

Hero Narratives

BY [STEFAN TILG](#), [ACHIM AURNHAMMER](#), [GEORG FEITSCHER](#)
VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED 24 JUNE 2024

Table of content

1. Introduction
 2. Plot
 3. Case study on the heroic plot structure: the Mwindo epic
 4. Figure
 5. Case study on admiring identification with heroic figures: Harriet Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
 6. Perspectives for future research and scholarly desiderata
 7. References
 8. Selected literature
 9. List of images
- Citation

1. Introduction

In the media and popular culture, talk of “hero stories” is omnipresent, and even recent scholarship ascribes to “hero narratives” a central role in [heroization processes](#).^[1] In narratology, however, [heroes](#) and the heroic play only a marginal role. Here, the term “hero” is mostly used as a synonym for “protagonist”, which may include but is not limited to “heroic figures” in the narrow sense. On the one hand, this is regrettable, but on the other hand it offers the possibility of recasting this subject.

The most prolific narratological categories with which the heroic can be apprehended are plot and figure. The one deals with typical plot structures and narrative sequences, the other with the narrative development of figures, in particular with their model ethical character that can be seen in that development. Of course, plot and figure mutually determine one another: there is no plot without figures and no figures without a plot.

In this article, different narratological approaches for describing heroic figures and plot structures are summarised – including Hans Robert Jauß’s term “identification patterns” (*Identifikationsmuster*) and Patrick Hogan’s modelling of ‘heroic plot structures’ – and their analytical power illustrated using case studies.

2. Plot

An influential approach for identifying typical plot structures comes from folktale scholarship and is

associated in particular with Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (Russian 1928).[2] Propp distinguishes 31 plot elements (e.g. "the hero and his adversary compete in a struggle", "the hero or the heroine is rewarded with a partner"), all of which need not always be realised, but they always occur in the same order. Propp's approach is tailored very specifically to (Russian) folktale heroes, however, and limited largely to describing formal, immanent structures of narratives.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell aspires to universality.[3] Through the intercultural comparison of myths, folktales, literature, religious narratives and dreams, as well as in referring to psychoanalytical clichés, he develops his idea of an archetypal "monomyth", consisting of a "hero's journey". Greatly simplified, this hero's journey comprises three steps: 1) separation from the community and the everyday world; 2) adventure and **heroic deeds** in a world removed from the everyday and 3) return to the community to which the hero has something to give and say on account of his exceptional experiences. Finally, the hero of the monomyth is an allegory of the potential of our own consciousness and of our dormant capabilities to effect relief through exceptional action – this is where popular self-help literature[4] and psychological "heroism science", currently flourishing particularly in America, come into play.[5] Campbell's book is popular science and esoteric in a way that is hard to digest. However, the fact that the basic formula of the hero's journey is a narrative recipe for success can hardly be denied due to Campbell's strong reception in the film industry and elsewhere.

A recent approach by Patrick Hogan, developed in his book *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (2011), is more broadly applicable.[6] By comparing numerous literary and cinematic narratives from around the world, he derives three particularly successful prototypical plot formulae: the heroic plot, the sacrificial plot (in the sense of atonement for an unexplained punishment/plague) and the romantic plot. In referring to contemporary research on emotions in cognitive science, Hogan argues that each of these formulae is linked with one to two basic emotions: pride and anger in the case of the heroic plot, hunger and fear in the case of the sacrificial plot and attachment and sexual desire in the case of the romantic plot. The heroic plot is most closely associated with the political formation of identity and political ideologies, and the sacrificial plot most approximate to the religious formation of identity and religious ideologies, while the romantic plot tends to be critical of large group identities (various hybrids are recognised). Ultimately, these narrative prototypes are well-founded in an anthropologically pragmatic sense because storytellers around the globe share similar needs: to make their stories interesting and relevant to a large audience. In contrast to theorists like Propp and Campbell, however, Hogan's purpose when examining individual works is not merely to provide abstract interpretations or to find a general formula behind them. He is equally concerned with distinguishing the culturally, sociologically, and individually conditioned formations and deviations in order to draw interpretive conclusions from them. The prototype therefore does not serve as an end in itself, but as a foil against which unique characteristics can be recognised more clearly (cf. the example of the *Mwindo epic* below).

