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[Introduction to] Heroes: What They Do & Why We Need Them

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Heroes

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Introduction

At the end of the movie *Casablanca*, one of Hollywood's most memorable love triangles is resolved. The setting is a fog-bound airport in North Africa during World War II. Quick decisions have to be made before Nazi villains arrive to arrest all three characters. The three are the leading man, Rick Blaine (played by the charismatic Humphrey Bogart), the love of his life, Ilsa Lund (portrayed luminously by Ingrid Bergman), and Ilsa's husband, the suave and heroic Victor Laszlo. We've learned that Rick and Ilsa had an affair in Paris at the beginning of the war, and that they had planned to escape together. Unknown to Rick, Ilsa had recently married Victor Laszlo, a courageous resistance leader, but she had been told that he had been killed in a German concentration camp. Just before she and Rick are to leave Paris, Ilsa learns that Laszlo is alive. Waiting in the rain for their departing train, a distraught Rick receives a hurried note: "I cannot go with you or ever see you again. You must not ask why. Just believe that I love you. Go, my darling, and God bless you. Ilsa." It is one of cinema's most wrenching moments.[1]

How do these three characters get to the final scene at the airport, fleeing from the Nazis? Early in the film, Rick and Ilsa encounter each other again, by accident. Not knowing that Rick is the owner, Ilsa and Victor walk into his nightclub in Casablanca. Ilsa and Rick tensely greet each other, and Victor soon learns that they had had a relationship while Ilsa believed that Victor was dead. As the plot unfolds, Ilsa decides to stay with Rick in Casablanca while Victor flies to the United States to continue his fight against the Nazis. However, at the critical moment, instead of telling Victor that Ilsa is not going with him, Rick tells Ilsa that she must. There is a lump in our throats as Rick explains: "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take

much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." With that, Rick sends the love of his life off with another man for the good of the cause that is bigger than he is. Victor welcomes Rick "back to the fight": "This time I know our side will win." Ilsa looks to both men for guidance. Both signal that she should go with Victor. She turns and says: "Goodbye, Rick. God bless you." Rick painfully deadpans: "You better hurry, or you'll miss that plane."

At this moment, Rick Blaine's character has finally met all the tests on our mental lists that define heroes. This book explores these mental lists and the ways people perceive men and women whose lives do or do not match them. Let's start by saying more about the film. Then we'll return to the lists. *Casablanca* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1942. It is always ranked at or near the top of any list of great movies. Made in the midst of World War II, its three main characters—Rick, Ilsa, and Victor—are caught in the web of Nazi domination in North Africa.

The film opens with the shooting of Nazi officials carrying two letters of transit allowing their holders to escape Casablanca and fly to America. The letters are of great value and of intense interest to two other characters, a German officer, Major Strasser, and the local French police chief, Captain Louis Renault. Louis bends to the power of the Nazis, but it is clear he doesn't really like them. He will work to help Major Strasser find the murderers who stole the letters, but without much vigor.

We soon encounter Rick Blaine. Rick runs a successful nightclub and is widely admired for his cool, quick wit, and his smooth, commanding presence. Louis envies his sex appeal. He describes Rick as "the kind of a man that, well, if I were a woman ... I should be in love with Rick." Louis also suspects that, somehow, the stolen letters have come into Rick's possession. He is right about that, but Rick keeps his own counsel.

At this point a beautiful woman, Ilsa, and the man escorting her, Victor, enter the night club. When Rick first sees Ilsa, he looks stunned. They greet each other awkwardly, but act correctly. Late that night, Rick complains, "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." Shortly thereafter, Ilsa returns to the

club and tries to explain to Rick why she jilted him in Paris. But he is drunk, quite rude, and won't listen.

The main dramatic tension of the film then turns on the fact that Rick has indeed acquired the stolen letters of transit, and that Victor and Ilsa need them to escape to America. They both plead for the letters, but Rick, still hurting from being deserted by Ilsa in Paris, won't let them go. As events unfold, Ilsa tells Rick that she has always been in love with him and can no longer live without him. She will stay with him in Casablanca if he helps Victor get to America. They agree on that plan. After several plot twists, Rick, Ilsa, and Victor end up at the airport where the plane for America is about to take off. That's when Rick explains to Ilsa that she is to go with Victor, so that she can support his resistance work. "The problems of three little people" are not as important as the Allies' struggle against totalitarianism.

