

Leslie Jamison's morphology of the hit: empathizing with the traditional villain

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How to Empathize with a Stranger

The main character within a story is almost always identified as a hero.

When reading a book, a person is typically expected to empathize with this character above all others, the villain especially. In her essay "Morphology of the Hit", Leslie Jamison plays with this common conception, placing herself in the role of hero as she retells her story of getting attacked while working in Nicaragua. In borrowing concepts from another essay and interlacing them into her own, Jamison attempts to evoke feelings of empathy not for herself but for the person who hit her. By carefully examining the framework of the hero's story, the advantages and disadvantages of her background, and her experience with this attack, Jamison introduces the idea of empathizing with the traditional villain in spite of the negative image we tend to hold against them.

Jamison appropriates elements from Vladimir Propp's essay "Morphology of the Folktale" to distinguish the fantasy of empathy from its reality by comparing Propp's theories to her own memories. She states clearly at the end of the first function, "Propp maps imperfectly onto the story. I keep coming back to his functions anyway" (57). With this faulty structure in mind, it is clear that Propp's functions are used ironically to oppose the idea that empathy is strictly reserved for the hero. Jamison uses these functions to label certain instances within her story, but sometimes they do not always fit. Rather than leaving them out of the essay, she chooses to dispute them. One example is under "Maybe VI", where the villain is supposed to "deceive his victim". Jamison, instead, insists that her attacker's gestures are honest,

a first attempt at empathizing with the stranger, which suggests that, like Jamison, he may not fit his dictated role (57). This is also where the reader starts to become aware of the issue of identity within the essay. In stories, for instance, the hero and villain are identified from the beginning, whereas in reality, there is no way to know who the good guy is or who the bad guy is. By using these functions but not having them necessarily complement the events within the essay, Jamison sets herself up to be questioned by the reader as to whether or not she is right for the role designated to her by this framework.

As the story's principal character, Jamison writes the essay from her point of view, which would normally indicate that she is this "hero" character. As such, the reader directly learns much more about Jamison than her attacker and should be much more likely to empathize with her. However, the thoughts shared in this essay also lead the reader to look into the theoretical life of the attacker, at least as far as it concerns Nicaragua and the United States. Jamison mentions the history between the two countries, using the word "hero" to describe Hugo Chavez, the former president of Nicaragua (57). Imposing this title cannot be done without its opposition being named as well. In short, Jamison may be the protagonist in the typical American's eyes, but to the Nicaraguans, based on their reverence for Chavez, she is the antagonist. Jamison recognizes this in the moments following her mention of him: "Maybe that didn't make it right that I got punched in the face. But maybe I wasn't entirely innocent, either" (57). Of course, she is not alluding to anything that she had actually done to offend anyone but to the fact that who she is, where she is from, whom she interacts with, and who witnesses <https://assignbuster.com/leslie-jamisons-morphology-of-the-hit-empathizing-with-the-traditional-villain/>

these interactions ultimately affects how she will be defined by others. As she mentions the advantages of being able to go to America, of being able to leave her attacker behind, one cannot help but compare that freedom to the humble living situation of the local Nicaraguans and wonder if what happened to Jamison was really so unfortunate (60). She loses some money, her stuff, yes, and even mentions the loss of her face, but Jamison still has means of fixing these things (58). In this way, the reader gets an idea of the assailant's opposing lifestyle, which is far more worthy of pity than of resentment.

The greatest reach Jamison makes toward trying to empathize with her unknown attacker, however, is her use of language. Jamison is very careful throughout her essay to make sure she does not express blame against him. When she introduces the subject of her essay, she says twice, " I got punched." (57). Jamison uses a passive voice; unaggressive and non-threatening. Even though Propp's functions indicate which roles the characters play, inherently polarizing them, the way in which the incident is described contradicts these labels. This contrast informs the reader that there is no villain here, that who we think are is arbitrary in determining which side we are on. In Jamison's essay, there is only the person who was hit and the person who attacked, but as to who is " good" or " bad", there are no conclusions. The reader sees more of this type of conflict as Jamison tries to explain her feelings of guilt, anger, fear, and obsession (60). There was a resolution that she had wanted to take place: a confrontation, not between hero and villain, but between two people. However, without

knowing where to find the other person involved, there could be no settlement.

And so we return to the problem of empathy and identity. As individuals, we are always so inclined to create labels: good, bad, hero, villain. But what it all comes down to is perspective. In the end, all anyone can really know is himself. We can try to understand others but will always be drawn toward people that are like ourselves because we equate understanding with love, with empathy. It is easy to assume villainy of people we do not understand. Perhaps it is not done violently, or even out loud, but it is acted upon. And these labels made against each other only encourage the segregation of people who are just as deserving of care and attention as anyone else. What is most daunting in "Morphology of the Hit" is not that Jamison was punched. It is that she can never empathize with her assailant. He is not a villain any more than she is a hero because the world is not as black and white as people choose to make it. Instead of being the hero of one's own story, Jamison encourages looking at others as if they are the heroes of other tales. If we embrace this frame of mind, there can be no villains, and we will find love and empathy in place of the inclination toward judgment and fear.