According to Hogan, it is characteristic of the heroic plot that it sets the hero in relation to an in-group to which he himself belongs and to an out-group that is usually hostile. Within his community/in-group, the hero seeks honour as recognition (his anger arises when his pride is gravely violated within the in-group; just think of the *Iliad* with the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles). The hero also seeks to attain pride in relation to the out-group, but through dominance over the out-group. Hence, in both cases, it is about a socially imparted sense of self-worth. Because of the in-group/out-group structure, the heroic plot typically falls apart into two narrative sequences: into the "usurpation sequence" in the in-group (e.g. a rightful heir to the throne is denied the crown; he goes into exile; etc.) and into the "threat-defense sequence" originating with the out-group (e.g. a country is threatened by the invasion of a hostile army). Both sequences are often so interwoven with one another that the threat-defence sequence results in the resolution of the ongoing

usurpation sequence (e.g. the exiled heir to the throne returns as the saviour of his endangered country and conquers the enemies). In the end, the hero or heroes have attained recognition in the in-group and dominance over the out-group. An “epilogue of suffering” can also be added, which can be understood as the penance for the suffering caused by the heroes and as the empathic recognition for the ‘enemies’, be it Hector receiving a funeral at the end of the *Iliad* or the hero undergoing a purification process like in the Epic of Gilgamesh, tempering his exorbitance and turning him into a temperate ruler.

Hogan develops his description of the heroic plot primarily using significant works of world literature, but also applies the fundamental ideas for his analysis of the narrative construction of nationalism as well as for political communities of honour in general (*Understanding Nationalism*, 2009)[7], which includes many factual narratives. In its fundamental elements, the model might therefore also be interesting outside of literary studies. At any rate, it is worth thinking about the heroic as a narrative phenomenon in the tense web of interrelation between pride (+/- anger), the in-group and the out-group.

3. Case study on the heroic plot structure: the Mwindo epic

The basic type of a heroic plot pattern described by Hogan and found across cultures, albeit in culturally specific variations, can be explained using the example of the Mwindo epic from Central Africa. (Hogan himself identifies this epic as an example.[8]) Among the Nyanga people, the hardly datable Mwindo epic has been passed down orally by storytellers and “bards” for generations. In the 1950s, a European ethnographer recorded one variation of the epic and published an English translation of it.[9] The epic tells the story of the child hero Mwindo, who is forced into exile by his father before then removing his father from power and succeeding him as the leader of the village. In the end, Mwindo develops from an immature braggart into a wise and benevolent ruler.

Accordingly, at the beginning of the story, there is a usurpation sequence in the sense put forth by Hogan: the rightful order of succession is disturbed by the village leader Shemwindo trying to kill his firstborn son, Mwindo, finally expelling him from the village after multiple attempts fail. The adventure and trials that Mwindo, endowed with magical powers, must pass while in exile, during his return to the village and when pursuing his father take up a large part of the story. Mwindo’s songs woven into the narrative make plain that the hero is seeking not least of all the recognition of his native in-group as he boasts about his deeds and victories over numerous opponents who blocked his way. This hubris is articulated particularly in a number of lines that the hero repeats and varies dozens of times: “You are powerless against Mwindo. / For Mwindo is the Little-one-just-born-he-walked. / Shemwindo gave birth to a hero.”[10] The power struggle is resolved by Mwindo destroying the village along with its inhabitants before resurrecting it and pursuing his father all the way to the underworld to bring him back to the village. The wisemen of the village resolve to divide the territory between Mwindo and Shemwindo in order to avoid future conflicts between the two – as the village elders themselves point out, this was less an ideal and more a pragmatic solution for resolving the order of succession that accommodated the pride and the jealousy of the two leaders.[11]

Another storyline ties into the usurpation sequence that varies the prototypical threat-defence sequence identified by Hogan. Mwindo, now the leader of his village, sends a troop of pygmies to hunt for pigs in the nearby territory of the dragon Kirimu. When Kirimu eats the pygmies in a fury, Mwindo, against his father’s advice, decides to kill the dragon and carry its carcass triumphantly back to the village. Thus, in this case, it is the hero Mwindo himself who provokes the conflict with the external opponent and subsequently resolves it by violently achieving dominance. The effortlessly achieved victory over the dragon provides Mwindo with another opportunity to brag about his deeds not only to the village community, but also to the gods and natural creatures. The hero has thereby

obtained the recognition of both the in-group and the out-group.

