

Debunking Heroism in Contemporary Culture: Culturally Iconic (Anti)heroes

Andreia-Irina Suciu

Mihaela Culea

“Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău
Romania

Abstract

The figure of the traditional hero of old legends and epics has always fascinated writers and researchers, readers and viewers due to the connotations of grandeur, magnanimity and honour. Shifting tastes and realities have determined transformations regarding the features associated with heroes, or regarding perceptions of them and of the very set of values they embody, with the figure of the equally attractive anti-hero thus reflecting the mind-set and the spirit of the time engendering him/her. This paper explores the changes in the nature of and perceptions on the iconic figure of the hero, his trajectory to anti-heroism and his metamorphosis into the new hero of the day in contemporary culture.

After some preliminary remarks on heroes and heroism, the paper offers some chronological examples of anti-heroes in literature and culture and also discusses their features. The third section discusses the emergence of the new (anti)heroes of contemporary culture by stressing the historical and social context that led to this alteration. The last section brings to the forefront typologies of contemporary iconic (anti)heroes and discusses some examples of such ‘new heroes’ belonging to the royal circles, people in the world of arts and show business, politics and sports.

Keywords: *hero, anti-hero, debunking, iconic, contemporary culture*

I. Introductory remarks on heroes and heroism

The result of the artists’ shift of interest from “immortal gods to mortal men” (Kuiper 2012: 128), the earliest figures of heroes offered a prominent and everlasting guiding model of conduct and morality

inspired and proposed by folklore and mythology. In the Anglo-Saxon world, heroes were poetized in the early heroic epics of *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, or *La Chanson de Roland* (Kuiper 2012: 128).

Associated with the early stage of a nation's formation, their role acquires a special significance for the creation of national identity as a result of their special missions. It was for these grand missions that their extraordinary qualities were compulsory, and it was the same collection of virtues that made them stand above the average men. It is especially because they "transcend ordinary men in skill, strength and courage" (Kuiper 2012: 128) that they are related to periods of great conquest, daring enterprise, quests of all sorts, expansion, or progress and to special acts of imparting justice, defending virtue, or assisting a community's ethnic coalescing or the preservation of its integrity. It is the case of the historical-cum-legendary figure of Beowulf from British history, depicted in the homonymous epic poem written in the sixth century, who displays features commonly observable to conventional heroes.

In later works, such as the medieval chivalric romances or epics, the hero, usually the protagonist, still possessed extraordinary, even almost superhuman dignity, courage, bravery, rectitude, fortitude, generosity, nobility, idealistic pursuits guided by morality and was usually accompanied by the projection of an aura of mystery and power. While obeying the moral codes and standards of his society, his personality matched the environment that produced him and for whose wellbeing he was ready to do his best and even to sacrifice himself. Noble both in mind and action, dignified, honest, wise, balanced, with a sacrificial nature, adventuresome, bold, stout-hearted, dedicated to defending a cause, courteous and possessing high principles, he stood out as a role model in his community that associated him with outstanding characteristics.

In dramatic tragedies, tragic heroes were depicted as great men, noble by birth and displaying nobleness of spirit, inspired by heroic ideals, capable of sacrifice, yet dominated by a tragic flaw that led to fall, which made them undergo trials and suffering. In the end, redemption is possible in spite of the defeat and the image of greatness still resonates in the hearts of the audience.

With the emergence of new prose forms, such as the novel, in the early years of the eighteenth century, caused by the many changes of

a new, enlightened age, literature put forth a counter or 'weakened' model of virtue embodied by the anti-hero, who also reflected the less rigid morals and social standards of the society and its new aspirations. The former model no longer suited the new outlook of a cosmopolitan, rationalized, capitalist, expanding world with the increasing recognition of the ambivalence of human nature in the background. That is why and how such a need led to the emergence of a new typology which seemed to find a resolution with the new anti-hero, a type that would acquire an increased occurrence and significance in the modern and postmodern period.

II. Features of anti-heroes in literature and culture

Also called a 'non-hero' as an indication of the absence of the qualities attributed to a hero, the anti-hero cannot boast with the same collection of almost superhuman qualities as his antecedent could, but he manages to possess some attributes which make him stand out.

