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Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick: Ideology and the Reluctant Hero in American Movies

Kendra Greene
Lake Forest College

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**Lake Forest Papers Winner 2001
Kendra Greene**

Words from Kendra:

When Joseph Yeh and I started discussing the possibility of doing a tutorial in the two spring months before I left to study in Greece and Turkey, we began with the idea of spending time in Chicago and watching good movies. Lacanian theory was a natural addition and all at once I found myself a student of ideology and pop culture. The reluctant hero is my name for a character type I noticed while contemplating the motive behind the American exaltation of the underdog. Like other cinematic standards, the reluctant hero marks an intersection of film and philosophy that speaks to what the members of a culture believe and what they would like to think they believe. Enjoy.

**Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick:
Ideology and the Reluctant Hero in American Movies**

I. Chimera in Sheep's Clothing

An amply qualified man wants to deny his position of power and lead a simple life, but his refusal to exercise power eventually propels him to its very heights. The reluctant hero is characterized as a good and honest man who selflessly comes to the service of those who need him in a time of crisis but then retires to personal concerns once good (public interest) has prevailed over evil (the super-powerful despot who oppresses the people and otherwise keeps them from happiness). As the personification of individuality, democracy, and the good fight, this hero is both the Jeffersonian gentleman-farmer and the George Washington figure who conquers the tyrant but does not want to rule in his place. Outwardly, the reluctant hero displays the dual virtues of strong ideals and the fist to back them up, but what the audience enjoys is the power of the individual (the comforting notion that greatness comes to those who do not seek it), the force of necessity (the fantasy of being free of decisions and consequences), and the impossibility of independence.

The hero is in a position to overthrow the power structure that opposes him because he actually possesses the great power only claimed by his foe. Parading authority and intimidation, the power structure seeks to mask an inadequacy. Conversely, the reluctant hero's ever-pacific overtures belie strength of equal proportion. Both hero and villain, then, operate under the same premise as the phallic signifier: claims to power serve to compensate for impotence and insecurity. Hence, the one who really has power is silent and confident, having no need to prove himself.

As for the reluctant hero, the great extent of his power is confirmed precisely by his disposition not to use it. In victory, he shows his opponent's display of force actually to have been the concealment of impotence. The hard part is convincing the hero it is worth his bother to expose the false claims of the power structure, but once the hero challenges the foe, "the more he reacts, the more he shows his power, the more his impotence is confirmed" (Zizek 157). In contrast, the reluctant hero's resistance to greatness marks him as worthy of it, and this struggle between desire and duty drives a fantasy of irresponsibility that makes up the heart of American ideology.

II. Don't Make Me Come There Over

The specifics vary, but the archetypal reluctant hero is *Gladiator's* Maximus. At his core the reluctant hero is always disinterested in power and adverse to public life. That is not to say he is unsuccessful, for he may be very wealthy and esteemed, but these trappings do not interest him, and his identity is independent of them. In *Gladiator*, when the Caesar asks, "What can I give Rome's greatest general?" Maximus is quick to reply that he just wants to go home.

The hero cannot decide when his job is done, however. If he is independent, then he represents an exception to the power structure's jurisdiction and at the same time is also free to act against the power structure. Once so threatened, the power structure is unwilling to let him remain uncommitted, and, as long as it pursues him, the hero cannot return to his home-life. For example, the Caesar's son, Commodus, sentences Maximus to death (twice, in fact). Big Tobacco fires Jeffrey Wigand, *The Insider*, takes away his benefits, and sends death threats because he knows too much. Partly in anger for what he has done but mostly in fear of what the infraction signals the hero is capable of, the power structure acts to undermine the hero's security.

Since the hero is too strong to capitulate under personal duress, the power structure attacks whatever is most dear to him, the thing that he says he has been working to protect, his American Dream. The power structure might only have time to threaten, but it may well slaughter the hero's family and destroy his homeland. Under the new Caesar's orders, Maximus' wife and son are hanged while his estate burns. Likewise in *Braveheart*, the ruling English seek to punish William Wallace and repress his rebellious spirit by murdering his bride. In any case, the threat against the hero eventually proves fatal for the power structure; that is, by tampering with the thing the hero lives for, the power structure eliminates the hero's reasons to live as a pacifist, and so unleashes its own destruction.

A displaced man without kin, career, or home, the hero is left with little more than his life. Alienated from the concrete world, he retreats into a sort of mythos, straddled between life and death, existence and fiction. Young Lucius explains to Maximus, "They said you were a giant. They said you could crush a man's head with your hands." Physically, the hero probably takes a journey or hides deep in the woods at this point (Maximus sets off across the countryside, and, after he collapses, a slave-trader takes him to the far reaches of the empire). Mentally, this ambiguous status occurs while the hero is presented as being still stunned with grief and undecided as to how he should proceed. True to his role as martyr, Maximus is destroyed by the loss of his wife and son. His urge to give in to death testifies to his sincerity when he prayed in battle, "Watch over my wife and son, and tell them I live only to hold them again."