The narrative does not end there, however, but with an epilogue of suffering in which Mwindo is forced to renounce his heroic hubris. A final conflict is foreshadowed already in the plot of the threat-defence sequence: when Mwindo has the dragon brought back to the village, three villagers warn Mwindo about the exorbitance of his deeds – “[...] he who has killed this one cannot fail to kill one of his relatives”^[12] – and are killed by Mwindo for it as if to confirm their warning. Mwindo is then punished for his hot-blooded deeds: it turns out that the dragon was an ally of the storm god Nkuba, who had supported Mwindo previously in the pursuit of Shemwindo, but is now demanding penance from the hero for murdering the dragon. Nkuba takes Mwindo to heaven and the gods of the rain, moon, sun and stars, who reproach him for his arrogance and inflict on him terrible agonies:

“Nkuba seized Mwindo; he climbed up with him to Rain. When Rain saw Mwindo, he told him: ‘You, Mwindo, never accept being criticized; the news about your toughness, your heroism, we surely have heard the news, but over here, there is no room for your heroism.’ Rain fell upon Mwindo seven and seven times more; he had Hail fall upon him, and he soaked him thoroughly. Mwindo said: ‘This time I am in trouble in every way.’ Nkuba lifted Mwindo up again; he had him ramble across Moon’s domain. When Moon saw Mwindo, he pointed at him: ‘This time the news was given us that you were tough, but here in the sky there is no room for your pride.’ Moon burned Mwindo’s hair; [...]

Nkuba lifted Mwindo up again; he went and climbed up with him to the domain of Sun. When Sun saw Mwindo, he harassed him hotly; Mwindo lacked all means of defense against Sun [...].^[13]

Confronted with the power of the gods, Mwindo must recognise that his heroism and pride have limits (“over here, there is no room for your heroism”; “here in the sky there is no room for your pride”). After a year of agonies, the gods allow Mwindo to return to earth, but under the condition that he must never again kill an animal.^[14] After he returns to the village, the reformed Mwindo proves himself as a mature and humble ruler. He issues to his village community new rules that are based on mutual recognition and respect: “Accept the chief; fear him; may he also fear you.”^[15]

At the end, the narrator once again explicitly states the moral of the story by warning of the dangers of heroic hubris: because no hero is invincible, it is important to evince magnanimity instead of showing only toughness:

“Heroism be hailed! But excessive callousness either pushes a man into a great crime or brings him a great one, which (normally) he would not have experienced. [...] Even if a man becomes a hero (so as) to surpass the others, he will not fail one day to encounter someone else who could crush him, who could turn against him what he was looking for.”^[16]

The brief epilogue of suffering, in which Mwindo is punished for his heartless violence and matures into a worthy leader, thus proves to be a crux: Mwindo’s violence and his heroic pride appear tolerable only as long as the social order is not disturbed by the power struggle (in the usurpation sequence). But no later than upon seizing power, the new ruler must learn to give up the hubris of his own infallibility and take on a pacific, respectful bearing (in the threat-defence sequence and epilogue of suffering).

