

Chapter Seven

Popular Heroes in *Star Trek*

"Heroes have an infinite capacity for stupidity. Thus legends are born."--Michael Smithⁱ

The third section of the first floor of the House of Popular Culture focuses on heroes which are human icons reflecting popular mythologies. While "stereotypes often reveal the historic fears of American culture," heroes usually reflect the ideals and highest virtues of culture.ⁱⁱ

Heroes provide popular culture with two things, "concrete images that we can all strive to become" and "a source of pride to that culture" because that culture has produced "a perfected member of [their] culture."ⁱⁱⁱ They also must gain their status under three conditions: they "must be exceptionally gifted in some way," "possess qualities the culture highly values," and defend their culture "so the culture is preserved and made prosperous."^{iv} This description fits what is called the traditional hero. However, there are two other types, rebels and celebrities, and these alternative heroes have different conditions that they must meet before being considered a hero.

The rebel hero is recognized because of his "vitality for life" and his representation of a sub-culture that goes against the dominant culture but he isn't necessarily gifted.^v Unlike the traditional hero, the rebel hero is intent upon pointing out the defects of the dominant culture. Celebrities, on the other hand, depend heavily on the media to make them popular and their gift is generally "being well known."^{vi} Their cultural values are those of the immediate, daily culture and celebrities try to change when the culture

changes or they will lose their cultural status. They do not conform to or rebel against the dominant culture, either, and because of their dependence on the mass media, they may only be a hero for a day.^{vii}

Of the three categories of heroes, Roger Rollin cites five different types of heroes that can be seen in modern culture: the super hero, the supreme hero, the leader-hero, the everyman-hero, and the subordinate hero. The super hero, while possessing human characteristics, is set apart because he/she is either alien and/or part human and because he/she possesses superior, mythic abilities such as Superman's heat vision and Wonder Woman's ability to fly.^{viii} The superhero also possesses incredibly enhanced talents such as X-ray vision. While Superman is considered a true super hero, Batman is seen as a supreme hero. This type of hero is human, and therefore vulnerable to attacks and mortal although escaping near-death situations gives the air of being immortal.^{ix} Batman possesses superior intelligence and intuition while being a master at several different forms of martial arts and gymnastics. He can do it all although he is limited to his human body.

The Leader-hero is marked by his/her "physical attractiveness and physical prowess, intelligence, knowledge, personality and skills to which ordinary mortals can only aspire."^x The difference between a supreme hero and a leader-hero is that the leader-hero is bound by his/her environment. Batman is more often than not seen as tragic loner although his sidekick Robin and his butler Alfred do provide some sort of companionship and rarely

involves himself in romance. On the other hand, the satiric leader-hero Hawkeye Pierce has had two best friends on *M*A*S*H**, "Trapper" John McIntyre and B.J. Hunnicutt, and has been involved in countless romances. As the title implies, a leader-hero is known for his/her leadership abilities and charisma.

"Ordinary mortals [who are] thrust[ed] by chance into extraordinary circumstances" are the Everyman-Heroes.^{xi} The Everyman-hero has no special powers, talents, or desire to become a hero, but when faced with a challenge, he/she does not back down. Instead, he/she meets the challenge head on and use his/her common, ordinary talents. While the Everyman-Hero is a person that we can be, the Subordinate Hero is a person we sympathize with. Only when he/she struggles through his/her ordinary life and achieves a small goal is he/she seen as heroes. This type of hero is usually marked by age, economic situation, or social status and considered subordinate because of their lower social class, origin, or background. He/She may be a hero to people within their own class, but the subordinate hero is often presented in a satirical (Archie Bunker) or comical (Charlie Chaplin) form.^{xii}

When it comes to science fiction, the traditional, Leader-Hero is the most common portrayal of the hero. James Hodge comments:

The heroic figures of today's fantasy and science fiction are merely the latest in a long line of culture heroes who purport to be models of all that is best in our society, and thus offer a comforting example of how truth and goodness--not to mention The American Way--prevail against evil and lies.^{xiii}

When the original series debued in 1966, the United States had fought

in the Korean War and fighting the VietNam War. Unlike previous wars, Americans did not have clear-cut reasons for participating in these wars. They did not feel that The American Way was being threatened and "the military connection with preservation of prosperity was hazy. The resultant mixed feelings about these wars created a national mood unreceptive to soldier heroes."^{xiv} In an era seemingly without heroes, *Star Trek* introduced three--Kirk, Spock, and McCoy.