As the following verbs suggest by way of their common prefix, *de-*, over the ages, there has been a gradual reduction or lowering of the value attached to the concept of heroism, which has progressively been *devalued*, *degraded*, *deflated*, *debunked*, or *demythified*. The debunking of heroism is all the more specific to the postmodern age, with the exposure of heroism as false, exaggerated¹ or simply unfit. The current age perhaps brings to a climax the calling into question of the meaning and manifestation of heroism. In agreement with this process, the concept has also undergone a repetitive action of *redefinition*, *reinterpretation*, *reassessment*, *repositioning*, out of the need of *relocating* the focus of attention to other features held dear by the contemporary age. The hero's shift to or transformation into a celebrity in the cultural setting of the postmodern age stems as a natural outcome which will be later discussed in the paper. Sometimes these celebrities surpassed the status of (anti)heroes and were viewed as iconic figures or downright myths (see Pierre Brunel 2003).

Embodying a character displaying more or less unheroic features, the anti-hero concept (also defined by Abrams 1999: 11, Baldick 2001: 13, Cuddon 2013: 41) has various implications in literature, where it

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/debunk>, accessed June 23, 2017.

is commonly associated with the modern literary works of the twentieth century (Murfin & Ray 2009: 21), although it has been present in European literary works since the sixteenth century with its picaresque narratives depicting roguish or knavish protagonists. In the 17th century it was illustrated by Don Quixote's figure portrayed by Miguel de Cervantes, in the eighteenth-century English literature Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne² also produced literary figures of anti-heroes, and later, in the early nineteenth-century, we can identify the Byronian character of Don Juan, but other such figures can be identified even in the works of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope or George Eliot (see Mario Praz's study from 1956, *The Hero in Eclipse Victorian Fiction*). To give an example from this list, Don Quixote may have had commendable purposes, but his ideals are impractical and fanciful, his outlook being the basis for future "quixotic" approaches to life, defined as "extravagantly chivalrous or romantic", "visionary" or "impracticable".³ Anti-heroes are particularly prevalent in the works belonging to the modern period, with protagonists such as Leopold Bloom from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) representing an instance of the way in which the modern literature depicted the concept of heroism through an ironical, satirical lens. Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon from *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and John Osborne's Jimmy Porter (from *Look Back in Anger*, 1957) represent postmodern examples of anti-heroes⁴ exhibiting an even more conspicuous diminishing of the aura of greatness specific to heroes.

However, a key sum of characteristics of the anti-hero reflects distinct aspects of his personality and sketches the central features that are to be expected from his narrative trajectory.

First of all, he is incapable of heroic deeds, not brave, or lacking heroic qualities (adj. *heroic* – very brave) and ideals (but sometimes hypocritically flaunting them, like Osborne's Jimmy Porter, Joyce's

² Also see Culea, Mihaela; Suci, Andreia-Irina (2017): "Between Grand Dreams and Big Failure. The Anti-Hero in English Literature and Culture", in *Interstudia. Discursive Forms. Dream and Reality*, no. 21, pp. 50–60.

³ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/quixotic?s=t>, accessed June 23, 2017.

⁴ Also discussed in Culea, Mihaela; Suci, Andreia Irina (2017): *op. cit.*

Leopold Bloom or Martin Amis's John Self, from the novel *Money*) and being ineffectual in carrying out significant projects.

Second of all, the anti-hero is imperfect, limited, confined to a view of life and environment from which he tries to escape, a "would-be-smth", but never "being the smth", as it is the case of K. Amis's Jim Dixon or Arthur Miller's Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman* (1948) – in the case of both characters their names (transformations of "dick son", respectively "low man") are an indication of their low potential. Unable to significantly impact his community or family circle and cause benefits for it, he oscillates back and forth only to confusingly remain suspended in between.

In the third place, he is unconventional, non-standard, a counter-alternative to idealizations, as L. Sterne's character-narrator anticipated as early as the eighteenth century, especially as a reaction against conventionalized definitions of a literary protagonist who had to possess (mostly) positive features. Likewise, the reaction became associated with the anti-novel and its characteristics that seek to subvert traditional standards of fiction writing and idealized depictions of literary heroes.

Fourthly, he is simply "all too common", as Murfin & Ray (2009: 21) point out, incapable of grand actions and ideals, and far from pursuing any degree of excellence and, as a result, he may also be self-interested since he is concerned with the boundaries of his own existence, the higher goals or ideals of his community meaning little to him.