As Hogan postulates, it is precisely the deviations from the ideal-typical (heroic) plot patterns that prove to be informative and illuminate the characteristics of the narrative and its cultural context. For example, it is not a usurper in the Mwindo epic who seizes power illegitimately, rather the village

leader himself who impedes an orderly succession. In addition, the threat-defence sequence follows the usurpation plot and is not interwoven with it. In this case, the former therefore does not serve to provide Mwindo with the opportunity to profile himself to his in-group and assert himself against the 'usurper'; instead, the sequence demonstrates Mwindo's lack of ruler qualities when he assumes the office of village leader. For it is Mwindo himself who provokes the conflict with the dragon unnecessarily, and the brief, one-sided struggle between the two appears hardly heroic. These variations of the hero plot pattern leave the Mwindo epic appearing as a narrative in which the Nyanga culture's ambivalent stance towards hero figures and a pronounced mistrust of rulers are articulated.[17]

4. Figure

Hans Robert Jauß's classic on the aesthetic of reception *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982) constitutes a good point of departure for examining the "heroic appeal" that proceeds from figures.[18] According to Jauß, experiencing art is the "enjoyment of the self in the enjoyment of the other", i.e. one's own opportunities and freedoms are revealed and shown by experiencing the other in art. A foundation for this enjoyment of the self in the enjoyment of the other is aesthetic identification, particularly identification with the "hero" (although initially, Jauß employs the word "hero" to refer to any protagonist of a story). However, of the five patterns of aesthetic identification that Jauß distinguishes, one is certainly very fitting for heroes, namely the "admirative" pattern. In this pattern, the readers admire a figure that – speaking in the sense of Aristoteles – is better than us, stands above us and to whom we can look up to.

In all of the identification patterns, Jauß distinguishes between two types of consequences of the identification for the recipients' own thinking and actions: those that are positive/"progressive" (leading to greater freedom and development of the self) and those that are negative/"regressive" (leading to a greater lack of freedom and limitation of the self). In "admiring identification", recipients can creatively "emulate" the admired hero (*aemulatio*), or only "imitate" him through replication (*imitatio*) – of course always with the means available in the given case. They can orient themselves studiously towards him as a role model, but also allow themselves to be merely entertained by him in escapist fashion. At the social level, admirative identification is a significant factor for the formation of all kinds of norms, fashions, tastes, the preserved traditions of communities of remembrance, etc. With Jauß, the hero figure can be understood as a social figure: the admiration of figures such as Goethe's Werther who touch the nerve of the times can for example become the beacon of an entire youth movement. Hero canons such as the Swiss heroes associated with Wilhelm Tell can define national consciousness. Conversely, the progression of social norms can allow the admiration of old heroes to die away and establish new heroes, as was the case, for example, in the replacement of the daredevils of the Germanic heroic epic with the cultivated heroes of the courtly novel in the 12th century.

To what extent is this narrative? As if self-evidently, Jauß cites literary examples, but does not address whether there is a fundamental connection between aesthetic identification and narrativity. We believe that there is this connection for identification. The admirative pattern is in the widest sense always based on normative conduct/thinking, and this conduct/thinking must first be developed narratively in order to become visual and comprehensible – we must know and understand the story of Werther and how he acts and thinks in certain situations in order to be able to identify with him.

This function of hero figures as an ethical model that recipients can emulate in various ways or can refuse to emulate manifests itself pointedly in crisis situations in narratives, e.g. in important decision situations that are genuinely structured in a narrative and temporal way ("What will he/she do?", but also "What would I do in that situation?"). Proceeding from such key moments, Jauß's model

can be refined to the effect that “identification” is located on two different levels. Individual key moments that evoke strong affective admiration for individual conduct (level 1) are substantiated reflexively through the overarching narrative individuation of the biography and morality of the figure (level 2). Through this stabilisation of the admiration, the figure can develop an enduring heroic binding force that makes the figure suitable as a point of reference for communities of remembrance. (Cf. the example of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* below)

Hence, in summary, from the perspective of the “figure” category, hero narratives make a strong, normative claim based on the narrative development of the (social) figure directed at the audience, thereby provoking them to emulation decisions.