Star Trek presented a group of heroes and a hope for the future in the late 1960's. *Star Trek's* viewing audience was young: high schoolers, college-aged people, and young married couples. They saw a modern ship full of galactic cowboys willing to take on whatever challenged them, never backing down, and usually winning. Sure, a token red-shirted security guard was sometimes sacrificed for the good of the many, but it always prompted Kirk and his crew into action, spouting words of tolerance and throwing fists when necessary to prove a point.

Kirk's actions are mainly guided by his intuition and his reliance on Spock and McCoy's input. He is a man of actions and ideals with a firm sense of duty, and while he acknowledges the need of the Prime Directive, he wastes no time at all in rejecting it in order to right wrongs. As a true hero, Kirk has a firm sense of himself and is able to accept the need for the undesirable parts of his personality: aggression, deception, and ruthlessness.^{xv} In the original series's "The Enemy Within," a transporter accident splits Kirk into two people, "a ruthless, aggressive coward and a

mEEK and somewhat indecisive pacifist."^{xvi} Kirk realizes that he must possess both the "good" qualities--peaceful, sensitive, and emotional--and the bad qualities--brutal, savage, and ruthless-- of his personality in order to become the charismatic, decisive person that he strives to be.

The second episode that showcases a dual personality of Kirk is "Mirror, Mirror." This time, the transporter malfunction sends Kirk, McCoy, Uhura, and Scotty to a parallel universe where ruthlessness reigns. In their place on the *Enterprise*, Spock encounters their parallel universe counterparts including a very vicious and "barbaric" version of Kirk. Although all is returned to normal at the end, Spock comments how watching the parallel universe form of Kirk rant and rave about being released was an interesting study for him. Kirk again realizes that those barbaric sides are part of his emotional make-up that are usually repressed.

Ironically, it is his barbaric side that makes Kirk so appealing to the audiences. He is a "roguish, mercurial, finger-on-the-phaser space cowboy who takes charge...and has a taste for leggy yeomen," states Rick Marin.^{xvii} He'd rather fight than talk and wastes no time in getting into the middle of conflicts. His defeat of the superhuman Khan came by physically attacking Khan and knocking him unconscious.^{xviii} Kirk evens the score between two rival factions by supplying the one faction with arms against the other one receiving rifles and gunpowder from the Klingons.^{xix} Throughout all these episodes where Kirk takes charge through violence, he mainly goes with his intuition and wins.

"Without facts, the decision cannot be made logically," Spock informs the captain in "Assignment: Earth." "You must depend on your human intuition." Even the coldly rational Spock acknowledges Kirk's superior intuition, yet he does not try to incorporate that personality trait because it is not logical. As Jane Elizabeth Ellington and Joseph Critelli point out, Spock's Vulcan ancestry leads him to "highly differentiated and one-sided thinking" which causes him to "reject intuition and feeling as determinants in his decisions."^{xx} Spock is the ultimate source of rationality.

While Spock's logic aids Kirk in the facts, it is McCoy who counsels Kirk on the emotional side. McCoy is very quick to point out the needs of the people and wants to "save the people without worry[ing] about the consequences."^{xxi} Although he uses technology to save patients' lives, he is not entirely dependent upon it and regards machines with wariness. His verbal battles that pit his emotionalism and humanity against Spock's Vulcan logic gives Kirk time to think and reflect on his next actions, but Kirk is the one who ultimately makes the decisions in every situation that he can.

Kirk was the true American hero of the 1960's, "a galactic Marlboro man, Paladin, or Man from U.N.C.L.E. He was brash and macho, frequently taking risks, engaging in physical combat, and loving and leaving women everywhere."^{xxii} He had a soul mate--John F. Kennedy--and together they safeguarded their respective new frontiers.^{xxiii} Slowly, over the years, Kirk's brashness was honed down as he grew older in command. A different Kirk appeared in each of the movies, slightly changed and more mature each

time, until in *The Undiscovered Country*. Suddenly, in this movie Kirk was altered into a captain that "wasn't James Tiberius Kirk," Gail Sakurai explains, "at least not any Kirk we [had] ever seen before, nor any Kirk that I felt could be believably extrapolated from known events."^{xxiv}

Similarly, the death and resurrection of Spock in *The Wrath of Khan* and *The Search for Spock* paved the way to his actions and altered characterization in *The Voyage Home*, *The Final Frontier*, *The Undiscovered Country*, and *The Next Generation's* "Unification I & II." No longer at war with his human side, Spock accepted that half of him as Kirk accepted his in "The Enemy Within." In the events following his resurrection in *The Search for Spock*, Spock is more disciplined in his logic, but allows for his human intuition to assist him in his decisions, advice given to him by Kirk in "The Tholian Web."