The characters of Victor Laszlo and the Nazi Major Strasser are prototypes of the personalities we often encounter in studying heroes and villains. Victor is tall, good-looking, and virtuous in manner, appearance, and behavior. At one point, he has to explain to Rick that he is not carved from stone. Pleading on Ilsa's behalf, he asks Rick "as a favor to use the letters to take her away from Casablanca." Rick replies, "You love her that much?" and Victor explains, "Apparently you think of me only as the leader of a cause. Well, I am also a human being." The way Victor's character is portrayed, this needs saying, since his nearly saintly persona seems somewhat bloodless. In contrast to Victor's heroic character, fighting the good fight for the good cause, Major Strasser is the unequivocal villain. He is formal and precise, cold and calculating—an unapologetic and ruthless agent of the Third Reich.

Rick Blaine is much more complicated than either Victor or Major Strasser. He initially comes off as impressive and likeable, but distinctly nonheroic. As we will see throughout our exploration of heroism, one of the defining traits of heroes is that they put the common good, and we emphasize *good*, ahead of their personal concerns. And yet, early in the film, we hear Rick claim more than once, when he might have put himself out to help someone else, "I stick my neck out for nobody." We also see him behave callously toward a woman he's been dating. When she asks where he was the night before, he claims that was too

long ago to remember. When she asks "Will I see you tonight?," he replies coldly "I never make plans that far ahead." And in a discussion of the war with Major Strasser and Louis, he says indifferently that he hasn't "the slightest idea" who will win. He claims to see both the Nazi perspective and Victor Laszlo's. He says that he has no particular sympathy for the efforts of Laszlo, "the fox," to escape: "I understand the point of view of the hound too." Then he excuses himself saying, "Gentlemen, your business is politics. Mine is running a saloon."

Yet, there is another side. Part of it is shrouded in mystery. Louis asks Rick why he can't go back to America: "Did you abscond with the church funds? Did you run off with a senator's wife? I'd like to think you killed a man. It's the romantic in me." Rick enigmatically replies, "It was a combination of all three." Later, Louis presses his questions, and states, "my dear Ricky, I suspect that under that cynical shell you're at heart a sentimentalist" and mentions that Rick smuggled guns to Ethiopia and fought against the fascists in Spain. We too suspect that Rick cares more than he admits. When we first see him, he is cold, but he refuses to let a German banker push his way into a card game:

"Your cash is good at the bar."

"What! Do you know who I am?"

"I do. You're lucky the bar's open to you."

It's obvious that a large part of Rick's harsh attitude results from having been deeply hurt when Ilsa abandoned him in Paris. In one scene, he recounts to Ilsa his feelings when he received the note saying that she couldn't leave with him. Ilsa says that she didn't count the days they had together in Paris. Rick replies: "Well, I did. Every one of them. Especially the last one. A wow finish. A guy standing on a station platform in the rain with a comical look on his face, because his insides had been kicked out." Ilsa pleads with Rick "to put your feelings aside for something more important." Rick responds: "I'm not fighting for anything anymore, except myself. I'm the only cause I'm interested in."

But shortly thereafter, the hurt is removed. Ilsa declares her love for Rick and her willingness to stay with him while Victor goes to

America. She seems overwhelmed with emotion and confusion and asks Rick "to think for both of us, for all of us." Of course, Rick does, and he surprisingly tells Ilsa at the end to join Victor. She can help Victor in the Allies' struggle, Rick says, but she can't help him. He will fight the Nazis on his own. Thus, the film concludes with the three principal characters—Victor, Ilsa, and Rick—planning to leave Casablanca, each in their own way to aid in the good fight.

