

A SACRIFICE MUST BE MADE: FROM KIERKEGAARD'S TRAGIC HERO TO THE CONTEMPORARY ANTIHERO

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ABSTRACT:

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* (1843), the figure of a tragic hero is defined by the sacrifice he makes for the benefit of his community. To illustrate this concept, Kierkegaard presents three examples of influential fathers who have sacrificed their children: Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus. In contemporary democratic societies, such a sacrifice would likely not be perceived as heroic anymore, since consciously sacrificing a human life is generally considered an unimaginable act. Thus, this article advocates that while sacrifice is still a key element for the development of contemporary heroes, the way it is executed has changed significantly since Kierkegaard's time: if the tragic hero had to make a choice to sacrifice a loved one, for contemporary (anti)heroes like Marvel's Deadpool (Miller 2016; Leitch 2018) or Disney's Cruella (Gillespie 2021) sacrifice no longer presents itself in the form of a choice, but rather an unexpected event.

KEYWORDS: sacrifice; tragic hero; antihero; Søren Kierkegaard; *Fear and Trembling*; Deadpool; Cruella

1. Introduction: the changing notion of a hero

Heroes have been present throughout history since ancient times: leading and protecting individuals and communities, fighting enemies, gaining admiration and envy among their peers, all while providing artists with fruitful storytelling material. However, the perception of who is a hero or heroine, or even more, who can become one, has been evolving significantly, reflecting various societal changes. While a hero used to be perceived as an exceptional individual, chosen among the crowd and distinguished by some extraordinary quality such as extreme strength or bravery, the increased democratisation of society has also made the notion more accessible, fostering the impression that everyone has the potential to become a hero or heroine if only circumstances are aligned accordingly.

The venture point of this paper is the notion of sacrifice as examined in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* (1843). Building on Kierkegaard's understanding of sacrifice as imperative for the development of a tragic hero, this article aims to examine the key difference in the perception of heroic sacrifice since Kierkegaard's text was first published: choice. While sacrifice still plays a crucial role in the conception of contemporary hero or heroine, the way it is performed has changed significantly, marking the evolution from sacrifice as a choice to sacrifice as an unexpected event.

2. Who can become a contemporary hero?

In order to examine the distinction between Kierkegaard's rather dramatic vision of a tragic hero and its contemporary reflections, it is essential to first distinguish what has shifted about a hero's identity since the middle of the nineteenth century, when *Fear and Trembling* was first published. The first change regarding the perception of a hero is related to the increased accessibility of the concept. The transformation from a grand figure defined by virtues and dominance into a common man has started long before the new millennium emerged. As noted by Houghton, while it has always been present, the nineteenth century has seen a remarkable popularization of hero-worship; the Pre-Raphaelite movement and Lord Tennyson have brought to the public's attention the long-neglected medieval tales, Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Nordic mythology, full of majestic deeds, courage, passion, and sacrifice. While the eighteenth-century writers such as Hume and Gibbon have seen

the heroic act as fueled by one's own selfish reasons, or even worse, delusion and madness, the Romantic cult of enthusiasm has freed the hero from this accusation and put him as a central figure of constant worship (Houghton 1985, 305-306). The notion was even magnified by the emerging popularisation of Lord Byron's writing, with the Byronic hero representing an intensified version of the Romantic hero (Christie 2016, 165-166). The trend can be further observed in the popularity of the empire hero, a product of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British novels of prominent authors, such as George Alfred Henty, Rudyard Kipling, and Edgar Wallace, supplying popular novels immersing readers in adventures abroad (Beardow 2018, 66).

On the other side of the ocean, the industrial revolution was already producing a new type of real-life hero, far from the Romantic notion of an imperial explorer marked with wanderlust as found in books and poetry of the time: a man who with great determination managed to climb the ranks through his own ability and agency. As Fraser observes, the nineteenth century has started to significantly democratise the notion of a hero. Daring businessmen such as “the Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt and “Jubilee Jim” Fisk inspired praise and admiration among their contemporaries (2008, 97-103), supporting the idea that everyone with enough endurance, courage, and skills can rise the ranks and make a difference: “skirting the law, or living beyond its reach, this new hero was half warlord, half Everyman, yet, like Napoleon, not altogether either” (Fraser 2008, 103).

