than enacting tangible structural change within their prevailing social conditions, their heroism is defined primarily by an acute, introspective self-awareness; deep within his psyche, "the hero creates the aboriginal self" (Hassan 1961, p. 327). So long as a dialectical mediation between the interior self and the external world remains viable, the latent anarchy within the protagonist's soul undergoes containment, allowing him to maintain the veneer of a traditional hero. However, when the capacity to bridge the chasm between the self and society collapses, the individual is left with no alternative but to surrender or recoil psychologically. Once the self is forced to internalize and confront its own insatiable nature, the traditional hero fundamentally transitions into the anti-hero (Hassan 1961, pp. 327-328).

Following World War II, American novelists began depicting characters who struggle profoundly against the unsettling, unpredictable ethos of a

fragmented mass society—one that defied traditional definitions. The pressures of altered socio-cultural and political landscapes, intensified by the anxieties of the Cold War era, compelled writers to experiment with their creative techniques. As literary critic Ihab Hassan notes, this shift triggered "an agnosticism of fictional forms" (105). Consequently, contemporary novelists stepped into the role of socio-cultural spokespersons, fundamentally altering traditional plot, characterization, theme, and imagery to reflect a radically altered world.

Shaken by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the looming threat of total annihilation, a younger generation of American novelists found conventional literary forms inadequate for conveying the nightmarish reality of modern warfare. Writers such as Saul Bellow, William S. Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, Jerzy Kosinski, and John Hawkes refashioned the novel to reconstruct the very concept of human identity, placing their characters in entirely unprecedented protagonistic situations. Navigating a grim landscape of materialism, cultural decay, and dehumanization, these post-war protagonists operate as existential explorers. As a result, the contemporary hero becomes a modern Odysseus, embarking on a psychological odyssey toward self-discovery and a reconstructed self.

Unlike its predecessors, the postmodern American novel is deeply preoccupied with socio-cultural forces and their fracturing impact on the contemporary psyche. At the heart of these narratives lies a perennial conflict: the relentless encroachment of society upon the individual self. To counter this intrusion, postmodern novels frequently propose alternative modes of existence—what Ihab Hassan identifies as a defense mechanism for personal freedom. Consequently, these fictional protagonists emerge as modern-day Sisyphean figures, perpetually striving for self-awareness, identity, and a sense of belonging. While these heroes share their predecessors' alienation from society, their gathered resistance ultimately collapses into energy of defeat. They inevitably transform into rebel-victims, embodying a Kafkaesque struggle against an absurd and inescapable existential crisis.

Within the narrative landscape of novels written during the closing decades of the twentieth century, the protagonist is frequently cast as a "deep diver." This hero submerges into the turbulent currents of the postmodern socio-cultural ethos in search of an alternative mode of existence, finding itself entirely unsuited to the rigid behavioral expectations imposed by mass society:

The central fact about fiction in a mass society may be this: that as the modes of behaviour congeal into hard crust, the hero attempts to discover alternate modes of life on the levels beneath the frozen surface. The new hero is a diver, a subterranean and this account for the

aesthetic distance which the formal resources of the novel put between him and the standardized realm of social behaviour. (Hassan 107)

The hero, therefore, is forced to dive beneath the surface of existence, thereby lacking some measure of definition as well as the basis to differentiate real from illusive. Postmodern American novelists acutely recognize that the average citizen is caught in an ironic trap, living out an American Dream that has metamorphosed into a nightmare. Many contemporary writers attribute this destructive, obsessive materialism to humanity's escalating dependence on technology. The resulting creative response is often one of pessimism and surrender. Because all attempts to synthesize this fractured reality prove futile, authors inevitably resort to an "agnosticism of fictional forms." The novel, as Ihab Hassan observes, can no longer find "in the vast spectacle of collective life a mirror to the pattern it seeks to create" (105). Instead, the genre pivots toward pioneering new formal categories, anchored by the internal values of a hero confronting a world that remains comprehensible only in fragments, yet entirely bewildering as a whole.

To confront such a disabling sociological milieu, the contemporary novelist uncovers authentic meaning and identity by adopting radically innovative forms. Traditional narrative creation is replaced by *decreation*, convention by innovation, realism by surrealism, and the classic hero by a destabilized protagonist. The universe these characters inhabit has morphed into a postmodern, absurdist void devoid of well-defined boundaries. At times, the author dissolves into their own fictional cosmos, narrowing the gap between internal and external fiction, reality and dream, history and the contemporary moment. Novelists like Kurt Vonnegut and Jerzy Kosinski repeatedly portray their protagonists as postmodern individuals perpetually struggling to unravel the mystery of the human predicament, placing them in existential situations that mirror the authors' own positions within a decreative society.