HEROES AND VILLAINS

We noted that Humphrey Bogart's character in *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine, met the tests "on our mental lists that define heroes." One of the central ideas in this book is that human beings do have mental lists or models, or images, of heroes, and also of villains. In psychology, these mental models or images are called schemas or sometimes archetypes. The basic idea is that we have general images or conceptions of many kinds of people, including heroes. We also have mental images of dancers, politicians, shortstops and U.S. marines. And we have schemas or images of nonhuman entities such as cars, birds, and tables and even images of events, called scripts, such as what happens when we walk into a restaurant.[2] In a nutshell, this book is about these images. We try to tell the story of where our images of heroes, and also villains, come from, how they develop, and how they shape and are shaped by our perceptions of either real or fictional individuals whom we think of as heroes or villains.

More broadly, our book addresses two overarching questions. The first is, How do people perceive heroes and villains? What do such terms mean to perceivers? Are there general conceptions of heroism? If so, how do they differ from one person to another, or from one time or place to another? Our second question is, how does heroism happen? What are the paths that people take to become heroes, or villains? What are the capacities, traits, circumstances, decisions, and actions that lead individuals to behave heroically, or just take a pass? Why and when do people become villains? These are our central concerns.

Let's begin addressing them by noting how Rick Blaine illustrates several key aspects of common notions of heroism. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that Rick makes a moral choice. In the end, he

decides to do the right thing. We sense that Rick has made moral choices in the past, and that he is a good man, but he seems calloused and unfeeling. He also declares himself to be selfish—"I'm the only cause I'm interested in"—and in some ways, we support his selfish wish for Ilsa and him to live together, happily ever after. But he sacrifices his completely understandable self-centered love interests for the moral good. Moral choices are typical of heroes. For example, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, despite his Southern background, made what most people view as the moral choice, casting all of his enormous power and political savvy behind civil rights and voting rights legislation in the 1960s. Such choices are almost universally considered heroic. Fictional superheroes such as Wonder Woman and Spiderman are defined by doing the right thing. The opening of every episode of the 1950s television series *Superman* reminds us that he fought for "truth, justice, and the American way." (There was no doubt in viewers' mind that the American way was as moral as truth and justice.) So, Rick meets the common standard of making the moral choice.

But Rick, like many heroes, has more going for him than virtue. He is also highly competent and in complete control of himself and his environment. He is handsome, and attractive to both men and women. He is tough, clever, and successful. In one scene, Victor and Ilsa return to Rick's nightclub and ask for a table "as far away from Major Strasser as possible." Rick looks around saying, "Well, the geography may be a little difficult to arrange" but immediately snaps his fingers for the headwaiter and orders "Paul! Table thirty!" His command is seamless. In these ways, Rick fits common images of heroes as talented individuals who look good and do good. Many other heroes are also defined by competence, and generally by extremely high levels of skill or ability in an important domain. Real-life examples include Einstein in science, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan in sports, and actress Meryl Streep. Other fictional examples include ballet dancer Billy Elliot and detective Sherlock Holmes. In mentioning individuals such as Meryl Streep and Billy Elliot, we underline the fact that some people are seen as heroes by large, broad audiences, while others are heroes to a much smaller group. For example, it has been clear from recent Academy Award ceremonies that Meryl Streep

is a hero to most other movie actresses, but she may not be a hero to most moviegoers or to the general public.

As we will see, many heroes are also leaders. The relationship between leadership and heroism will be one of our overarching concerns. Sometimes heroes, and villains, intentionally exert leadership, and sometimes their examples are followed, whether they intend to lead or not. Rick Blaine is a leader on a small scale within his business, and also as he orchestrates Ilsa and Victor's airplane departure from Casablanca. When Ilsa asks him to think "for all of us," he takes command and makes things happen. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela are heroes to many precisely because of their exercise of leadership. Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton's rescue of the stranded crew of the ship *Endurance* provides a vivid example of heroic leadership. For many, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher achieved hero status on the basis of her firm leadership during the Falklands War in 1982. In the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest,* the protagonist Randle Patrick McMurphy is a hero by virtue of his uplifting leadership of mental patients on a locked hospital ward. In the chapters that follow, we will explore the multiple and complex relationships between heroism and leadership.