5. Case study on admirative identification with heroic figures: Harriet Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

We would like to test our theory on the heroic impact of narratively developed figures using two key scenes in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).[19] The novel depicts the brutal oppression of enslaved Blacks in the Southern United States on the eve of the American Civil War with great basis in reality (the novel contains many factual elements – for instance the legendary flight of Harriet Tubman, a major abolitionist figure). The background for the novel is the increase in the penalty for aiding in the escape of enslaved individuals and the legally prescribed return of enslaved individuals who had fled to the Northern States. The cruel treatment of enslaved people is depicted: how their families were separated, how they were exploited, maltreated and traded as commodities. In two key scenes of heroic conduct, the novel confronts readers with the decision to identify with this conduct or to reject it.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the enslaved woman Eliza Harris flees from the slave trader Haley, who has purchased her five-year-old son, Harry. The chapter *The Mother’s Struggle* presents Eliza’s decision to flee in order to keep her son. The decision situation begins with a universalisation of maternal love:

“But stronger than all was maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger. Her boy was old enough to have walked by her side, and, in an indifferent case, she would only have led him by the hand; but now the bare thought of putting him out of her arms made her shudder, and she strained him to her bosom with a convulsive grasp, as she went rapidly forward.”[20]

The Christian call to God (“Lord, help! Lord, save me!”) from the mouth of Eliza constitutes the link to the reader. That call serves as an implicit appeal to the Christian readership to see in the enslaved woman Eliza not just the creature of God, but a practising Christian – and to recognise themselves in her.

“She wondered within herself at the strength that seemed to be come upon her; for she felt the weight of her boy as if it had been a feather, and every flutter of fear seemed to increase the supernatural power that bore her on, while from her pale lips burst forth, in frequent ejaculations, the prayer to a Friend above – ‘Lord, help! Lord, save me!’

If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning, – if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o’clock till morning to make good your escape, – how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom, – the little sleepy head on your shoulder, – the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?”[21]

The key scene is dramatised and marked as a situation in which a decision must be made and as a literal crisis by the reader being explicitly addressed. The reader, as a “mother”, is herself confronted with Eliza’s choice, even forced to put herself in the position of the figure of Eliza. Affect poetics, which rely heavily on repetition, contribute to this confrontation.

The reader is addressed via a repeated use of the second-person singular pronoun (eleven times), twice emphasised through italics; but also through the detailed visual depiction (*expositio*) of the situation (‘small, soft arms around the neck’); and thirdly by the temporal intensification and dramatisation of the decision situation (‘brief time between twelve o’clock and the next morning’, ‘purchase agreement signed and delivered’). Any mention of possible alterity is omitted (mother, race, social class); exclusively universal equality is asserted: at no point is a breach of law, which Eliza’s flight constitutes (not just within the fictional world of the novel, but also factually at the time of the novel’s publication) mentioned in this passage. On the contrary, it is suggested to the reader/mother in an emphatic-subjunctive personal address that flight is not just the only right action, but also the only possible action of a Christian mother. A **transgressive action**, a Christianly legitimised breaking of the law is thus suggested as the only humane decision.

On her flight, Eliza finally reaches the Ohio River, the other side of which represents freedom. A figural simile from Eliza’s perspective compares the Ohio River with the Jordan, thereby invoking a Biblical **prefiguration**, namely Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan, at which the people of Israel reached the liberating shore of the promised land with dry feet by a miracle of God – the waters of the Jordan had receded.

“An hour before sunset, she entered the village of T-, by the Ohio river, weary and foot-sore, but still strong in heart. Her first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side.”[22]

When Eliza realises her pursuer is behind her, undaunted by **death**, she takes her son and jumps with him in her arms over the floes in the Ohio River. The depiction makes the decision present (“dreadful moment”, “that terrible moment”) and heroizes sentimentally Eliza’s undaunted boldness, who reaches the liberating shore with bloody feet:

“A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza. Her room opened by a side door to the river. She caught her child, and sprang down the steps towards it. The trader caught a full glimpse of her just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly on Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment her feet to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water’s edge. Right on behind they came; and, nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap – impossible to anything but madness and despair; and Haley, Sam, and Andy, instinctively cried out, and lifted up their hands, as she did it.

The huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she staid there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake; – stumbling – leaping – slipping – springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone – her stockings cut from her feet – while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.”[23]

Haley, the slave trader, together with the enslaved Blacks Sam and Andy, who are to help him in the pursuit of the fugitive Eliza, are spectators of the escape over the ice. Through this setting, the scene

suggests the identificatory reception of the fleeing Eliza.