This curious development has set the foundations for the second interrelated change, revolving around the increased imperfection of a hero, contributing to the emergence of a modern-day antihero. Starting with heroes of oftentimes divine origin, we have come to a point where it is not rare to encounter a human hero or heroine possessed by very ordinary imperfections, such as self-doubt and indecisiveness. In comparison with the authoritative status of ancient heroes who undertook their tasks with obedience and dignity, a modern antihero is oftentimes rejecting the role at the beginning but still acts heroically when the time comes. Contemporary antiheroes like Cruella (Gillespie 2021) or Deadpool (Miller 2016; Leitch 2018) are more human than ever before – flawed, under-confident, shy, self-deprecating, doubtful, bitter, resentful, rude, and tormented by a myriad of past mistakes. Their development is complicated and determined by a great degree of personal growth and self-acceptance through which they accept the task presented

to them. The contemporary antihero's journey is no longer concerned only with the externally visible action since the internal thought processes, and inner moral battles have gained greater importance.

The third changing notion is connected with gender. From Greek demigods to prophets and rulers, ancient tales are mostly presenting us with predominantly male figures of great excellence and importance. Women are often presented as supporting characters, nurturing and advising the hero on his journey, but not embarking on their own. Examples such as the character of Psyche, reversing the traditional narrative in which a man is fighting for the hand of his potential wife, or biblical heroine Judith, committing a violent act of slaying to save her community, present more of an exception than an established trend. The notion of heroic behaviour as predominantly male characteristic has endured throughout centuries, up until the nineteenth-century literary heroes such as Karl May's Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, and Jules Verne's explorers of the depths of space (1865) and the earth's core (1864). In popular culture, the concept has undergone significant change only during and after the Second World War with the emergence of superheroines, such as Ms. Marvel and Wonder Woman.

As shown by this brief overview, the notion of a hero is far from static as it is constantly evolving due to societal changes affecting various aspects of a heroic character. The archetype of a hero is thus continuously being deconstructed and reintroduced again, with the above three changing characteristics being crucial for our further reexamination of Kierkegaard's concept of sacrifice as an intrinsic element of the heroes' development.

3. The notion of sacrifice in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843)

After breaking up with his fiancée Regine Olsen in 1841, young Kierkegaard decided there was little to keep him from venturing abroad. Equipped with his inheritance and a freshly obtained degree from the University of Copenhagen, he set out to Berlin where he got closely acquainted with the work of Friedrich Schelling and Georg Hegel, concluding in a lifelong obsession with Hegel's relationship between an individual and ethics. As opposed to Hegel who was presenting man as part of society, bound by rules of ethics, Kierkegaard believed in bending those rules: as an individual, man can, in certain circumstances, rise above the society around him and distinguish himself as the one above ethics.

Kierkegaard's lifelong quest to contradict Hegel dominated a great part of his writing and his seminal *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* (1843), published under the name of Johannes de Silentio, can be seen as one of the first examples of his celebration of an individual's personal quest for the righteous choice in given circumstances (Koller 2020, 29-30).

In this relatively short text, Kierkegaard explores the notion of sacrifice through the biblical story of Abraham as well as other mythological and biblical characters, thus establishing a crucial distinction between the notion of sacrifice in the name of faith, performed by the knight of faith, and heroic sacrifice, performed by either a tragic or an aesthetic hero (1843). Reaching far back into the history of Christianity, Kierkegaard reflects on an archetype of a devoted believer, the patriarch Abraham. God promised him a child, but for years he had none. Finally, his wife Sarah gave birth at the age of ninety. For years they lived in peace, but when Isaac became a young boy, God asked Abraham to sacrifice him. Abraham silently took his son to Mount Moriah and prepared the altar, but God intervened at the last moment before the sacrifice could take place. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard observes this story through various perspectives of everyone involved, trying to put together the missing pieces in the original story in an attempt to investigate sacrifice in the name of faith as compared to the heroic one.

4. The tragic hero enters

Kierkegaard states that every hero should be remembered, but the importance of a hero is measured by the cause he is fighting for (Kierkegaard 1983 [1843]: 16). Thus, after thoroughly inspecting the notion of sacrifice through Abraham's experience, Kierkegaard in contrast delves deeper into narratives in which a sacrifice is made on the basis of a relationship between an individual and a community. While Abraham's story is multi-layered and offers an in-depth look into sacrifice in the name of faith, Kierkegaard's examination of the notion does not end with a singular understanding: sacrifice can also be made in order to protect others and as such becomes an intrinsic element in the development of a tragic or an aesthetic hero. While a tragic hero performs a sacrifice for the community, which in return understands his sorrow and feels compassionate towards him, the task of an aesthetic hero is precisely to keep silent. By keeping a certain knowledge to himself, he is protecting himself and also others, who do not need to share his pain.