Many heroes are defined by doing the right thing at a critical moment even when their lives until that point have not been heroic. In *Casablanca,* Rick Blaine is not initially heroic. He has many characteristics of heroes, such as attractiveness and competence, but his actions in the early parts of the film are not entirely praiseworthy. As we have seen, it is hinted that while he may have behaved admirably on occasion, such as fighting for the virtuous underdogs in the Spanish civil war, he may also have killed someone or stolen money. Interestingly, Victor Laszlo argues that Rick is actually suppressing or denying his own virtuous tendencies. When Rick asks him whether what he is fighting for is really worth it, Victor tells Rick that he sounds "like a man who's trying to convince himself of something he doesn't believe in his heart" and "I wonder if you know that you're trying to escape from yourself and that you'll never succeed." When Rick takes heroic action at the end, our hopeful sense that he is fundamentally noble is confirmed, as are the varying hopes and expectations of Ilsa and Victor. The idea that nonheroic people often decide

in the end to do good provides the theme of redemption that we explore fully in Chapter 3.

There are numerous other examples of individuals who surprisingly but gratifyingly act heroically at the decisive moment. McMurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* decides to stay and fight the Big Nurse when he could easily have escaped in the climactic passage in the novel. The outlaw Ben Wade in Elmore Leonard's *3:10 to Yuma* spares the life of the sympathetic and law-abiding Dan Evans at the end of the story, and he shoots a more vicious villain to protect Evans. In both cases, the characters' decisions are heroic, and they represent a decisive commitment to act morally at a critical juncture.

In some cases, redemption is not a matter of a moral choice by an ethically questionable character but rather of a highly effective action by a person who hasn't previously been seen as being especially competent. A fictional example of redemption based on competence comes from the film *The Karate Kid*, where an overmatched young boy becomes a sympathetic martial arts champion. The recent U.S. President George W. Bush illustrates this sequence in a particularly interesting way. Polls show that Bush was not seen as especially competent, and certainly not charismatic, at either the beginning or end of his presidency. During the 2000 election campaign he was once described as looking like "a small mammal in distress."[3] He often seemed overwhelmed by the challenges and complexities of governing. And at the end of his term, in the fall of 2008, he seemed completely overmatched by impending economic collapse. He became president having lost the popular vote and left office with extremely low approval ratings. However, he was viewed as charismatic and heroic when he rose to the occasion and exercised what most people perceived as effective and even heroic leadership following the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. And his confidence and swagger were notable during the early stages of the war in Iraq. They reached a pinnacle when Bush landed on the deck of an aircraft carrier wearing a flight suit, with a huge Mission Accomplished banner prominently displayed for television in the background. In those early years of his presidency, his decisive leadership had redeemed him. But as his competence became increasingly doubtful, and his approval ratings fell, the flight suit moment became a target of Comedy Central's

late night television humorists. Sometimes heroic action cements a person's image as a hero. In that case, the appraisal doesn't change. But heroes can also fall from popular grace.

In many instances, particularly compelling stories of heroism involve both moral choice and competence. This was true of Rick and also Victor Laszlo in *Casablanca.* Readers who know of Jimmy Dean Sausages sold at many supermarkets, particularly in the South, might not know that Dean also had a career as an actor, television variety show host, and country singer. In 1961, he had a number-one hit called "Big Bad John." The song tells the story of a large, somewhat mysterious man with a violent past. Early in the song we are told the following: "He stood six foot six and weighed two-forty five"; "Nobody knew where John called home" and "he didn't say much, kinda quiet and shy." And later: "Somebody said he came from New Orleans, where he got in a fight over a Cajun Queen, and a crashing blow from a big right hand sent a Louisiana man to the promised land." John and his fellow workers are miners. One day the mine caves in, but John uses his size and strength to hold up sagging timbers. The lyrics tell us "twenty men scrambled from a would-be grave and now there's only one left down there to save—Big John." Of course, the mine collapses, John is killed, and later a marble stand is placed in front of the now abandoned shaft: "At the bottom of this mine lies a big, big man, Big John." Typical of many hero narratives, John is impressive and skilled but uncommunicative and dangerous. But in the end he uses his capacity to save others. The song declares him a hero, and there's no quarrel with that assessment.[4]

Rick Blaine has many of the same qualities as Big Bad John. He had a mysterious and perhaps violent background, he is competent but distant, and he ultimately decides to help others at some sacrifice to himself. The qualities that Big John and Rick share put some of the essential features of heroism into focus.