Fifthly, along with the other features and in line with the previous one, he also lacks purposefulness (Kennedy et al. 2005: 9) but it is equally true that there may be little valuable assets in his life or culture for him to be determined or resolute for or he may have no real or worthwhile purpose to strive for. He lacks higher purposes or, if he envisions any, he is simply incapable of accomplishing them.

In the sixth place, anti-heroes may also be dishonest or only partly principled, quite deceitful and thus unreliable, with characters like Moll Flanders (D. Defoe) and Tom Jones (H. Fielding) as examples from the eighteenth-century novels and thus marking a more significant shift toward new interpretations and depictions of how central heroes are like or how they should look like in order to reflect the reality. Moll Flanders is both a thief and a prostitute, and Tom's adventurous nature leads to his imprisonment.

Selectively illustrating features from all these categories, other quoted figures of modern and even postmodern anti-heroes are Philip Roth's character from *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and the more recent Nick Guest from Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004), all mentioned by Scott (1985: 16), Kennedy et al. (2005: 9) and Murfin & Ray (2009: 21). Such anti-heroes

- are built up as a strange, partial or total combination of cynicism and anguish/angst, displacement, inadaptation, alienation, frustration, regress, naivety, but also innocence, confusion, ambivalence, idiosyncrasies, struggle, underachievement and ridiculousness, inaptness and ignorance;
- are (very often) physically (at least temporarily) maimed;
- display (again, at least temporarily if not on a constant line) strong and surprising bouts of acumen, but also insipidness and cowardice, inertia or, on the contrary, exaggeration toward the negative, demagoguery, conformism or, on the contrary, exhibitionism (one or another form of) brutality, eccentricity;
- live in (one or another form of) exile, overtly being dilettante and professional, randy and quizzical, obnoxious and charming, unorthodox and rebellious, tragic and comical, ultimately "riddled with paradoxical qualities" (Morrell 2008: 55).

Other such examples of anti-heroes could also include: Oscar Wilde's Dorian Grey from *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890), F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby* (1925), (according to Seigneuret 1988: 64) even Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Ernest Hemingway's Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), William Faulkner's Quentin Compson from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Samuel Beckett's Belacqua Shuah from *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) or Murphy from the eponymous novel (1938), J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Saul Bellow's Augie March from *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Ray Bradbury's Guy Montag from *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert from *Lolita* (1955), Joseph Heller's John Yossarian from *Catch-22* (1953), John Wain's Charles Lumley from *Hurry on Down* (1953), John Braine's Joe Lampton from

Room at the Top (1957), Vladimir Nabokov's Timofey Pnin from the eponymous novel (1957), Jack Kerouac's Dean Moriarty from *On the Road* (1957), Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), John Updike's Harry Angstrom from the *Rabbit* series (running from the 1960s to the 90s), Alex "DeLarge" from Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Saul Bellow's Moses Herzog from *Herzog* (1964), Malcolm Bradbury's Johnny Walker from *Stepping Westward* (1965), David Lodge's Morris Zapp and Philip Swallow from *Changing Places* (1975), Anthony Burgess's Bev Jones from the novel 1985 (published in 1978), (according to some critics) even Kazuo Ishiguro's Stevens, the butler, from *The Remains of the Day* (1989) (because of his unreliability as a narrator and because of the "white spots" in his personal history, cf. Morrell 2008: 30), Ian McEwan's Michael Beard from *Solar* (2010), Martin Amis's Lionel Asbo from the *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012).

Nevertheless, the antihero is not to be confused with the antagonist, the latter making reference to the protagonist's contender. Imperfect and flawed, "neurotic and with 'issues'" (Morrell 2008: 60) or all too banal and blasé, comic, but also bearing notes of pathos, compulsive and impulsive but also lethargic, caught up between the forces of the past and the present (the old and the new, the classic and the modern or the modern and the postmodern) and trying to maintain some dignity in perceiving the world, the antihero remains and acts as the protagonist of a (literary) work and does not stand in total opposition to the hero concept, possessing features specific both to villains and to heroes, with their positive and negative aspects that paradoxically mix in a composite ensemble. In fact, English literary critic Walter Allen (In *Tradition and Dream*, 1965: 300–301) recognizes the anti-hero's multifaceted nature