To illustrate the concept, Kierkegaard presents three examples of a tragic hero: Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus. They were all rulers who had to concern themselves with the overall well-being of people they were entrusted with, but due to particular circumstances, they all decided to sacrifice lives of their children for the benefit of their society. Agamemnon had to sacrifice Iphigenia to please the goddess of hunt, Artemis, and ensure the winds for ships which would lead his army in the direction of Troy. Jephthah had to sacrifice his daughter, because he had made a promise to God before going to battle against Ammon that, in the case of victory, he will make a burnt offering out of whoever comes out of the door of his house first to greet him home. Brutus had to kill his sons because they were plotting to disrupt the political order of Rome. Kierkegaard interprets their stories in a favorable way: they did not wish to kill their children, and their deaths therefore represent their own personal sacrifice for the benefit of society. Therefore, these men did not go against the ethical, the universal; and people can feel compassion towards them for their sacrifice, which made them tragic heroes.

The difference between the knight of faith and a tragic hero is both in their motivation for sacrifice as well as in their relationship with society. Abraham's situation is, according to Kierkegaard, fundamentally different from Agamemnon, Brutus, and Jephthah's dilemma. While they made their sacrifice for the benefit of many, they remained inside the ethical, the universal, therefore we can understand their actions. Abraham followed a different principle: he was ready to commit a sacrifice not because he believed it would benefit his community in general, but because he trusted God and took a leap of faith. His sacrifice was asked from him specifically; he was chosen to be tested. His obeying or denying would affect him only, and he could not share his sorrow with others, because he would not be understood. According to Kierkegaard, everyone feels compassion towards the tragic hero because of his sacrifice, but the knight of faith must endure his challenge alone.

Kierkegaard's concept of an individual having to suffer a sacrifice in order to become a hero seems to remain extremely relevant until today. However, there are some crucial differences between sacrifice as performed by a tragic hero and sacrifice as understood in contemporary terms. Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus all made a choice to protect their society; their sacrifice was fueled by their own agency. This presents a crucial difference to a contemporary narrative in which

heroes and heroines endure sacrifice as part of their origin story, providing them with a strong sense of purpose for their future heroic work of protecting the community. Kierkegaard reflects plenty on how Abraham, a knight of faith, must endure his sacrifice alone, since he could never explain it to his community. For Kierkegaard, the religious presents the stage above the ethical, the stage at which an individual can transcend the rules of ethics. But ethics change: if history bears witness to times in which sacrificing one human for the betterment of society was permitted or understood, contemporary democratic society generally dictates the sanctity of human life, in which no sacrifice is justifiable.

Thus, looking from a current perspective, Jephthah, Agamemnon, and Brutus would find themselves in a position similarly detached as that of a knight of faith, struggling to explain the heroic quality of a sacrifice they were willing to commit. Contemporary heroes are defined by their desire to protect those who need protecting, and the idea of intentionally sacrificing another life presents a direct opposition to this demand. The notion of what is ethical is constantly evolving and Kierkegaard's tragic heroes would have a harder time still passing as heroes within a modern-day democratic society.

5. The emerging antihero

In order to further examine the changing relationship between sacrifice and hero as an epitome of morality, we now turn to his increasingly popular successor. The concept of antihero as a doubtful individual, coincidentally entrusted with a grand task, has also been evolving throughout time, affecting even one of the hero's most prevalent qualities: courage. In 1637, a Spanish Jesuit and philosopher Baltasar Gracián wrote a text carrying an instructive title *El héroe*, illuminating a set of heroic characteristics, inspired by Christian values. In approximately the same period, Thomas Hobbes was writing about the existence of a social contract between a ruler and his subjects, examining a less idealistic notion of a man, driven by fear of death (1651); his viewpoint established the ground for what Zarka and Griffith see as an antihero to Gracián's hero (2016).

Centuries later, the nineteenth-century literary heroes advanced the eventual conception of a contemporary antihero by introducing a new type of hero, separated from publicly accepted rules of ethics, yet guided by a strong system of independent moral guidance. While his traditionally positive qualities make a hero an obvious

choice for a leader, Welsh observes that the hero of Sir Walter Scott's early nineteenth-century popular series of the *Waverley Novels*, despite his social position and status, usually refrains from leading his contemporaries (1968, 24). The increasingly divergent paths of a hero's own sense of morality in opposition to publicly accepted ethics have culminated in the conception of the twenty-first century 'hybrid heroes', who must, in order to protect the world from the ubiquitous evil, accept the darker side out of which their power is emerging (Abbott 2016, 120-121).