As these examples suggest, many instances of heroism involve overcoming challenging obstacles. In Big John's case, the challenge is an external, physical one that calls on his competencies, in this instance his great strength. In the case of Ernest Shackleton and *Endurance,* the crew's struggle is against the elements. For Rick Blaine the challenge is an internal, psychological one. He has to put aside his

pain and his anger at Ilsa for having deserted him in Paris, and then his long sought-after chance to have her love in his life. He has to shed his cynical protective armor in order to see the importance of the world's raging war and then contribute to that important struggle. He also has to overcome Major Strasser, but the bigger challenge is his own internal mix of pain and longing.

Examples of people overcoming obstacles heroically abound in actual human history and in fiction. Heroes from the military are frequently defined by overcoming long odds and winning important fights. In U.S. history, George Washington is a vivid example. His struggles, and those of his troops, against freezing weather, inadequate shelter and supplies, and a superior British army, enshrine Washington as a military hero. His actual fighting record wasn't very good, but he did what he had to do to win: keep the army together and avoid decisive defeat.[5] He persevered and eventually prevailed. World War II hero George Patton is an example of a bold and dashing military leader who fought extremely skillfully to win difficult, decisive battles. Patton is well known for having to overcome internal obstacles as well as the wartime enemy. His blunt, uncensored comments often caused political turmoil and nearly got him removed from command. But when it mattered most, he fought brilliantly and saved Allied armies.[6] In a different domain, pilot Amelia Earhart overcame daunting obstacles to achieve record-breaking success. She became the first woman to win the Distinguished Flying Cross, and she became a much-admired hero in her time. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Winston Churchill became an invincible charismatic hero by rallying the English people to battle Adolph Hitler.

In fiction, the Greek mythic war hero Odysseus was acclaimed for overcoming numerous obstacles on his return from Troy to his home in Ithaca. He attained such heroic status that long and difficult journeys are now called odysseys, in recognition of Odysseus' adventures. For many fictional heroes, and some real-life ones as well, obstacles come in the form of villains. Superman battles Lex Luthor while Batman battles The Joker, and so forth. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, the arch villain is Professor Moriarty. Holmes tells Dr. Watson that Moriarty is "the Napoleon of crime," and in one story he apparently kills Holmes.

Overcoming obstacles creates surprisingly different heroes. Some heroes—some real and some fictional—are not even human. The underdog racehorse Seabiscuit won the hearts of millions during the depression, beating the Triple Crown winner War Admiral by four lengths in an epic 1938 match race. A beloved animal hero, Seabiscuit's story naturally became grist for the film industry. A highly successful 2003 movie featuring actor Toby McGuire was a huge hit. The child's tale *The Little Engine That Could* shows that even inanimate objects, endowed with admirable human qualities, can become heroes. The train's mantra—"I think I can, I think I can"—defines one of the most enduring qualities of the lone hero, the uncompromising struggle against difficult obstacles when others refuse to help.[7]

Hero status is often achieved by making a great personal sacrifice for a cause. We saw that with Rick Blaine, giving up his long lost and newly found love. The boxer Muhammad Ali gave up the best years of his career, and risked going to jail, to fight for his political and religious beliefs. In the end, he didn't serve time because the Supreme Court of the United States ruled unanimously in his favor in his Conscientious Objector claim. Other people are not so lucky. They give their lives for their cause. While they are unfortunate in life, they achieve heroic immortality that honors them in death. Many soldiers who die in battle are given awards for heroism posthumously. During the Civil War, Stonewall Jackson's heroic stature was only enhanced when he died from friendly fire after the battle of Chancellorsville. No one knows exactly what happened to Amelia Earhart. It is presumed that her aircraft crashed in an attempt to reach the air base at Howland Island during her flight around the globe. Both her death and the mysteries surrounding it fixed her reputation as a hero.