Yet even the hero's will to die is frustrated. The power structure he irks wants him dead, and he himself is happy to so end his grief, but somehow he continues to live. Somehow, he is drawn out of both mourning and great danger to single-handedly take up a fight against odds from which he was previously content to walk away. The force is so irresistible it seems that (in the ultimate fantasy of democracy) even the totalitarian power structure wants its destruction by the hero. When he re-emerges

ready to fight, it is as if summoned by a collective will; he is now a man transformed, stripped of reservations.

This movement from mere man to true hero is a substantial change in identity, and it is often marked by a sense of death and a change of name. After the destruction of his family, someone asks Maximus about his past in the military, and he replies, "that man doesn't exist." When asked to give his name, he asserts, "Gladiator." He is no longer a man but purely a role. Similarly though less dramatic, Casablanca's most celebrated club owner never mentions his old life in Paris or the political activity tied to it. He makes sure that all that is known about him is his profession, and not even the name Richard survives to remind Rick of his earlier life.

Nevertheless, there is something very odd in the hero rising again to fight. His home and family are gone, but their theft doesn't immediately inspire vengeance. Nor is the hero strictly an idealist; after all, he was associated with good or grandiose causes like liberation, establishing law and order, and the grandeur of Rome because they provided him income, and he leaves these duties as soon as he can. Indeed, it is hard to ascribe any motivation to the reluctant hero because it is precisely his total disinterest (disinterest in money, politics, personal grudges, etc.) that allows him to be read as just. Everything is set up for the audience to believe that he would be happy to be a gentleman farmer, but things just keep getting in the way. He is a good man because he is concerned solely with his private life, but once that dream is shattered, what could compel him to rise from misery and cripple an empire?

Ostensibly, it is the common people who seem to be the driving force, because they are freed from some tyranny or another. Notably though, the reluctant hero is attempting to subdue an evil rather than champion a good. He is settling a personal score, and it just so happens that the general populace reaps the benefits of this victory. The plot introduces no other motivation, yet it remains hard to believe that the helplessness of the public is what moves the fundamentally private man to action.

Undeniably, the reluctant hero has an unconventional relationship with the masses he benefits. They do not want the hero to do anything for them, though they hesitate to do anything themselves. In *High Noon*, Gary Cooper's character, Will Kane, has just turned in his marshal's badge when the town gets news that an outlaw Will sent to prison has been released and is coming back for revenge. Everyone urges Will to follow his honeymoon plans and leave town, even though they all acknowledge that the impending arrival of an outlaw puts the entire community in danger. Will decides he cannot leave but still receives no assistance from the townspeople he is protecting.

Will stays for the impending gunfight mostly because he knows the criminal from his past will continue to haunt him personally until the whole thing is finished, but he also knows that no one else can do the job (the new marshal will arrive too late). To some extent, Will stays because the situation demands it, even if the citizenry explicitly tries to keep him out of it. As the benefactor of the common people he is a sort of savior offering deliverance, and, unsurprisingly, he is shrouded in a quasi-divine necessity.

After due struggle, the hero conquers the power system which initiated his creation. The unjust Caesar is killed and the senate is reinstated. The waffling network runs

the whole story, and the evil tobacco company is brought to court. Thirteenth century Scots negotiate better conditions with tyrannical England. By demonstrating true power, the hero exposes the false claims to power made by his foe. With the hero's triumph, the state is poised for peace and prosperity, and, as his final heroic act, the hero relinquishes power.

Just as in the beginning, the hero wants to retire, but only when everything is in order is the wish tenable. The sincere desire to avoid power is never doubted, even if the hero transfers his spoils to a worthy replacement in the moments before succumbing to battle wounds. In the extreme case (like *Gladiator*), the hero was only living to complete his quest, so there is no incentive to live to enjoy its spoils. In a similar way, the hero who survives then retreats from heroism and begins a new life. Hence Jeffrey Wigand, once high-powered executive, becomes a beloved teacher, and Rick leaves *Casablanca* having embarked on "the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

III. Mob and Master or Can't Live With 'Em, Can't Live Without 'Em

As evidenced in films from *Gladiator* to *High Noon*, *Casablanca* to *Star Wars*, the reluctant hero fights a political battle meant to undermine a tyrant or other outlaw. A democracy ideologically demands that a man of the people campaign against such injustice and tyranny for the rights of the people. That is, the situation calls for a man so committed to preserving his own solitude that he retreats from power, thus putting himself above the accusation that he wishes to substitute his own agenda for that of the tyrant. Like Rick in *Casablanca*, the public finds this hero trustworthy in his self-centeredness. Yet because he appears free of ulterior motives, this same self-centered man is called upon to sacrifice himself for a populace he doesn't care about.