By even the antagonists instinctively sympathising with Eliza, the scene's affective power can be seen, which, however, goes beyond identification and turns into admiration because of the internal, advance reception. However, the prolonged description of Eliza's self-endangerment through participles strung together mediates between aesthetic proximity and distance. The arrival at the liberating shore, which a 'helping hand' facilitates, seizes on the Biblical prefiguration of the scene. It is no surprise that this typologically charged episode of the novel has been illustrated again and again with spectators and charged with additional heroic effect by reception in the visual arts.

Fig. 1: George Cruikshank: Eliza Crosses the Ohio on the Floating Ice



George Cruikshank: Eliza Crosses the Ohio on the Floating Ice

illustration in the British edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London 1852, Vol. 1, opposite p. 51).

Source: Scan by Philip V. Allingham for [Victorian Web](#)

Licence: Scholarly use permitted

Do the categories of the interaction patterns of identification with the hero fit here? How does the reader position themselves in relation to the heroine? Both scenes of the novel invite the reader to identify with the heroic action. The identification, however, is based on a different relationship to the figure acting heroically. While Eliza's decision to flee (according to Jauß) is aimed narratively at the associative-sympathetic modality of identification (slipping into the role of all other participants, compassion), the narrative now transforms and demands an admiring reception mode in light of the nearly superhuman crossing of the river. However, this points to a problem in Jauß's model of interaction patterns, namely that this mode detaches from 'identification' in the narrow sense, but without severing the already established emotional bond to the transgressive heroine who places her life on the line. On the contrary, the bond is even reinforced by the brave crossing of the river.

To convey this sequence of an increasing emotional attachment between the recipient and hero typical for hero narratives, a process model based on [affective aesthetics](#) or the aesthetic of reception appears sensible to us, which is to be outlined herein using the example of Eliza:

In ideal-typical hero narratives there is at least (1) a **polarising 'key moment'** in which, as an emotional core, the heroic figure is confronted with a decision and the audience is forced to choose a side – Eliza's decision to flee comes to mind. (2) By closely witnessing the heroic crisis, the reception initially forms as a temporary **community of feeling**: the overwhelming feeling is a mixture of [attraction](#) and distance. Hence, for instance, because of Eliza's courageous flight across the Ohio, fear and admiration mix in the spectator. (3) To transform the momentary identification into a permanent **emotion of attachment**, the heroic must additionally be substantiated narratively through biographic and moral individuation of the heroic figure – hence, for instance, Eliza is characterised as a devout Christian. (4) By the affective bond being subsequently reinforced through reason, the community of feeling is transformed into a **community of shared values**. In the case of Eliza, the reader is convinced of the inhumanity of the prevailing laws. (5) **The aesthetic allure of the heroic figure** lies in the community of admirers reassuring itself, time and again, of its rationally shared moral principles

both emotionally and through identification.

6. Perspectives for future research and scholarly desiderata

In a first step on the path towards a more comprehensive 'heroic narratology', the attempt could be made to consolidate approaches to plot (particularly in Hogan's variant) and to figure. Hence, for example, in following Juri Lotman, the question can be asked whether the hero's decision to commit a spatial, social or moral transgression constitutes a key moment in heroic narratives that gives structure to the plot, but that is also relevant to the figures and promotes identification.^[24]

In addition, the most important desideratum seems to be an integration of the fields of narrative voice (Who is narrating?) and perspectivation (How is the story being narrated? How are events being conveyed?), which for their part can contribute to narrative heroizations in multiple ways. Besides (literary) texts, other [media](#) with each of their specific (re)presentational means must also be considered in this context.

The relation between hero narratives and their cultural and social context equally requires further illumination. Hero narratives can for instance be seen from the perspective of their being 'anthropological' responses to problems of socialisation and of the need for entertainment. Questions about moral affection are often focal in the discussion on heroic narratives – as in the observations above. Nevertheless, the entertainment aspect of heroic narratives should not be ignored. Not just the long-standing poetological and scholarly debates on the entertainment value of literature, but also the still unbroken popularity of hero narratives in everyday culture, film and television evidence this.