Two assassinated U.S. Presidents provide vivid examples of death cementing, and preserving, heroic status. Both Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy achieved almost immediate recognition as heroes after their murders. Kennedy's case is particularly interesting. He served less than 3 years, and his record of accomplishment was mixed. But his wife Jacqueline's comment that his presidency was reminiscent of the mythical kingdom of Camelot crystallized a heroic myth that endures nearly 50 years after his death. Distinguished scholar Samuel Eliot Morison publi[illegible] classic *Oxford History of the*

American People just 2 years after Kennedy's assassination. The book ends with moving lyrics from the musical *Camelot.*[8] In 2009, a C-SPAN survey of historians ranked Kennedy as the sixth greatest president. We'll see later that his assassination still plays a crucial role in his place in history. Although examples of real-life dead heroes abound, there are fewer fictional ones. True, some do die at the end. Herman Melville's Billy Budd, "the handsome sailor," is one example. Another is Larry McMurtry's cowboy icon Augustus McCrae from *Lonesome Dove.* But fiction more often provides happy endings. Handsome heroes live happily ever after with beautiful women.

There is one further aspect of heroism that we will see throughout our study. In *Casablanca,* Rick and Louis enjoy a friendship that is often seen in hero narratives. The main protagonist or hero frequently has what we can call a buddy or sidekick aiding in his or her heroic efforts. Heroes sometimes seem too good to be true—a little wooden and perhaps overly idealistic—and sidekicks provide doses of hard-nosed pragmatism, common sense, and comic relief. *Don Quixote,* sometimes thought of as the first novel in the Western tradition, offers the squat, hapless Sancho Panza. He takes on the role of squire, striving humorously but vainly to cue the knight errant Don Quixote toward seeing windmills, for example, for what they are. More recent fictional sidekicks include the Lone Ranger's "faithful Indian companion Tonto," Robin in the Batman comics, and Barbara Havers in Elizabeth George's Inspector Lynley mystery novels. They all help and humanize their heroes. There are sidekick examples from real life, although they might better be described as collaborative relationships. Sometimes in the middle of the night Abraham Lincoln would wake up his young secretary, John Hay (later Secretary of State), to try out ideas, express anxieties, or often just relate barnyard-type jokes and stories. The president generally found these yarns more amusing than his young aid. But it helped Lincoln to tell them. Heavyweight boxing champ Muhammad Ali, regarded as a hero all over the world both for his athletic skill and his commitment to political, social, and religious justice, relied on Bundini Brown, a member of his training entourage. Brown laughed, released tension, and offered Ali cogent advice on matters inside and outside the ring.

In the Casablanca story, while Rick and Louis have a congenial relationship, for most of the film they are independent agents who deal with each other in a good-natured but business-like fashion. At one point Rick derails one of Louis' attempts to extract sexual favors from a young bride who needs money to escape to America. He rigs the roulette game so that the woman's husband can win the needed funds at the gambling table. Louis cheerfully accepts being checked on this occasion but makes clear that he expects Rick to stop interfering: "Well, I forgive you this time. But I'll be in tomorrow night with a breathtaking blonde, and it will make me very happy if she loses." Similarly, Louis has no hesitation in obeying Major Strasser's command to close down Rick's nightclub in the wake of a spontaneous anti-Nazi demonstration, led by Victor Laszlo. Rick asks: "How can you close me up? On what grounds?" In one of the film's most appealing scenes, Louis exclaims, "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here." Just then Rick's croupier walks by and hands Louis a roll of bills, saying, "Your winnings, sir." Without being embarrassed in the slightest by his patent hypocrisy, Louis offhandedly replies, "Oh. Thank you very much."

At the end of the film, however, after Rick makes the pivotal decision to send Ilsa away with Victor, Louis makes his own pivotal decision. Endangering himself, he diverts the police officers trying to find Rick. Thus, both Rick and Louis decide to forgo personal advantage and to put themselves at considerable risk, in order to collaborate in the struggle against the Third Reich. Louis comments, "Well, Rick, you're not only a sentimentalist, but you've become a patriot." Rick says, "It seemed like a good place to start" and Louis agrees, "I think perhaps you're right." At this point the typical sidekick relationship comes into focus, as both characters acknowledge "the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