The emerging need for heroes to become more and more complex and realistic is causing them to be as diverse as ever, becoming more than just versions of an archetype, but characters with developed backgrounds, quirky personality traits, and complex psychological motivations. The contemporary hero is no longer Atlas, patiently carrying the collective burden for the prosperity of humanity, but rather a morally ambiguous character drawn to vices. While the antihero is defined by a lack of traditional qualities of a hero, such as courage, nobility, and dignity, they both need to overcome the experience of sacrifice after which their paths diverge since they react to it differently.

For Kierkegaard's tragic heroes, a sacrifice does not come as a surprise, but rather following a decision-making process, ending with them pulling the metaphorical trigger on the victim. Since they are all in positions of power, they have an opportunity to make a choice about how they will react to the circumstances at hand. In distinction, a contemporary antihero is oftentimes an ordinary person who is faced with a sudden tragedy, occurring without any warning. This particular experience of loss can leave the antihero bitter and cruel, even ignorant to the needs of others, the community. Nevertheless, this stage is necessary for contemporary antiheroes in order to accept the responsibility they have due to their ability of protecting others. While heroes used to be static in their perfection, contemporary antiheroes must learn to accept their role. And sacrifice has an essential function in this process.

Sacrifice as a building element of an antiheroine/antihero's origin story: Cruella (Gillespie 2021) and Deadpool (Miller 2016; Leitch 2018)

Within recent popular culture, sacrifice often presents itself as a venture point: an occurrence that shatters the protagonist's world, turning it upside down in

a matter of seconds. In *Deadpool 2* (Leitch 2018), the viewers meet the title protagonist Wade Wilson settled with his partner Vanessa Carlyse, and they have just started planning a child together. Their idyllic existence quickly transforms into chaos when a group of attackers storms into their home. During the fight, Carlyse is fatally injured. On the other hand, in *Cruella* (Gillespie 2021), the title character is just a child when her caregiver dies in a violent event. Since she is convinced that the premature death was her fault, it haunts young Estella for years.

In comparison to the type of sacrifice found in Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus' experience, Deadpool and Cruella's sacrifice was tragic in a sense that they could not have predicted or avoided it. Nonetheless, their loss turns out to be a key element in their origin story, causing them to take essential decisions that would, in the long run, benefit the community. After the initial stage of rage and resignation, Deadpool joins forces with the X-Men, thus becoming a protector against various forms of evil. Similarly, when Cruella as an adult learns the identity of the real killer, she is first consumed with revenge. In the process of seeking her own type of justice, she almost sacrifices her accomplices, but eventually rearranges her priorities and saves them just in time. Taking on a path that leads her to bringing a murderess to justice, she benefits both humans as well as animals along the way.

The sacrifice they have endured forces Cruella and Deadpool to become more active than ever before: faced with the consequences of what happens when they could not prevent evil, they set a determinant fight to stop it from occurring in the future. While first being revengeful – an essential trait of heroes, as noted by Edmundson (2015, 39–40) – their need to avenge eventually transforms into dedication towards ensuring justice, both by making sure the perpetrators are held accountable as well as protecting those in need of protection. A hero's relation to violence is complex, and while revenge is an essential part of the heroic archetype – the strong desire to avenge a wrongdoing, despite the consequences – this characteristic is today considered problematic (Edmundson 2015, 40). Furthermore, there is a concrete danger of the need to revenge escalating into something more, as the so-called “warrior ideal” has a potential to tip the aspiring hero over the invisible moral edge: “There is much to be wary of in the warrior ideal. One legitimately fears that the aspiring hero will turn into the brute, the sadist, the killing machine. One fears that the hero will not always pause long enough to ponder whether his cause is just” (Edmundson 2015, 50).

Here, some changes in the hero's identity described previously come into account. While ancient heroes have assumed a *grandeur* role, allowing themselves to take decisions for the community due to their patriarchal position – much like in Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus' case – contemporary antiheroes are usually no longer rulers. And even if they do in some cases hold some kind of political or social power due to their heroic status, the democratic political systems they navigate no longer allow for an autocratic experience. Being aware of the limits of one's power, they no longer assume the right to decide upon an innocent life in the name of the community they represent. In the aftermath of their involuntary sacrifice, contemporary heroes overcome their initial wish for revenge and conform to the contemporary realm of ethics, choosing the protection of others as a primary motivation. Both Cruella and Deadpool present clear examples of this narrative: while Deadpool kills Ajax, who was responsible for his torture and transformation, he indicates that we will pause before making such a choice in the future (Miller 2016, 01:34:43). This shows that while Deadpool continuously mocks the traditionally heroic attitudes and characteristics, he still accepts that this final act of revenge was not acceptable.