The reluctant hero is at once the pinnacle of independence (choosing, almost on a whim, to fight the cocky power structure that made things personal) and a servile instrument of the people (nearly the physical embodiment of the mob's will). Or perhaps the latter perpetuates the illusion of the former. When the retired gladiator Proximo explains to Maximus the feeling of "the crowd willing you [to kill]," the force he describes is irresistible. Ilsa (played by Ingrid Bergman) implores Rick, "You've got to think for both of us." In making him responsible, she imposes on Rick a burdensome obligation by virtue of appearing helpless and passive herself.

Whether by virtue of independent action or as sole executor of a mob's desire, the reluctant hero is clearly presented as an individual. As such, everything is up to him; he has no support and no excuses. As much as he may buck it (and although he has tried to avoid it), he cannot transfer responsibility to anyone else. Noteworthy here is that the hero is not a hero until he achieves this hyper-independence (albeit he becomes something of a slave to the people). The death of his family and destruction of his property disconnect him from everything. Only after he has lost everything can the reluctant man become the reluctant hero.

The death of the family—and notably the loss of the wife/love interest—sets up a dichotomy of character that matches two phases for the hero: with women and without women. This split of man and hero corresponds to a whole series of complements such as mortal and immortal, private and public, provider and protector, pacifist and soldier, husband and bachelor (or, if you are Luke Skywalker,

child and orphan). Even though women honestly seem to care for him, the hero is a Samson figure who is far more powerful when apart from his woman.

Yet even after adopting his super-powerful role, the hero again comes to be connected to women. Usually, the woman is in fact essential to the success of the hero's mission, but though she helps insure the prosperity of an empire, she is ultimately a liability for the hero. In *High Noon*, Amy (Grace Kelly) saves the husband who left her, Will (Gary Cooper), by shooting the gunman about to attack him. However, in so doing, Amy gives away her position, and the only surviving gunman takes her as hostage. With a woman quite literally in the way, Will's opportunity to shoot is greatly impaired. Similarly in *Gladiator*, Lucilla (sister to the false Caesar Commodus) works so that Maximus' revenge is possible, but in doing so, she also sets up his martyrdom.

Women in these movies represent responsibility. They are symbols of commitment in the lives of very independent men. In some sense, the wedding band serves as a reminder of a pre-existing allegiance, a loyalty that must be dissolved for the man to become a true individual and act without bias or agenda and so, paradoxically, to act in the name of all people. The presence of woman interrupts a fantasy of irresponsibility, not only because she grounds man in the real world (instead of the realm of heroic adventure), but also because woman unmistakably connects man to something outside of himself. Freed from her, the hero is simply bound instead to the people, but everyone ignores this connection, and the tie is treated as somehow unrestricting.

Movies about reluctant heroes are enjoyable; the audience leaves feeling everything has worked out satisfactorily, despite the fact that the protagonist was subjected to great tragedy before dying. Though he may suffer for it, he has fulfilled a destiny of greatness. As a result, the people as a whole are better off and liberty itself is intact. The audience is left to relish the hero asserting his authority as a great man, but the enjoyment is really in a two-fold irresponsibility. First, without even trying to, everything works out in the end, and the hero does everything right. He does not need to want to help people or achieve greatness, yet everything falls into place effortlessly, and he simply cannot help but be successful. He has risked nothing and gained everything; he avoids greatness, yet it is thrust upon him.

The second irresponsibility is less overt. Maximus has spent years away from his family, Rick and Ilsa separated with a love affair unfinished, Will and Amy are just about to leave on their honeymoon: however unlikely a family man, the man in each story is just one step away from the life he has imagined when the stroke of tragedy calls him to a higher duty. The idyllic family and farm he has yearned for remains firmly on its pedestal, and each man is saved at the last minute from having to live his dream and confront the possibility that he may have been wrong about it. Family life may not be all that rewarding, the man may turn out to be a failure at it, but he never has to know. The hero is left with the impression that he did everything humanly possible to live the fantasy, and so he is in no way at fault for how things turned out. He earns credit for striving for a peaceful family life, even though he never has to give up his competitive and brutal activities. Fate, the will of the people, the necessity of the situation, or some such quasi-divine force made all the choices for him, and in the face of adversity, he bravely did his best.