7. References

- 1 Cf. for instance Schlechtriemen, Tobias: "The Hero and a Thousand Actors. On the Constitution of Heroic Agency". In: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen* 4.1 (2016), 17-32 DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2016/01/03](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2016/01/03) ; Gölz, Olmo: "The Imaginary Field of the Heroic. On the Contention between Heroes, Martyrs, Victims and Villains in Collective Memory". In: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5* (2019), 27-38 DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/04](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/04); Bröckling, Ulrich: *Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild*. Berlin 2020: Suhrkamp; and s.v. [Heroization](#) in the *Compendium heroicum*.
- 2 Propp, Vladimir: *Morphology of the Folktale*. Translated by Laurence Scott. Second Edition. Austin, Texas 1968 [1928]: University of Texas Press.
- 3 Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Third Edition. Novato, California 2008 [1949]: New World Library.
- 4 Cf. Lutz, Fabian: "Der Leser als Held des Alltags. Heldenbild und Heldenreise in Ratgeber- und Selbsthilfeliteratur". In: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen* 6.2 (2018), 23-28. DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2018/02/03](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2018/02/03).
- 5 Cf. primarily Allison, Scott T. / Goethals, George R.: *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them*. New York 2010: Oxford University Press; Allison, Scott T.: "The Initiation of Heroism Science", In: *Heroism Science* 1.1 (2016). DOI: [10.26736/hs.2016.01.01](https://doi.org/10.26736/hs.2016.01.01).
- 6 Hogan, Patrick: *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*. Lincoln 2011: University of Nebraska Press.
- 7 Hogan, Patrick: *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity*. Columbus 2009: Ohio State University Press.
- 8 Hogan: *Affective Narratology*, 2011, 159-165.
- 9 Biebuyck, Daniel / Mateene, Kahombo C.: *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga*. Oakland 2021:

University of California Press, v-viii, 1-18.

- 10 E.g. Mwindo Epic, 2021, 62-66, 71, 74, 90, 96-97, 106-109, 111-112, 128, 131-132. The self-designation as "Little-one-just-born-he-walked" alludes to Mwindo already being able to speak and walk immediately after his wondrous birth, cf. Mwindo Epic, 2021, 51-54.
- 11 "Where the counselors and nobles were seated, they assented to Mwindo; they said to Shemwindo: 'Your son did not speak wrongly; divide the country into two parts; let your son take a part and you a part, since, if you were to give away all authority, you would again be immensely jealous of him, and this jealousy could eventually trouble this country in the long run.' Shemwindo said: 'No, you counselors and nobles, I am not on that side; but I want my son to become chief. From now on I shall always work behind him.' The counselors told him: 'You, Shemwindo, divide your country into two parts, you a part and your son a part, since formerly you always used to say that you alone were a man surpassing (all) others; and what you said happened: that is why we witnessed all these palavers; we had no way of disagreeing with you because you inspired fear. Lo! if the chief cannot be disagreed with, then it is too great foolishness.'" (Mwindo Epic, 2021, 122).
- 12 Mwindo Epic, 2021, 129.
- 13 Mwindo Epic, 2021, 133-134.
- 14 Mwindo Epic, 2021, 134: "We have respect for you, just that much; otherwise, you would vanish right here. You, Mwindo, you are ordered to go back; never a day should you kill an animal of the forest or of the village or even an insect like a centipede or like a *ntsine* [water-strider]. If one day we would learn the news that you began again to kill a thing among those that we just forbade, then you will die, then your people would never see you again.' They pulled his ears seven times and seven more, saying: 'Understand?' And he: 'Yes, I have understood.'"
- 15 Mwindo Epic, 2021, 134. This central message of the epic is embedded in a broader catalogue of laws that Mwindo establishes: "When Mwindo was in his village, his fame grew and stretched widely. He passed laws to all his people, saying: May you grow many foods and many crops. May you live in good houses; may you moreover live in a beautiful village. Don't quarrel with one another. Don't pursue another's spouse. Don't mock the invalid passing in the village. And he who seduces another's wife will be killed! Accept the chief; fear him; may he also fear you. May you agree with one another, all together; no enmity in the land nor too much hate. May you bring forth tall and short children; in so doing you will bring them forth for the chief."
- 16 Mwindo Epic, 2011, 140.
- 17 Cf. the explanations of Biebuyck in Mwindo Epic, 2021, 141, footnote 286; "The Nyanga have a profound dislike for boasting and megalomania. [...] In most of the epic, the hero Mwindo behaves like an arrogant boaster, blindly believing in his own power. For the auditors, the hero's attitude caused reactions of uneasiness and sarcasm. Yet, there was an excuse for the hero as long as he was the victim of his father's unjust decisions and actions. The personality of the hero would ultimately have been unacceptable to the Nyanga if a moment of crisis and restraint had not come into his life. [...] In a great many of their stories, the Nyanga manifest strong fatalism and skepticism; even the sacred chiefs are limited in power and intelligence by superior beings, sometimes by the creator god himself."
- 18 Jauß, Hans Robert: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis 1982: University of Minnesota Press (ch. "B. Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero", 152-188).
- 19 Beecher Stowe, Harriet: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ed. by Elizabeth Ammons. 3rd edition. New York / London 2017 [1852]: W. W. Norton.
- 20 Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 2017, 55.
- 21 Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 2017, 55-56.
- 22 Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 2017, 57.
- 23 Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 2017, 64-65.

