Perceptions of Heroes and Villains in European Literature

It is tempting to classify literary, cinematic, and historical characters into groups. The trouble, of course, is that such labels can be misleading at best, and severely subjective and variable. When using terms such as hero, villain, anti-hero, anti-villain, or adventurer, it is important to remember how vague and movable the borders really are, and to ask why a certain label is or should be placed on a specific character. It is never enough to simply classify a character or a person. One must take into consideration what the creator of this character had in mind, what circumstances affected this person’s actions, what culture or society this person came from, what his or her own beliefs or intentions may be, and finally, how our own principles, prejudices, and associations may influence our perceptions.

What makes a person a hero or a villain? How much comes from inner predisposition, from personal destiny, from mere interpretation? Is someone obliged to become a hero or villain by virtue of their existence, or are heroes and villains molded over time with an outcome that could potentially have gone either way? How much of it is voluntary, and how many of these people truly anticipate (and care) how they will be interpreted by others?

Some historical figures though not technically vilified by history may take a new and interesting turn for the worst through faulty identification. The infamous figure of Napoleon Bonaparte has influenced an unlimited number of books, films, and people. People want to understand Napoleon, to compete with Napoleon, and most of all – to be Napoleon. His incredible political and social rise through his own talents and ambition has made him an almost mythic figure. The trouble is, that many are inspired for all the wrong reasons, and abuse his name to cover their own odd fantasies and egomaniacal schemes.

Identification with Napoleon has been used to justify tyranny, deception, treason, treachery, insanity, even murder. Poor Napoleon who never had half of the thoughts or intentions ascribed to him by his ardent disciples would have cringed at the horrid things they did in his name. He may have been no saint, but he was definitely not Raskolnikov from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment. Raskolnikov randomly sets out to murder a helpless old woman, just to see if he can. He seems to feel that the success of this type of experiment will give him superiority over mankind, as if lack of a conscience somehow makes him a stronger and more efficient human being. He seems to be under the illusion that
Napoleon was able to achieve what he did because he did possess this laudable trait.

He neglects to note that Napoleon had very clear goals and purposes that he fought for, and that killing in battle for a cause, is vastly different from the idle murder of an unarmed opponent. It is not surprising that this act gives Raskolnikov neither the unlimited power, nor the satisfaction that he imagined. Unfortunately, he is not the first or the last to deliberately misinterpret Napoleon to fit his own desires, and this usage does Napoleon’s public image no favors.

If these are villains, what constitutes a hero? If a hero is defined merely as someone who sacrifices himself for the good of others (at least up to a certain point), there are many “heroes” that hardly stand up to scrutiny. Just because someone does good to others doesn’t mean he/she gets nothing from it for him/herself. In fact one may bring an enormous amount of benefit to someone without sacrificing oneself at all. Does that make them any less of a hero? Also, just because a person is defined as hero, either in the context of a literary work, or through historical interpretation, doesn’t mean that on closer inspection they may not prove to be controversial at best. The interpretation of the reader is bound to color every aspect of the work itself.

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Objective Summary: