Chapter 9

The Group Hero: An Archetype Whose Time Has Come

Claudia Hall
California Institute of Integral Studies, USA

ABSTRACT

The Group Hero is an emerging archetype of the Hero story that differs from lone hero stories in five specific ways. These are: 1) Heroism is about participation in the larger cause, 2) Heroism is team based, 3) Each team member is different and everyone’s contributions are important, 4) The cause takes precedence over personality conflicts, and 5) Leadership is dynamic and team based. Using mass media examples of movies, comic books, and MMO games, this chapter explores each of these themes and how they differ from the presentation of heroism in more traditional lone hero stories. The Group Hero archetype template is then applied to the problem of school bullying, and the chapter ends by challenging digital storytellers of all kinds to apply the Group Hero archetype in new and creative ways to effect positive social changes.

INTRODUCTION

The group hero is an emerging psychological archetype of the hero found in stories where heroic exploits are credited to the actions of the entire group, not a single individual. Throughout Western history, the primary definition of “hero” has been solitary: “a person who is admired for great or brave acts or fine qualities” (Merriam-Webster, 2014, online). The stories cultures tell, known as myths, reflect common patterns within human experience. Jung (1959) called these patterns archetypes, writing often about these patterns and their specific expressions in people’s lives (as cited in Jacobi, 2007). Campbell (2008) took the idea of archetypes and applied it to mythology, most notably in his work on the hero archetype. In the case of the hero archetype, every culture has stories about brave people who overcame great challenges. In The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Campbell (2008) wrote of the lone hero archetype, the person who might have help along the way, but in the end acquires success on his or her own merits.

This lone hero archetype is the primary hero story told in mythology throughout time, including in the modern myth stories told in popular literature and through cinema. The lone hero archetype is so
The Group Hero

prevalent that Campbell (2008) presented it in many ways as the only hero archetype. However, in a minority of stories within cinema and literature, the entire group is credited with the heroic action. In the last few decades, this minority has gained strength, and today, it is arguably at a tipping point where this minority archetype may be coming into prominence as the primary type of hero story.

According to Box Office Mojo (2014), a website dedicated to tracking movie statistics, in 2014, group hero movies were the primary type of hero story watched by American moviegoers. Six of the top ten grossing films in America in 2014 were full or partial group hero stories (Box Office Mojo, 2014). Two of these, *The LEGO Movie* and *Big Hero 6*, might be argued to be solo hero tales because there is a distinct lead character. However, an argument can equally be made that they are at least partially group hero stories because of the critical necessity of the team for the mission’s success. In lone hero movies, the hero receives help from others but ultimately success or failure rest on them (Campbell, 2008). In group hero stories, success is dependent on the performance of the entire team. Thus, *The LEGO Movie* and *Big Hero 6* might be seen as group stories because the main characters could not succeed without their team. Regardless of which side of the hero line those two movies are placed on, the other four, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, are purely group based hero stories, offering cinematic examples of the emerging group hero archetype defined in this chapter.

Comic books, movies, and MMOs are multigenerational genres, offering a wide variety of people access to stories of the group hero archetype. In all cases, people looking to utilize the group hero themes as the basis for social change will find rich material for application. However, one of the main arguments against viewing comic and movie hero stories is that they are very violent (Signorielli, 2012). This is true, and the creators of heroic tales need to address the impact of violent messages, whether lone hero or group hero stories (Parham-Payne, 2014). While it is currently true that the dominant means of overcoming problems in hero stories is violence, there is nothing in the archetype of the group hero that demands violence to succeed.

One question faced by the storytellers of every generation is whether or not to tell stories of violence, and that is equally true for those telling stories of group heroism. Society is shaped by the stories it tells itself, so if it wants to change, it must change the stories told. Wales (2013) has explicitly begun using comic books to teach anti-bullying behavior, using student’s own storytelling skills to create novel, peaceful solutions to bullying. This is one immediately available model for utilizing hero stories to combat bullying. In each educational context, a nonviolent group story can be told, one which utilizes the skills and talents of all students, whatever their previous role(s) may have been.

In this chapter the group hero archetype is defined and explored, using various kinds of mass media presentations to explore the nuances of the archetype. The chapter then discusses the problem of school bullying from the perspective of the group hero, and it ends with a challenge to digital storytellers of all kinds to consider the group hero when choosing what kinds of heroic stories to tell.

**BACKGROUND**

The group hero archetype, like all archetypes, is a creation of the collective unconscious of humanity and is not restricted to American stories (Jacobi, 2007). In fact, some cultures have included this archetype in their hero stories for some time. In the Latin American world, group hero stories, such as *El Eternauta*, have existed for decades (Ferreira, 2012). In Native American writing, group heroics have been