A new hero has arisen among us. Is he the intellectual tough or the tough intellectual? He is consciously, even conscientiously, graceless. His face, when not dead-pan, is set in a snarl of exasperation. He has one skin too few, but his is not the sensitiveness of the young man in earlier twentieth-century fiction: it is to the phoney that his nerve-ends are trembling exposed, and at the least suspicion of the phoney he goes tough. He is at odds with his conventional university education, tough he comes generally from a famous

university: he has seen through the academic racket, as he sees through all the others. A racket is phoneyess organized, and in contact with phoneyess he turns red just as litmus paper does in contact with acid. In life he has been among us for some little time. One may speculate whence he derives. The Services, certainly, helped to make him; but George Orwell, Dr. Leavis and the Logical Positivists – or, rather, the attitudes these represent – all contributed to his genesis.

Allen's recognition of this new fictional creation – the anti-hero – and presentation of the type as “indeed the other face of the hero”, though being recognized an existence as old as that of the hero's, is now strongly culturally contextualized and, in his presentation, we discern the strong antithetic brushes of modernity and, in the context of the fifties (because the critic makes main reference to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and John Wain's *Hurry on Down*) of the emerging postmodernity. This sort of new typology seems to embody the antagonistic features of the period of passage from modernity to postmodernity, the beginning of the disintegration of old values and patterns of thinking and behaviour and the gradual suffusion of these into the matrix of the new times. At the same time, the anti-hero seems to experience a state of dissociation between action and intention (according to Hassan 1995: 60), a fact which amplifies his paradoxical nature, or draws him close to a “new species” which D.H. Lawrence calls an unrecognizable type of individual due to the changing of the pattern of the actions he takes and who passes instead through “allotropic states” (in Hassan 1995: 60). This capacity of some chemical elements of taking more than one form is translated in the making of the new hero as the capacity to manifest dichotomic thoughts, actions and behaviours. Sometimes stemming from man's dual nature (amplified in the contemporary age), other times originating in a borderline positioning on a moral continuum between the sympathetic protagonist and the villain (Morrell 2008: 18), the nature of the anti-hero is always delineated in borderline strokes. This tenet is held by more contemporary studies which speak about this fine line between good and bad, likeable and despicable, between guilty and downright innocent or at least victim.

In compensation to the features described above, anti-heroes do possess some features that attract, to a certain extent, readers or the

general public. The feeling of sympathy is still targeted, only if it is the result of his, at times, rebellious or eccentric nature. Thus,

by contrast, (he) is the character with whom we might identify, but only in wilful resistance to prevailing codes of morality and behaviour. (Bennet & Royle 2004: 67)

III. Old vs. new conceptions of heroism. The new (anti)heroes of contemporary culture?

Given that “heroes represent the values of their culture” (Storry & Childs 2003: 22), knowing heroes means or helps gaining knowledge of the world they inhabit and represent. The nature and the worth of that environment from an axiological viewpoint differ from one period to another or from one stage of evolution to another. What is considered as deserving importance, value or merit may change in time or may alter its nature while certain features are still redolent of the original patterns or model. It is also the case of heroes, who stand for and embody the values, standards and aspirations of their culture.

Within changing life patterns, human concerns, frames of mind and value systems, and under the mediation of new technological tools and communication media, what is credited as worthy of praise, admiration and respect is a mere reflection of people’s own norms and interests. It may thus no longer be the case of admiring respectable ‘Establishment’ politicians like W. Churchill or H. Macmillan because the sports people or celebrities at large have taken their place, as Storry & Childs highlight (2003: 22). It may also be the effect of a weakening youth interest in ‘hard’ topics and issues (history, politics, national identity), with more preference being given to popular themes coming from sport, music, film, technology, and entertainment in general. While Churchill’s reputation and significance will pass the test of time to enjoy a perennial existence, it may simply be superseded by other models with a different kind of public influence.

On the other hand, certain values may simply change in time without a negative implication ascribed to this change. While W. Churchill’s personality was associated with a type of valiance, strategic thinking, wide knowledge and determination that were necessary to lead a nation in times of war, nowadays personal or

professional qualities are provided or inspired by sports, including obstinacy, resoluteness, firmness and even possessing a pleasant disposition, qualities which are underlined by Storry & Childs (2003: 22).