24 Lotman, Juri: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Translated by Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon. Ann Arbor 1977: University of Michigan, 240-241.

8. Selected literature

Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Third Edition. Novato, California 2008 [1949]: New World Library.

Hogan, Patrick: *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity*. Columbus 2009: Ohio State University Press.

Hogan, Patrick: *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*. Lincoln 2011: University of Nebraska Press.

Lotman, Juri: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Translated by Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon. Ann Arbor 1977: University of Michigan.

Jauß, Hans Robert: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis 1982: University of Minnesota Press (ch. "B. Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero", 152-188).

Propp, Vladimir: *Morphology of the Folktale*. Translated by Laurence Scott. Second Edition. Austin, Texas 1968 [1928]: University of Texas Press.

9. List of images

- 1 George Cruikshank: *Eliza Crosses the Ohio on the Floating Ice*, illustration in the British edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London 1852, Vol. 1, opposite p. 51).
Source: Scan by Philip V. Allingham for [Victorian Web](#)
Licence: Scholarly use permitted

Citation

Stefan Tilg / Achim Aurnhammer / Georg Feitscher: Hero narratives. In: *Compendium heroicum*, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2024-06-24. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/hne1.0.20240624

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/hne1.0.20240624
Licence	Creative Commons BY-ND 4.0
Category	Theory
Subject Headings (LOC)	Act (Philosophy) , Epic literature , Heroes , Literature , Plots (Drama, novel, etc.) , Reader-response criticism , Act (Philosophy) in literature

Index	<p>Authors: Stefan Tilg, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Mwindo (figure), Homer, Agamemnon (figure), Achilles (figure), Hector (figure), Gilgamesh (figure), Shemwindo (figure), Aristotle, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Werther (figure), William Tell (figure), Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, Eliza Harris (figure), Joshua (figure), George Cruikshank, Joseph Campbell, Vladimir Propp, Hans Robert Jauss</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: Africa, Europe, Russia, USA, Ohio River, Jordan</p> <p>Time and Events: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Early Modern Period, Modernity, Postmodernity, American Civil War (1861-1865)</p>
-------	--

Compendium heroicum

Das Online-Lexikon des Sonderforschungsbereichs 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
an der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg

In Kooperation mit dem Open Encyclopedia System der
Freien Universität Berlin
www.open-encyclopedia-system.org

Gefördert von der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft

Kontakt

Sonderforschungsbereich 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg
Hebelstraße 25
D-79104 Freiburg im Breisgau

www.compendium-heroicum.de
redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de