In his seminal essays, "The Pattern of Fictional Experience" and "The Culture of Postmodernism," Ihab Hassan outlines this postmodern typology of narrative structure. He rightly argues that contradiction, instability, and a high degree of self-reflexivity form the axis upon which contemporary protagonists are constructed. Writers such as William S. Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Kosinski, and Vonnegut spun fabulatory, synthesized narratives to reflect this shift. Consequently, readers also find it challenging to negotiate with a new generation of central characters presented as existential explorers navigating an agonizing spectrum of *deculture* materialism, dehumanization, and the profanities of provocative metropolitan life. Commenting on the resilience of the medium, Henry James once remarked: "The prose

picture can never be at the end of its tether, unless it loses the sense of what it can do" (James 1956: 35).

Cumulatively, the works of these modern and postmodern American novelists depict society as an amorphous mass of "junk"—a socio-cultural wasteland populated by consumerist automatons lost in a turbulent sea of confusion, anarchy, and spiritual apostasy. The catastrophic collapse of the American Dream caused a profound fission in the contemporary American experience, rendering the act of novel-writing a difficult, complex premise. Yet, through hybridized and juxtaposed narratives, every hero emerges as a contemporary Odysseus embarking on a journey toward self-discovery, affirmation, and authenticity.

The perennial conflict of the American hero remains the encroachment of society upon the self. However, the advent of *doxa*—defined by postmodern theorists like Ihab Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, and Patricia Waugh as an "altered apprehension" of the human self—has further complicated this struggle. This altered apprehension completely unsettles the protagonist's existential center of gravity, shifting the primary battlefield from an external struggle ("Self vs. Others") to an internal tribulation ("Self vs. Self"). In this context, recent protagonists inherit an existential predicament not of their own choosing, yet they boldly "oppose the disillusioning reality with the vision of their own choice" (Hipkiss 31). Within this fictional cosmos, these characters seek a "true territory ahead." As A. Walton Litz observes:

"The true territory ahead is what he must imagine for himself. He will recognize it by its strangeness, the lonely pilgrimage through which he attained it, and through the window of his fiction he will breathe air of his brave new world. Strange, indeed, will be the gods who inhabit it" (Litz 365).

This inevitable flight has deep generic roots in Mark Twain's immortal boy-hero, Huck Finn, whose decision to "light out for the territory" remains a cardinal declaration governing the choices, perceptions, and preferences of American heroes to this day.

Serious American fiction writers—including Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, William Styron, Paul Bowles, Saul Bellow, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Kurt Vonnegut, Jerzy Kosinski, Robert Coover, and John Cheever—have consistently placed this existential pattern at the centre of their work. Ihab Hassan's analysis of the contemporary novel in *Radical Innocence* serves as a crucial literary counterpart to John Macquarrie's *Existentialism*. Hassan equates the modern American condition—characterized by motiveless action, absurdity, anarchy, nihilism, and death—with the existential mode. He notes that the "pattern of

experience" in contemporary American fiction is "largely existential" (Hassan 115) because it is forged from contradiction, chance, illusory choice, and relative perception. Hassan treats this existential form as a "modern variant" of irony (120), merging his framework with Northrop Frye's definition of the ironic mode in *Anatomy of Criticism*.

Hassan concludes that the protagonist's existential awareness relies on discovering the "aboriginal self"—the primal, anarchic core of American identity. In his view, existentialism is inextricably bound to an individual within a dissolving society. While alienation is axiomatic, the existential self can still maintain an affirmative stance through what he calls "radical innocence." This quality is *radical* because it is inherent, pressing down into the very roots of the character, but also because it is extreme, impulsive, anarchic, and driven by vision. This existential hero, frequently a youthful "rebel-victim," becomes "transcendent by virtue of [his] nakedness rather than [his] communal authority" (114).

Thus, the hero of contemporary American fiction operates simultaneously as a rebel and a victim. Trapped by the automated, concrete expectations of mass society, they dive deep beneath its "frozen surface" to establish their own "aesthetic distance" (107). Caught between doom and defiance, the hero emerges as an ironic figure and an existential victim. Since the hero's self-image within society dictates the trajectory of the plot, the very form of contemporary fiction relies entirely on the nature of the hero and the substance of its experience. Drawing on Northrop Frye's archetypes, the contemporary hero embodies a complex blend of the *alazon* (the imposter or compulsive rebel), the *eiron* (the self-deprecating underdog), and the *pharmakos* (the scapegoat or random victim)—traits that profoundly shape his trajectory (39-43). Through this synthesis, a new, ironic protagonist emerges: one who is simultaneously an existential victim. Ultimately, the hero's self-image within society dictates the narrative plot, suggesting that the very form of fiction depends on how a hero's nature and experiences are defined.

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