The least changed of all three heroes is McCoy. He is still the acerbic, country doctor who hates transporters but has an overwhelming passion for medicine and compassion for the rights of sentient beings. Although we see a more mature, aging doctor in the movies, especially *The Undiscovered Country*, he has not been altered as radically as Kirk nor as dramatically as Spock.

While Kirk and crew reflected the Kennedy Era, Picard and his officers reflect the changes in political climates in the twenty years that had passed. Picard's soul mate in the late 1980's and early 1990's can be seen as George Bush, both using diplomacy to achieve their goals and focusing more on

foreign policy than domestic issues.^{xxv} The late 1980's in the United States were in the wake of the peace and prosperity of the Reagan Era and there was a wider acceptance of technology in every day life.

Unlike the original series whose focus was mainly on Kirk, Spock, and McCoy throughout its three years, *The Next Generation* has emphasized all nine characters who had at least one episode per season that showcased their abilities. The series nevertheless paid particular attention to the Picard-Data-Riker trio during the first season and it was then switched to the Picard-Data-Worf trio in the late second and early third seasons after the Klingon's popularity soared with the fans.

Picard is the seasoned starship captain, comfortable with his command (except when dealing with children) and a diplomat.^{xxvi} He has negotiated countless treaties, twenty-nine of them featured as major or minor plots in *The Next Generation* episodes. His experience in shuttle craft piloting saved a teenager's life in "Coming of Age" and Wesley's and a pilot's lives as well as his own in "The Final Mission."

He only resorts to violence when it's absolutely necessary, usually defending himself from a hostile attack. In "Allegiance," Picard is trapped in a maze with four other alien beings, one being a Starfleet cadet, so that an advance race can study their reactions to stimulation. Picard negotiates peace between the three belligerent aliens and encourages the young cadet to do her best. Although challenged, he does not resort to physical retaliation. On the other hand, when Picard was attacked in "Sins of the

Father," Picard readily defended himself against Klingon assassins. Similarly, he out-dueled the best swordsman in Nottingham, Sir Guy, in "Q-pid," *The Next Generation's* 4th season send up of the classic Robin Hood tale.

Picard's dedication to his duties in Starfleet shows that rules and regulations do work and that there are consequences if they are broken without substantial reasons for doing so. In "Justice," he battled to save Wesley's life because the Edo god at first refused to see that "when laws are absolute there can be no real justice."^{xxvii} He broke the Prime Directive, one of Kirk's habits, but justified them with an eloquent speech about there being no absolutes.

Governed by consensus, Picard listens and respects the opinions of his crew members and often delegates the tasks to them.^{xxviii} Rick Marin comments, "He doesn't beam down to every Planet of Death the Enterprise swings into orbit around--he sends `away teams' led by his game, youthful first officer, Will Riker."^{xxix} As mentioned before, Riker was at first seen as a Kirk-in-training because of his readiness to go into action and his active libido. Riker often employs unconventional strategies in order to get the job done, and there are rarely any negative consequences.^{xxx} He does not have the tight control on his emotions as Picard does. For instance, he first sided with Dr. Kila Marr's desire to destroy an alien being that had annihilated several planets in "Silicon Avatar." The alien, the Crystalline Entity first seen in "Datalore," wiped out a colony that Riker and his away team were helping to establish and killed Riker's love interest Carmen Davila. Riker also risks his career in trying to free Soren, an androgynous alien who has "female" feelings in a race where sexual preferences are forbidden, from brainwashing therapy that would remove all such tendencies.^{xxxi}

It can be said that Riker is motivated by his libido in both of those episodes, but *The Next Generation's* third season episode titled "The Vengeance Factor" showed Riker in a moral dilemma. His love interest, Yuta, attempts to assassinate the leader of rival faction. Racial wars tore apart Acamar III for over a century and Yuta's cell structure within her body was altered so that she may carry on the vengeance against the Lornack clan, who all but massacred her Tralesta clan. Unlike in "The Outcast," Riker is forced to choose between Yuta and the leader of the faction attempting to make peace. Being a true hero, he sacrifices Yuta for the greater good.