When we explore the many facets of heroism, we often see that our heroes are defined in relation to villains. The drama of *Casablanca* requires the evil Major Strasser. It's chilling when he tells Ilsa that while it is not safe for Victor to leave Casablanca, it is also not safe for him to stay. He makes the likely resolution clear: "My dear Mademoiselle, perhaps you have already observed that in Casablanca,

human life is cheap." Our story is as much about the defining characteristics of villains as the nature of heroism. Beginning with Major Strasser, what are some of the central elements? Perhaps the clearest is that villains represent evil. They fight for selfish, immoral interests. Jealousy or envy is one motive that drives evil. In Grimm's classic *Snow White*, jealousy is the reason the queen wants to kill her young stepdaughter. When the queen implores, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is fairest of them all," she gets the wrong answer. As a result, she tries repeatedly to kill Snow White. In Shakespeare's *Othello* the villain Iago, himself driven by envy, takes advantage of Othello's vulnerability to jealousy to manipulate him into killing Desdemona. Power is another powerful motive leading to evil behavior. Major Strasser, a proxy for Hitler, wants power. He asks Rick: "Can you imagine us in New York?" The desire for power impels a number of Shakespearean characters, including Macbeth, and the king Claudius in *Hamlet*. Russian dictator Stalin and Cambodian despot Pol Pot are twentieth-century figures widely regarded as villains for their ruthless, power-hungry, and murderous rule.

And of course plain old greed, one of the seven deadly sins along with envy, is a frequent source of villainy. Many of us are brought up learning that money is the root of all evil. One novelty song from the early days of rock 'n roll provides a perfect narrative of greed producing villainy. The Coasters sing of Salty Sam repeatedly threatening Sweet Sue, "if you don't give me the deed to your ranch." Sam tries to cut her in half, blow her to bits with dynamite, and throw her on the railroad tracks. In each case he ties her up and leaves her to her fate. But of course all three times the song's hero saves the day: "and then along came Jones."[9]

It's worth noting that the evil of many fictional villains needs no explanation. We are all aware that evil exists, and so it isn't surprising that some villains don't seem to have any particular motive for turning to the dark side. The villain Jack Belmont in the novel *The Hot Kid* robs and kills for no apparent reason, except to become the FBI's Public Enemy Number One. Why Jack thinks that way is unfathomable, but it's seldom hard to believe that some individuals do.

Villains are the antithesis to heroes in terms of morality, but they are similar to heroes in their talent and competence. Iago, for example,

is a master of manipulation. In John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a master of rhetoric, both in organizing his partners to oppose God, and in tempting Adam and Eve. Professor Moriarty nearly matches Sherlock Holmes' brilliance. In real life, villains from Hitler to Bernie Madoff of 2009's ruinous Ponzi schemes are consequential because of their talent and their capacity to wreak havoc of one kind or another. Our consideration of villains will illustrate a range of evil inclinations and a spectrum of talents toward realizing them.

In contrasting heroes and villains we quickly see that there is often a fine line between them.[10] And this is true in two important ways. First, in many cases whether an individual ultimately acts for good or evil is by no means certain. In *Casablanca*, Rick ultimately does the right thing. But that outcome isn't obvious. At one point it seems that Rick plans to take Ilsa to America and abandon Victor Laszlo to the Nazis. And his friend Louis is only to happy to arrest Victor and gain credit with Major Strasser for detaining him. So when Louis ultimately protects Rick we are pleasantly, but not totally, surprised. In the Peter Jackson films based on Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo nearly succumbs to the temptations of evil in the climactic scene. The New Testament of the Bible likewise tells of the evil temptations that Jesus had to resist.

Many historical figures ultimately opted for good late in their careers. German industrialist Oskar Schindler, immortalized in the Stephen Spielberg film *Schindler's List*, only began to protect Jewish workers from certain death after years of exploiting their labor. President Lyndon Johnson's famous "We Shall Overcome" speech on behalf of the 1965 voting rights bill was the culmination of a long political odyssey from young racist to mature defender of African American aspirations and basic human decency. But individuals also get turned the other way. Adolph Hitler may not have become the monster he was had he not been frustrated in his early career as an artist. American traitor Benedict Arnold might not have betrayed the American colonies in their fight for independence had he not been consumed by greed and envy.