Against this backdrop, media, entertainment, commerce or business personalities also emerge as *new heroes* of the contemporary times, and not necessarily as anti-heroes, their popularity being the result of intense media representation and public visibility rather than of inherent talent, exceptional merit or outstanding contribution to community wellbeing. The public impact of these personalities is shaped and evaluated in terms of presence, glamour and personal charm, with lower rates of public interest in their (higher) goals, level of intelligence, education or knowledge, adherence to a set of values, be it general or domain-specific. The ethical scope may not be that rigorous anymore, just as the behavioural strictness and aspirational reach may have faded with time's passing. Likewise, the natural quality of incessant fight against dysfunctionalities, wrongs, social or political evil, accompanied by a deeply ingrained moral drive toward doing what is good no longer display their full potential. These remnants of the heroic model of virtue ultimately prove that our constantly changing society is no longer dominated by the same overriding principles that previously defined heroism in a majestic light.

Therefore, anti-heroes best reflect the state of mind, the mood and character of the times they live in. In the twentieth century, the aftermath of the two World Wars coincided with a period of uncertainty, a pervading feeling of solitude, disillusionment with authority, a degraded humanity, a weakening spirituality, and a general discontentment and confusion regarding (the validity of) values, ideals and their realization. Themselves torn and quite ungovernable, anti-heroes thus started to serve as tools of "social and ethical criticism" (Kennedy et al. 2005: 9), their own imperfections mirroring the shortcomings, defects and ills of the world they inhabited. With high criminality levels, high levels of social unrest, moral laxity, the dilution of rigour and strictness, acceptance of flamboyance and grossness, erasure of national, cultural and even moral boundaries and ever expanding globalizing forces, the anti-hero still surfaces as peculiar but the boundaries of his uncanny or untypical nature become blurred. The brief chronological

enumeration of such figures in subchapter II of the present article is a proof of the profuseness of such characters strongly emerging therefore in the 20s and 50s of the twentieth century, in two decades clearly marking the emergence of a new modern, respectively postmodern spirit. The anti-hero was labelled as "a phenomenon of modernism" (Seigneuret 1988: 59), but we rather consider that, due to his strong historical and social rooting, or rather denial of and opposition to this, the anti-hero is rather a man of opposition and change, marking the opposition toward or nostalgia for consumed times and the yearning toward new ones. All his actions come "as a response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values" (Neimneh 2013: 50). Bound by the *Zeitgeist*, the struggle of the anti-hero emerges from him being caught between the rhythm of the change which he wants to undergo and the one imposed on him by society. Séan O-Faoláin manages to recognize this duality in the nature of the anti-hero for he says in his seminal study *The Vanishing Hero: Studies in Novelists of the Twenties* (in Seigneuret 1988: 59–60) that, unlike the Hero, the anti-hero

[i]s not a social creation. He is his own creation, that is, the author's personal creation. He is a much less neat and tidy concept, since he is always presented as groping, puzzled, cross, mocking, frustrated, and isolated, manfully or blunderingly trying to establish his own personal, supra-social codes. He is sometimes ridiculous through lack of perspicacity, accentuated by a foolhardy if attractive personal courage. He is sometimes intelligent, in the manner of Julien Sorel or Stephen Daedalus. Whatever he is, weak or brave, brainy or bewildered, his one abiding characteristic is that, like his author-creator, he is never able to see any Pattern in life and rarely its Destination.

It is in this context that contemporary personalities from politics, media, entertainment, sports or business have become the *new heroes* of the present-day society. They are less *opposed to* the standard features of heroes; rather, their features are simply attuned to the nature of the time and place they belong to, they are thus *unlike* traditional heroes and emerge as new possible and accepted forms of heroism, in harmony with the times producing them. Nourished and

hosted by an easy-going, lenient, permissive, liberal and over-tolerant milieu, the rigour of the traditional concept can no longer be valid and other features soften the concept. The age of post-heroism engenders new typologies that can be admired, envied and even widely acclaimed. It is on this background that Storry & Childs (2003) discuss present-day British personalities from the domains we have specified before under the heading of "Heroes". Though the authors admit that they possess features of *anti*-heroes, they are known and treated as "unlikely heroes" or "contemporary heroes" ordinary people have created or sometimes they are even fabricated by the media (Storry & Childs 2003: 22, 26). Examples presented by the two authors (*ibid.*: 22-27) from British life include Princess Diana, The Beckhams, media celebrities such as chef Jamie Oliver, business tycoons including Richard Branson, the father of Virgin, or Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop. A special category is that of reality TV protagonists, with a description of the ITV series Pop Stars.

