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### What Is a Hero?

It seems that the longer I consider what defines a hero, the more I am confronted by multiple elements and varying possibilities. It is quite common to rely on the generic idea that a hero is someone who engages in an action, or leads a cause that is helpful to others or is daring in itself. It is the person who is set apart from the mainstream by courage, more than anything else, and we tend to connect this courage with results that bring good to people. At the same time, I have come to believe that heroism itself can be many things, as a hero may be such only for a brief point in their own life. It is then for me someone who “rises above,” even temporarily, to reveal a core of human excellence. Moreover, when heroism is involved, I feel that there is evidence of nobility in the true sense of the word. A human being is a hero to me when they have developed an awareness of life’s true purpose, and, on a deeper level, a commitment to the best thinking, feeling, and behavior that can exist in humans.

This definition of the hero as being noble is clear to me in the contrast offered in Knight's poem, “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane.” More exactly, the poem powerfully conveys how it is easy and common for people to call someone a hero for all the wrong reasons. Because real heroism often involves challenging the existing order of things, we frequently regard this kind of behavior as marking the hero, and this sad reality lies at the core of Knight's poem. The story here is plain; Hard Rock is a fierce rebel admired by everyone because no authority can restrain or intimidate him. He is covered in scars as proof of his toughness, and he is also given the traditionally heroic quality of serving as a legend. The others are curious as to what electroshock and a lobotomy can do to their hero, and they treat him

as a myth: “As we waited we wrapped ourselves in the cloak/ Of his exploits” (Knight ll 15-16). When it is clear that Hard Rock is in fact empty inside, there remains the need in his admirers to justify this as a pose, but the truth eventually crushes them. What is revealed then, and as is indicated from the start by the excessive praise for violence, is that no hero has ever existed here. Those around Hard Rock are so desperate for release, they translate his defiance into heroism, when there is evidence in the poem of no real heroism at all. The illusion is understandable; the others are crushed by the weight they can only dream of fighting, so the lone fighter is everything to them. Still, Hard Rock is nothing more than, “A doer of things” (L 34). It is his lack of real heroism or nobility, in my opinion, that makes Knight’s poem tinged with genuine sadness, just as it reinforces how often we make heroes to meet our own needs.

More in keeping with how I view a hero, if in an indirect way, is Claude McKay's introspection in “Outcast.” There is nothing remotely heroic in this poem in any overt way. It is all internal thought and feeling, and it reflects a profound sadness at having been stripped of a native identity. The “outcast” is who he is, defined by being an oppressed alien in a world not of his choosing. All of this, however, brings to my mind a critical element of real heroism: awareness. Being a hero in any form must translate into seeing beyond the self, even if the self is the primary concern. How this becomes heroic in McKay's poem occurs in the wider understanding that the narrator expresses. It is, in a sense, a cry of self-pity, but in that pity is knowledge of all humanity: “And I must walk the way of life a ghost/ Among the sons of earth” (McKay ll 11-12). The narrator is aware of the entire scope of human existence, even as he laments his place in it. This is a kind of nobility of sight or feeling that is heroic in a poetic sense; more exactly, as Hard Rock is unheroic because he is a reactive, violent being, McKay's narrator is heroic simply because he is capable of seeing beyond himself. That the sight is tragic

in no way undermines its quality as heroic.

Then, and in greatly understated ways, John Hope Franklin's essay, "The Train from Hate," powerfully reinforces my conviction that real heroism, active or unmoving, is based on a nobility of spirit and mind. Knight's Hard Rock is a hero only in a misguided construction of him as such by others, and McKay's "outcast" evinces an indirect expansion of insight that nears him to hero status. Franklin's mother, in no uncertain terms, is a hero, and of a beautifully gentle kind. To begin with, she embodies the quality I regard as so meaningful: awareness. She can, of course, comprehend her son's anger and tears, but she also comprehends the larger world he must learn to see. The reader understands that, in having undergone struggles of her own, she is now empowered to share the insights so painfully gained. Importantly, she is realistic and unromantic in her words to her son. She paints no "pretty pictures" and she does not even encourage him to resist the oppression. This alone, however, reinforces her innate nobility because her aim is to make him see the totality of the experience: "The laws required racial separation, but that they did not, could not, make us inferior in any way" (Franklin). In rising above the unjust laws, she seeks to aid her child in rising above them as well. It is, in effect, both the most mild "action" and the most powerful kind of heroism, because it is born from a noble impulse.

People will, I imagine, always define heroes based on what their own needs and views are, at least to some extent. The men of Knight's poem exemplify this reality as they shape a hero out of defiance. In life, most of us also define a person by what their actions or beliefs mean to us, even as we tend to look for excellence or evidence of goodness in our heroes. I share these views, but at the same time I feel the need to expand the definition. I perceive heroism in McKay's "Outcast" because I see in him a wide awareness going beyond himself, as I find Franklin's mother to be absolutely heroic by virtue of an even greater awareness. When such an awareness

is in place, there can be true nobility because the hero has a sense of life and perspective.

Ultimately, then, a hero to me is someone who has gained a deep understanding of life, which leads to a commitment to the best thinking, feeling, and behavior that can exist in humans.

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