In the sequel, this narrative takes a step forward as *Deadpool 2* (Leitch 2018) revolves around one core dilemma: is it acceptable to sacrifice one life in order to save many? After Carlisle's death, the story escalates as Cable, a fighter from the future, tries to kill Russell Collins, a young mutant marked by a history of abuse he received due to his extraordinary power. As Cable knows that Russell will grow up into a murderer eventually killing Cable's family, he believes that the correct course of action is to kill him before he grows up. Deadpool disagrees with this idea and believes Russell has an ability to change. By committing to saving Russell's life, Deadpool here exhibits the core characteristic of a contemporary hero: struggling to preserve a life is a more ethical option than simply sacrificing it for the benefit of others.

Similarly, Cruella is through much of the story motivated by the wish to avenge. Nonetheless, eventually she chooses to bring the murderess to justice instead of achieving the ultimate revenge by killing her. Instead of executing the dalmatians that attacked her caretaker, she recognizes that they did not have much choice or responsibility for this action. Therefore, she decides to provide the dogs

with love and reeducation, ensuring they get a second chance in life – eventually creating new life in the form of puppies.

Sacrifice is essential for the origin story of the contemporary hero or heroine because it allows them to conclude the necessary psychological journey from obsession with revenge to the recognition that justice is not something that can be served at the hands of a single individual – even more so when that individual is also the victim of a related crime – but only by proper and objective institutions. While heroes used to assume the power to make decisions about life and death of innocent people, this is not acceptable within today's realm of ethics, embodied in contemporary democratic systems.

This psychological journey to maturity marks the final stage of transformation to a heroic character and also ensures that, despite possessing antiheroic qualities, the protagonists remain within the realm of the ethical, just like Kierkegaard predicted. The final result thus shows a contrasting parallel between Kierkegaard's definition of a hero and contemporary definition of a hero. As they are both working for the benefit of the community, their work must remain within the realm of the ethical that is changing according to complex transitions within political and social structures.

Conclusion

The notion of sacrifice has always been central to Kierkegaard's writing, a base on which he has constructed a multitude of intricate ideas about faith, ethics, morality, the individual, and society. In distinction to sacrifice in the name of faith, Kierkegaard also investigated a concept of heroic sacrifice, committed in order to protect a community. In such a case, sacrifice becomes an intrinsic element of the development of both the tragic and the aesthetic hero. Choosing to either suffer publicly or privately defines which type of hero a person will become.

Nevertheless, despite being present since ancient times in both biblical as well as mythological tales, the notion of a hero has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting how values and perceptions develop within evolving social and political systems. Heroes have always inspired admiration because they represent the most extreme human qualities: by living extraordinary lives and conducting *grandeur* deeds, they are able to gain respect, secure a place in legends,

as well as seek personal meaning and value in their life. Notwithstanding, the increasing number of antiheroes in popular culture is clearly showing that we no longer wish for heroes to represent only the best of us: we seek inspiration and clarity through observing ordinary, complex, and flawed characters reacting in extraordinary circumstances. The antiheroes and antiheroines of today have little in common with Kierkegaard's autocratic and patriarchal tragic and aesthetic heroes that take decisions with little or no regard for an individual life.

While Kierkegaard's understanding of sacrifice as imperative for the development of a tragic hero revolves primarily around voluntary sacrifice of a loved one in order to secure some sort of societal benefit, such as safety or prosperity of one's community, his examples of tragic heroes – rulers Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus – could no longer be considered heroes in contemporary circumstances. In comparison with ancient heroes embodied in mighty patriarchs, contemporary antiheroes and antiheroines are no longer defined by their superiority and perfection. Aware of the limitations that come with their power, they do not take decisions about whether an individual deserves to die in order for a community to be preserved from a particular unfortunate event. Cruella and Deadpool are both significantly affected by a death of a beloved person, but they did not choose this sacrifice. While this unexpected occurrence sets them on a path of eventual heroism, it presents an unwanted event that they were not able to prevent.

Within a current society enveloped by democratic systems in place, sacrificing an individual's life is no longer acceptable within the realm of ethics. Thus, Kierkegaard's understanding of what a heroic sacrifice is, and consequently, who a hero is, must be reconsidered. Nevertheless, while the notion of how a heroic sacrifice must be conducted has evolved in relation to political and social changes, the concept of sacrifice itself has remained imperative for the process of development of contemporary (anti)heroes.

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