Essentially, the hero is not at fault for neglecting his personal life. In fact the abandonment appears absolutely necessary, the hero's image remains untarnished, and he is rewarded with prestige for the sacrifice. However, the triumph of the hyper-individualistic hero really pays tribute to social forces greater than the single man. The reluctant hero movie uses the individual to justify, even enjoy, the concessions he must make for the sake of society. "The paradox of the Lacanian Real, then, is that it is an entity which although it does not exist (in the sense of 'really existing,' taking place in reality) has a series of properties — it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects that is the symbolic reality of subjects" (Žižek 163). The reluctant hero is not so much an individual but a man who steps in to fill the role of an individual, a role created by the society that needs his contribution.

In the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, the parade organizers have no need for the actual Santa Claus; they just need someone to wear the clothes and play the part they have already prepared. Analogously, the reluctant hero need not be the unique and genuine article, but simply enter a prepared role. After all, the news program sets up Jeffery Wigand's role as informer, Luke Skywalker is of great help to the rebels because he is a Jedi, and Will Kane has to stay only because the new marshal does not arrive in time.

Perhaps because the movie comes at a time when questions about the relative priority due work and family have become a popular cultural issue, *Gladiator* more than its predecessors shows the distance between the role and the hero in it. Before choosing Maximus as his successor, the Caesar muses to his daughter Lucilla, "If only you had been born a man" the crown would be hers. Although Lucilla has the qualities to inherit the throne and restore the grandeur of Rome, she is clearly suited to it and hence does not quite fit the role. Instead she must help prime Maximus (in his gladiator form) for these tasks and facilitate his actions by arranging meetings and alliances.

In the Lacanian sense, the hero status is "an object produced by the signifying texture itself. It is a kind of object that came to exist as a result of all the fuss about it" (Žižek 160). The people, dissatisfied with the power structure, prepare the role of the hero, and then it is only a matter of time before the hero himself comes to exist. When the hero is in limbo after the destruction of his land and family (the destruction of his identity up until that point), his identity is so fragmentary that legend readily molds it so that it fits specifications for the type of hero required by the situation. The reluctant man has only to accept his new identity as reluctant hero.

But why is it so important to create and perpetuate the individual? Žižek reinterprets the Marxist formula "*they do not know it, but they are doing it*" to say that people know very well what they are doing, but they overlook the fact that illusion is structuring "their real social activity" (28, 32). The movie-going public realizes the hero does not exist and that his adventures are as unrealistic as the supreme individualism he affects. What they do not take into account is that their notions of democratic rights and responsibilities (not to mention their conceptions of what it is to be an American adult) have prepared them to use the mask of the triumphant individual to enjoy how the text affirms the goodness of sacrificing individuality.

The necessity of abandoning individuality is even suggested in the movie by how briefly the reluctant hero can sustain his role before he must die, leave town, start a new life, or otherwise relinquish his heroic status. Slavoj Žižek says, "Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void" (Žižek 126). The reluctant hero, insofar as he represents individuality in its most rarified state, is a fantasy of total independence that tries to mask the fact that such individuality only exists when there are others to acknowledge it.

It turns out that the independent man needs others to bring him into the fray, convince him to fight, and help to carry out his plans. Fighting against the enemy, the hero's displays of superior strength and independence always play to a crowd. It should not be surprising that Maximus rebuilds his reputation while trying to win over spectators, or that Commodus stages his showdown with Maximus in the grand circus atmosphere of the Coliseum. Likewise, Jeffrey Wigand will fight against big tobacco just so long as the whole thing gets aired on national television. The showman that emerges in the hero resembles characteristics of the very power structure he is trying to destroy. One must remember that Maximus was raised with Commodus and that Luke Skywalker is, after all, the son of Darth Vader. To maintain the hero's integrity, though, any such resemblance must be erased, and the final renunciation of power serves to preserve the image that the hero is fundamentally independent and has been unfailingly so throughout.

The individual is an illusion, and every action he performs in that name threatens to reveal his impossibility: "The phallic signifier is, so to speak, an index of its own impossibility. In its very positivity it is the signifier of 'castration' — that is, of its own lack" (Žižek 157). The power structure toppled by the reluctant hero reveals that it never really had the absolute authority it pretended to, but, by the same principle, the hero himself is nearly sacrificed for victory. The reluctant hero is a power symbol whose reputation (a reputation stoked by every demur and refusal to participate the hero makes) is so great that eventually his hand is forced, and in action he is betrayed. The hero displaces the power and takes it away from his foe, but then it replaces him. Fundamentally, the structure of power does not change but the ideology fulfills its function, leaving the viewer with the impression that this submission is actually free choice.

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