As a matter of consequence, this context has enabled persons activating in sports, media, entertainment, politics or business to achieve an iconic status. What are they iconic of? They are iconic or representative of all those aspects, be they positive or negative, characterising current society, some of which have been mentioned above. They stand as emblematic figures of tenacious enterprise, obstinacy to achieve certain life goals in personal lives or in their careers, perseverance, charitableness, they are ambitious, inventive, charming, even charismatic, outspoken, fashionable, enjoying impressive media coverage, thus impactful, along with being brazen, eccentric, imprudent, provocative, and bold (the new, weakened form of being courageous). Their lives and their actions are often the subject of controversy that now and then leads to public disapproval or disagreement, but their positive features appeal to the large public and generally manage to counterbalance the less attractive ones.

IV. Contemporary iconic (anti)heroes

The contemporary age brought more and more under scrutiny the nature of this "difficult-to-define prototype" (in Crusie et al 2011) of the antihero. The strong aspects brought by urbanization, technologization, consumerism, (virtual) media control, and new forms of emancipation on all levels introduced a new type of individual admired by the public and dubbed as hero-model. The

newer studies (Morrell 2008 and Crusie et al 2011) assign the colour grey to this type of figure because of the “grey areas” that both us and the new “heroes” have to face up in terms of the morality or of the intellectual and aesthetic composition of the contemporary complex world. We have, therefore, to attempt to identify some new “psychological sub-partitions” (Crusie et al 2011). Equally, new roles of the anti-hero are identified as follows (Morrell 2008: 60–69): “everyman”, the “vigilante or tarnished knight”, the “charming criminal”, the “dark hero”, the “bad boy”, the “reluctant hero”, the “loser”, the “outcast”, the “screwball”, the “disgraced hero”, the “oddball”, the “rebel”. If they are taken separately, many of these roles might seem to lean towards the negative, the antagonist, or the villain. In fact, in the context of anti-heroism, they are borderline typologies, built on complex oppositions. As Morrell (2008: 70) goes on, the anti-hero

“can be courageous, truthful, analytical, charismatic, independent, quick-thinking, and resourceful. On the other hand, he could be ruthless, cynical, aloof, selfish, and controlling”.

If the figure of the anti-hero was embodied at its debut by somebody who lacked “largeness, grace, power and social success” and was “sick, anti-social and introspected”, “expressing a sense of cultural apocalypse and fragmentation” (Neimneh 2013: 58), “unglamorous and unattractive” (Morrell 2008: 55), a new category emerged in the world of public figures from the world of politicians, media and entertainment “sweethearts” or even royal figures who lacked in none of the above, but did so in so many others. One thing is clear, though – what unites contemporary anti-heroes is an inescapable tendency of stepping over the boundaries of common sense and a minimal code of “proper” behaviour: (s)he is a blunderer, but also careless, claiming a status, yet disregarding the code of norms coming with it, unremorseful, prejudiced and a bundle of contradictions. Therefore, it is the principle of opposition that we mentioned earlier that shapes the new type of hero in the trajectory of their becoming with some individuals going upwards on the trajectory (called “arc” by Morrell 2008), and others going down. But in the context of contemporary media and audience perception the

direction of the vectors seems to have become irrelevant as, so to say, even bad publicity is good publicity. This goes hand in hand with people's change of perception in terms of values. So, can bad behaviour be good behaviour? Well, rather antagonistic behaviour is impressive for the public, and therefore creates new heroic prototypes.

It is the strange case of the characters/figures going downwards that we choose to develop in this subchapter, as they seem to stir and keep the public's interest much longer than it is the case of the 'bad guys turned good'. The contemporary public's "hunger for the negative" to call it so, seems to come from the typical saturation of the contemporary society (or perhaps its dissatisfaction) with the "grand narratives". Taken on categories identified by sociologists, these types of contemporary "heroic" figures catch the public's eye precisely when they step outside their imposed code of behaviour. The four categories generally discussed by sociologists (see Chenu 2007) are: *the aristocracy and royalty, the people in the arts and show business, the politicians*, and the composite world comprising *sportspeople, fighters for the law but also criminals, scientists*, as well as *entrepreneurs*. Discussed sociologically in terms of celebrity, such figures can as equally and as validly be discussed in terms of anti-heroism. Celebrity, iconicity and heroism in the contemporary setting seem to have developed strongly when the typical frames of heroism were overstepped and fed the hunger or quenched the thirst for shocking and breaking news of the general public. Taking each category in turn we can identify iconic figures as part of a cultural heritage that is being redefined and reshaped while these figures are all the more validated as such by a popularity brought by a negative aspect of their personal history.