Another instance of Riker holding his own against temptation comes when Q bestows the power of the Continuum on Riker, enabling the first officer to fulfill any desire that he may have. Suddenly god-like, Riker must choose how he is going to use the powers of Q and whether or not he is going to keep them. When he realizes how badly so much power corrupts, Riker turns down the gift and is content with being the first officer of the *Enterprise*.^{xxxii}

Although Picard and Riker are departures from the traditional, shoot-from-the-hip *Star Trek* hero, perhaps the greatest indicator of the cultural change in heroes is seen in the character of Lieutenant Commander Data, the second officer of the *Enterprise*. Data is the only android currently serving in Starfleet and his lack of emotions further separate him from the rest of the crew. What is most intriguing about the character of Data, though, is the fact that he embodies the myth of technology as a savior as

well as being a popular hero. The myth is not new to *Star Trek*, but it is the first time that this myth and a hero are combined into one. Back in the 1960's, the thought of having a sentient android working in harmony for humans was unheard of. By the 1990's, it was accepted.

Androids were no longer mindless replicants of humans, but they had developed into characters and had somehow gained a sympathetic crowd. Films like 1982's *BladeRunner* portrayed artificial lifeforms seeking out their creator in order to live longer than their four year, preprogrammed lifespan. *Alien*, made in 1980, features an android who is responsible for deaths of all the crew except for the heroine Ripley. Subsequently, Ripley hates androids and doesn't want them to be around, but in the 1986 sequel *Aliens*, the android Bishop is an unlikely hero. At the end of the movie, he saves the life of a little girl at the expense of his body being ripped apart by the enemy. Ripley's big battle with the mother alien has ended and she walks over to where Bishop and the girl are. He comments about Ripley's performance: "Not bad for a human."

Would a scene like the one in *Aliens* ever occur in the original series? The only way it would happen is if Kirk reprograms the androids from self-preservation to the preservation of human life. the original series's androids and computers embody "the myth of the computer [which] deals with anthropomorphization, replacement, machine intelligence, and free will."^{xxxiii} While they may have "superior" intelligence with the ability to store vast amounts of information, they are not able to go beyond their programming.

The machines may look and act human, but they cannot replace humans.

By 1987, man's view of technology had changed radically. While there was still the threat of the machine taking over a person's job, computers and the like had become commonplace and a part of the "leisure era." They went from impersonal, industrialized machines to everyday *gadgets* that made life a bit more comfortable. Compact disc players, laser disc players, video cassette recorders, camcorders, answering machines, cellular phones, and computers became a necessary part of day to day life in the fast paced world with the obsession with efficiency.

With the creation of Lieutenant Commander Data, Roddenberry introduced the artificial lifeform searching for a soul. Data's constant search to learn what it is to be human, everything from sneezing to humor to love, is featured in many *The Next Generation* episodes. "The Naked Now," "Datalore," "Elementary, Dear Data," "The Measure of the Man," "The Ensigns of Command," "The Offspring," "The Most Toys," "Brothers," "Legacy," "Data's Day," "In Theory," "Silicon Avatar," "Hero Worship," and "The Quality of Life" focus on some aspect of Data's coming of age. While androids were looked down upon in the original series, Data is the most written about character in *The Next Generation*. Already he's had an intimate encounter with Tasha Yar, fought for his rights as a sentient being, dealt with his second and third romances on board the *Enterprise*, served the father of the bride, been both a father and a hero/role model, and defended new life forms similar to himself.^{xxxiv}

As Data continued to develop extensively over the seasons, the emphasis on Riker steadily declined in favor of Worf. The character that was added at the last minute had gained a strong following and several hard-hitting story lines.

Worf's proud Klingon heritage, sense of duty and honor, and intense loyalty give audiences a look at the ultimate alien hero, willing to accept discommendation from the Klingon Empire to avoid a civil war.^{xxxv} He is almost the complete opposite of Picard, wanting to fight first and talk later. His convictions are strong, so strong in fact that he rarely compromises them unless given a direct order not to do so. In "The Enemy," Beverly Crusher treats a badly wounded Romulan who needs Worf's blood to survive. Worf, whose Klingon parents were killed by Romulans, refuses and although both Beverly and Picard make impassioned pleas to change Worf's mind, he doesn't. In a stunning scene, Worf allows the Romulan to die rather than break his own moral codes.