There is a fine line between heroes and villains in another sense. Some people's actions often represent combinations of good and

bad, not just unalloyed virtue or vice. Leadership scholar Barbara Kellerman in her book *Bad Leadership* paints U.S. President Bill Clinton as a villain for not intervening in the Rwanda genocide of 1994.[11] There's no way Clinton's actions, or nonactions, can be described as heroic. But they did reflect his conscientious judgment about what the United States and the United Nations could usefully do at that time. Clint Eastwood's antagonist in his 2008 film *Gran Torino* is heroic, but just barely. His character ultimately does the right thing, but the usual toxic elements of Eastwood cynicism and violence find their way into the mix.

There is a fine line also in that who is a hero and who is a villain is in the eye of the beholder. There's no better example than Islamist militant Osama bin Laden. He is the ultimate villain to most Americans of the twenty-first century. Yet he is a hero to those who cast their lot with Al Qaeda. Some U.S. Presidents are seen as both heroes or villains, depending on who you ask and when you ask. Andrew Jackson is seen as a hero to many who applaud his efforts to elevate the common man. But he is vilified by just as many for his Indian removal policies. Early in the twentieth century, historical consensus defined President Ulysses S. Grant as a villain for fostering Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War. Later he was seen as a villain, but somewhat less so, for not pushing hard enough. Now many historians think he got it just about right. Of course, that appraisal may change, too.

In short, what makes heroes and villains, and what makes us perceive various people as heroes and villains, is enormously complex. Their stories form the basis for our study of heroism and villainy. Next we preview our plan to explore those stories.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

What follows are six chapters exploring the issues touched on earlier and a concluding discussion of our findings from the research pertaining to those questions. We begin each chapter with a case study that illuminates its central themes, and we discuss where pertinent the relevant scholarship. Please note that the first letters in the title of each of the six chapters are, in order, H-E-R-O-E-S. That is, heroes. We hope this arrangement helps readers track and remember our central themes.

Chapter 1 is called, simply, Heroes. It considers who heroes are and what they do. We will see that people identify numerous heroes and numerous kinds of heroes, and that each kind presents a compelling array of personal qualities. We try to isolate the most important variables that differentiate the many kinds of heroes. Our opening case for this chapter is the Polish woman Irena Sendler, a relative unknown. We bet that our readers will admire her tremendously as we relate her story.

Chapter 2 is called Exemplars, and it considers how human beings think and feel about heroes. We begin with the fascinating fictional character Randle Patrick McMurphy from Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Our goal in this chapter is to explore the basic human thought processes, as understood through research on social cognition, that guide our perceptions of heroes, and also villains. One of the most intriguing questions is whether a human collective unconscious provides us with inborn latent images of heroes and villains, images that are activated when we encounter people who seem to fit them.

Chapter 3 is called Redemption. It considers Princess Diana's transformation from an attractive but lightly regarded young woman into one of the most frequently mentioned heroes of modern times. We'll also explore Abraham Lincoln's struggle with issues of emancipation and abolition, and how he has become perhaps the ultimate American hero for the decisive steps he took to free slaves. Lincoln's struggle was not a simple one. But we'll see that many other heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., for example, also struggled mightily before ultimately deciding to commit themselves fully to doing the right thing.

Chapter 4 is called Obstacles. We noted earlier that heroes frequently have to overcome one kind of obstacle or another. We explore Babe Zaharias's struggle to overcome gender prejudices and establish her credibility as an athlete in a range of male-dominated sports. We'll consider the research that shows how difficult it can be for people to do the right thing, especially in the face of common social pressures that would lead them in a different direction. We'll also see how ready people are to admire those who struggle to do good.

Chapter 5 is called Evil. Here we explore both how people become villains and how we perceive villains. We open with the character of

Brutus from *Julius Caesar.* In many ways, he is Shakespeare's most complex villain. Marc Antony turns an angry crowd against Brutus but finally calls him the "noblest Roman of them all." And Hitler figures prominently in this discussion. Both their examples, and many more, alert us to how resourcefully human beings can rationalize or justify evil behavior.

Chapter 6 is called Shaping. We consider how heroes and villains, both real and fictional, shape our lives, and also how complex life events shape them. We focus particularly on the role that heroes, but also villains, play as leaders. How do they move us, their followers, toward good or evil?

Finally, in our Conclusion, we hope to pull together in a clear and coherent fashion, the central implications of our study. We hope you enjoy the ride.