Among the first category – the aristocrats and royalties –, we have some notable such figures. Similarly to King Henry VIII who, despite the fact that more centuries have passed from his reign, is more remembered for his troubled marital history (he had six wives) instead of his cultural, religious and economic achievements, contemporary royal figures are more projected to the audience retina and memory through outside-the-norm behaviours, and not necessarily on a derogatory note. Princess Di is remembered for her charitable nature and compassionate heart, but also for her defiance

of the rules of the Royal Court.⁵ Sarah Ferguson is more known for her divorce⁶ from Prince Andrew, Duke of York, than for her work in charity, television, film, or as a writer. Princess Stéphanie of Monaco remains in the public memory because of her joining the circus, or having married her former body-guard or for having all of her three children out of wedlock.⁷ We may thus notice that matters of the private realm heavily engage the public attention and are even a source of fascination because the royals seem to step down from their aura of mystery and come closer to the eyes of ordinary people.

From the second category – people in the world of arts and show – figures such as Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Ozzy Osbourne, Marilyn Manson, Lady Gaga, Amy Winehouse⁸, Charlie Sheen, Jean-Claude Van Damme⁹ and so many others are equally known for their artistic value and for the controversial lives they led, this adding up to their image of icons. As for films, it is frighteningly impressive to see how anti-heroes in films or television series have become so popular among the general public and film critics registering huge ratings and receiving awards; among them we enumerate Walter White, the former chemistry teacher in *Breaking Bad* who uses his knowledge to prepare crystal methamphetamine to pay for the treatment of his cancer and to provide for his family in the event of his death; nurse Jackie, in the homonymous series, which presents the life of a drug-addict nurse, struggling with her addiction and trying to face the frantic rhythm of her professional life; George Constanza in *Seinfeld*, an unmanly, hesitant, blundering, neurotic presence, “Lord of the idiots” as he himself describes himself; the scientists from *The Big Bang Theory* series, who are all geniuses, but whose practical knowledge of life is almost zero and whose eccentricities and idiosyncrasies make them almost anti-social; Dr Gregory House in *House* series, the genius doctor who is ridden with eccentricities, who

⁵ <http://www.historyextra.com/article/feature/princess-diana-rebel>, accessed 7 July 2017.

⁶ <http://people.com/archive/cover-story-farewell-fergie-vol-37-no-12/>, accessed 7 July 2017.

⁷ <http://people.com/royals/princess-stephanie-controversial-moments/>, accessed 7 July 2017.

⁸ See <http://www.rollingstone.com> for all the mentioned musicians (accessed 7 July 2017).

⁹ See www.dailymail.co.uk, accessed 7 July 2017.

fights his pain drugs addiction and his fear of committal in terms of any kind of relationship.¹⁰

It is even easier to find anti-heroic figures among the politicians; they easily stand out through scandals of one sort or another, but this only renders their flawed, and not ultimately bad nature. Famous examples of such figures include former American president Bill Clinton¹¹, former Italian president Silvio Berlusconi¹², British politician, president of the UKIP Party, Nigel Farage¹³ and so on. Involved in sex scandals, corruption cases or cases of discrimination and racism, their figures easily pop up in public memory as eccentric, impudent, and with a 'tainted' reputation resulting from some disreputable act or statement.

The fourth category also brings together people who stand out for their idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, or career-ending flaws such as the American basketballer Denis Rodman, the Romanian tennis player Ilie Năstase, American football player O. J. Simpson, American skater Tonya Harding, American boxer Mike Tyson, American cyclist Lance Armstrong.¹⁴

The common denominator of all of these figures is that they are built on opposition, they are archetypes of the contemporary society mirroring its gains and losses, perfections and imperfections, and they are engaged in a struggle with themselves. Ihab Hassan in his seminal study reaches the same conclusion which we adhere to:

In its most compelling moments, the mystique of the antihero is nourished precisely by this overweening drive of the self to oppose, at the risk of damnation or bitter defeat, powers that

¹⁰ For a presentation of some of them see <http://screenrant.com/greatest-anti-heroes-on-tv/> and <https://www.britannica.com/list/10-best-antiheroes-of-television>, accessed 7 July 2017.