With *Star Trek*, we see the evolution of heroes in both the original series and *The Next Generation*. In the original series, we have the trio of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy who represent intuition, logic, and humanity respectively. They are heroes of the 1960's, full of action and convictions and ready to meddle in the affairs of those who are oppressed. In *The Next Generation*, Picard, rather than beaming down onto the planet to destroy the leader or provide weapons to even up the odds in a civil war, gives a moralizing speech about humanity and its eventual triumph over the tyranny. Also, he chooses to make sure no one else interferes with the civil war and to let the two warring sides fight it out amongst themselves unless he and his crew are specifically called into action. Perhaps Worf and Data reflect the action and logic of McCoy and Spock, but Worf can be seen as the harsher, more violent hero while Data can be seen as near pacifistic, only going into "battle" if it is absolutely necessary.

Notes

ⁱMichael Smith, "Button," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (Cincinnati: 27 Sept 1992), Message #553.

ⁱⁱChristopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Introduction: What is Popular Culture?" *The Popular Culture Reader* Third Edition (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱChristopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Part Four: Popular Heroes Introduction," *The Popular Culture Reader* Third Edition (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 206.

^{iv}Geist and Nachbar, pp. 206-7.

^vGeist and Nachbar, "Hero," p. 210.

^{vi}Geist and Nachbar, "Hero," p. 210.

^{vii}Geist and Nachbar, "Hero," p. 209.

^{viii}Roger R. Rollin, "The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture," *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Ray B. Brown and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 27. Wonder Woman's super hero abilities have changed throughout the years. Currently, DC Comics, which publishes the monthly comic book, has given her the power of flight.

^{ix}Rollin, p. 27.

^xRollin, p. 28.

^{xi}Rollin, p. 29.

^{xii}Rollin, p. 29.

^{xiii}James L. Hodge, "New Bottles--Old Wine: The Persistence of the Heroic Figure in the Mythology of Television Science Fiction and Fantasy," *Journal of Popular Culture*

^{xiv}Geist and Nachbar, "Hero," p. 207.

^{xv}Stuart M. Kaminsky with Jeffrey H. Mahan, *American Television Genres* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1985), p. 119.

^{xvi}Kaminsky, p. 118.

^{xvii}Rick Marin, "Kisses Great!/Less Killing! Comparing the Captains: Kirk vs. Picard," *TV Guide* (31 Aug 1991), p. 5.

^{xviii}The original series episode "Space Seed."

^{xix}The original series episode "A Private Little War."

^{xx}Ellington and Critelli, p. 245.

^{xxi}Kaminsky, p. 126.

^{xxii}April Selley, "Transcendentalism in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*," *Journal of American Culture*.

^{xxiii}Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *New Voyages: The Next Generation Guidebook* (New York: Image Publishing, 1991), p. 5.

^{xxiv}Gail Sakurai, "TUC as the Worst?" *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (26 July 1992), Message #341.

^{xxv}Gross and Altman, p. 5. Of course, due to Roddenberry's edict that the regular crew members shared a feeling of brother and sisterhood, there was little to worry about as far as domestic issues on the *Enterprise-D*.

^{xxvi}Rick Marin, p. 5. Picard's comments about not being good with children is from *The Next Generation* episode "Encounter at Farpoint."

^{xxvii}Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion* (New York: Pocket, 1992), p. 40.

^{xxviii}Gross and Altman, p. 5.

^{xxix}Marin, pp. 5-6.

^{xxx}"Peak Performance" and "Best of Both Worlds I & II" showcase Riker's talents for unconventional battle strategies.

^{xxxi}"The Outcast."

^{xxxii}*The Next Generation* episode, "Hide and Q."

^{xxxiii}Tyrrell, p. 289.

^{xxxiv}The episodes mentioned are: "The Naked Now," "The Measure of the Man," "The Ensigns of Command," "In Theory," "Data's Day," "The Offspring," "Hero Worship," "The Quality of Life," and "Evolution."

^{xxxv}*The Next Generation* episode "Sins of the Father."