¹¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2017/07/12/90s-bill-clinton-impeachment-ron-2.cnn>, accessed 7 July 2017.

¹² <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/08/23/berlusconi.sex.scandal.explained/index.html> and <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/23/world/europe/italy-berlusconi-new-corruption-case/index.html>, accessed 7 July 2017.

¹³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/05/opinions/could-nigel-farage-end-up-being-the-biggest-loser-of-brexite/index.html>, accessed 7 July 2017.

¹⁴ <http://www.thesportster.com/entertainment/top-15-most-controversial-sports-figures-of-all-time/>, accessed 7 July 2017.

threaten to corrode the basis of human consciousness itself.
(Hassan 1995: 67)

Considering everything that has been discussed so far, it is necessary to clarify the position of the hero, anti-hero and new hero types in relation to the concept of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is commonly defined as

an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values.¹⁵

It thus represents the valuable work of man that must be kept in a community's memory and protected for the future generations. However, besides the work of man, man himself needs to be suitably appreciated as the creator and guardian of such worthy expressions. From this perspective, *man and the work of man* are indissolubly connected and are part of the cultural legacy that is handed down from one generation to another. Historical figures of heroes were great personalities that brought a major contribution to a community's life, and their input is always intimately related to their name. Later transformations of the type weakened the aura of 'perfection' associated with heroes but it is clear that anti-heroes still impacted their culture due to some positive features or actions. The new heroes of the day also give human shape to the values their society creates and perpetuates, although it constantly renegotiates and 'softens' the collection of values lying at the basis of the reputation and public recognition attached to its 'heroes', while the worthiness and endurance of their unique contribution remains a matter to be revealed by future times and generations.

¹⁵

http://www.cultureindevelopment.nl/cultural_heritage/what_is_cultural_heritage, accessed 10 July 2017.

Conclusions

Tracking the chronological and axiological transition from hero to anti-hero and then to the new hero of the postmodern times, the paper aimed at uncovering the changing values, outlooks and ideas defining these typologies. Having the hero prototype as a background and starting point for its exploration, the paper's particular focus was on exposing the demystified figure of the culturally iconic (anti)heroes or new heroes of the contemporary culture where the traditional heroism no longer finds a place. Built on duality, even opposition and imperfection, oscillating between good and bad, the new heroes occupy a borderline position as 'grey' characters, an indication that they reflect something which is neither black (a villain) nor white (a hero) but covers the whole spectrum in between and is thus wrapped up in hues of grey. The 'greyness' of his nature ultimately discloses a number of possible interpretations for the attractive force he holds on society, a society in which there may be only a very thin line between good and bad, order and disorder, morality and immorality. The same society is attracted by what is fluctuating, antagonistic, nonconformist, unstable, eccentric, for they are all the subject of sensation. Not conforming to generally accepted patterns of thought and behaviour catches the eye; what is more, those generally accepted norms themselves are now blurred, a proof of the insecurities, confusions and dissatisfactions experienced by the same society.

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Andreia Irina Suciu

affiliation: The Faculty of Letters, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania

position: PhD lecturer

email: suciu.irina@ub.ro

research interests: contemporary English drama and novel

selected publications:

(2016): "The Discourse of the Paratext in Malcolm Bradbury's 'My Strange for Mensonge: Structuralism's Hidden Hero'" (Suciu, Andreia), in *Interstudia. Discursive Forms. New Perspectives – Language, Literature, Communication*, vol. 1, no. 19, pp. 78–88.

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Mihaela Culea

affiliation: The Faculty of Letters, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania

position: PhD lecturer

email: culea.mihaela@ub.ro

research interests: English literature, British cultural history, cultural studies, discourse analysis

selected publications:

- (2015): "The Risk of Losing National Identity in the Twenty-First Century Romania, or National Identity from Adaptation to Self-censorship", (Suciu, Andreia; Culea, Mihaela) in *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, volume 18, no. 1, Baku, Azerbaijan: Khazar University Press, pp. 13-34.
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