
UNIT 1 REVERSAL OF TRADITIONAL MODES: ANTI-HERO

Structure

- 1.0 Aims and Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Some common features in traditional and anti-hero fiction
- 1.3 Points of difference
 - 1.3.1 Complexity
 - 1.3.2 Unpredictability
- 1.4 Technique of character presentation
- 1.5 Types of anti-heroes
 - 1.5.1 Affluence and power
 - 1.5.2 Poverty and oppression
 - 1.5.3 The spy hero
- 1.6 Summing up
- 1.7 Activities: aids to answers
- 1.8 Glossary

1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to examine the position of the anti-hero in relation to the traditional hero and explain that

- the traditional hero, with his commanding, larger-than-life personality, is an anomalous figure in our age; also
- since fiction has now become interpretative, rather than plot-based, complex, variable, and ambiguous heroes are needed;
- the traditional plot having been abandoned, the anti-plot calls for the anti-hero;
- while the traditional hero is predictable, the anti-hero is not;
- three fundamental principles—consistency, motivation and plausibility which underlie the creation of the conventional hero also hold good for the anti-hero;
- the anti-heroes produced by a highly materialistic and competitive society differ from those brought up in conditions of utter poverty and exploitation;
- the anti-hero falsifies the concept of 'noble descent'. He can be anybody: a peasant, a coolie or an untouchable who struggles for an existence of self-respect on par with other human beings.

By the end of the Unit, you will have learnt

- how an anti-hero differs in significant ways from the traditional hero;
- that anti-hero fiction is primarily a product of twentieth century life;
- that the anti-hero is a rebel against the establishment, whether competitive, money-minded, greedy or oppressive;
- to conceive and create a character who is disillusioned with the existing living conditions, since he finds no order in the Universe.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding Units on the short story, we dealt with certain basic elements of a short story, and with children's tales and detective stories. There we discussed the traditional modes of story writing. This Unit pertains to experimental stories where the modes are reversed. In place of the conventional hero, we now have the anti-hero—a lonely and despised figure struggling for freedom and self-respect, a strange mix of weakness, rebellion and ironic self study.

The anti-hero story is a marked feature of the twentieth century. It is closely connected with changes in traditional values and life styles. This Unit seeks to define

anti-hero fiction, and **compare** it with traditional fiction, emphasising points of difference and **similarity**. The character of the anti-hero is discussed with reference to certain major types within differing **socio-cultural** contexts.

1.2 SOME COMMON FEATURES IN TRADITIONAL AND ANTI-HERO FICTION

The plot of a **story cannot** be considered apart from its characters. The two are inseparable, **and** the **form** and development of one is linked closely with the form and development of the other. The central character in the story, whether he is portrayed sympathetically or **unsympathetically**, is referred to as the protagonist **or** the hero.

The basic requirement of all good fiction is that all characters should **justify** their roles in the story in a convincing manner. Most stories will hardly have room for more than one or two fully-developed characters. Although the minor characters will play small roles, they should **also** be made plausible in what they do and say.

Some basic **principles must** be observed for a **convincing** portrayal of a hero or anti-hero.

Firstly, the character **must** be **consistent** in his behaviour which must not undergo sudden and **unexplained** changes.

Secondly, the **character** must be clearly **motivated** in whatever he does. If not immediately, at least **by** the end of the story, the reader should be able to understand clearly why he acted **as** he did, and also the reason for a change in him, if any.

Thirdly, the **character** must be plausible and lifelike. Whether the reader has, or has not, known anyone **like** that in his own life, he must feel that the character has been drawn from the **actual** world.

1.3 POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

The term 'hero' **normally** brings to mind a person somewhat larger than life (the heroes of Greek **tragedies** or the heroes on the screens of our Hindi films). He is usually **someone** of a commanding presence, as great **in** life as **in** death — noble, proud and almost **overwhelming**. Such **nobility** of human beings has become **increasingly** dubious, if not outright comic in our age, where wars can be triggered off by **someone** pressing a button, **and** computers are made responsible for planning our lives, our careers, our industry, and even our marriages.

1.3.1 Complexity

Human nature is **seldom**, if at **all**, uni-dimensional'. Stories with what we call an 'anti-plot', offer **greater** opportunity to the writer to depict human nature in all its complexity. A **good example** of this was the character of **Basesar** Ram in the popular Hindi TV serial, 'Hum Log'. A drunkard and a drop-out, he was nevertheless lovable. Likewise, we have the characters of another popular serial, 'Nukkad', who **failed** in whatever they **attempted** and who cheated and lied and grovelled their way through life. The popularity of both these serials all over the country proves that in spite of their sharp differences from the heroes of popular cinema, such characters touched a deep chord in the **hearts** of all viewers. R.K. Narayan's characters in his Malgudi stories also **belong to** this category. The anti-hero is complex, variable and **ambiguous**, in **contrast** to the **traditional** hero of romances who is handsome, **fundamentally decent** and **good-hearted**, even when he defies law and order. Whatever **the** anti-hero's faults, he is easily identifiable from the villain.

1.3.2 Unpredictability

In the traditional detective **or** romantic **fiction**, the hero is far more predictable and puts less strain on the reader's **imagination** than in experimental **fiction**. Such a work

of fiction does not demand a great deal of understanding from the reader. Moreover, the reader tends to identify himself with the main character, and vicariously shares his adventures, escapes and triumphs.

The writer who creates an anti-hero, such as the main character in Kafka's story, 'The Hunger Artist', challenges this easy habit of reading, of expecting a mechanical opposition between hero and villain, and offers the reader an opportunity to understand human nature, including his own, in all its complexity.

1.4 TECHNIQUE OF CHARACTER PRESENTATION

The anti-heroes can be presented in two ways, either directly or indirectly. In a direct presentation, either the author or some other character in the story presents the hero.

In an indirect presentation, the hero is placed adeptly within the story and his actions help the reader form an opinion about him. Marquez explains beautifully the need 'to introduce a narrator who could move freely through the novel's temporal structure'.

Irony is also a great asset in developing anti-heroic characters, and enables one to gain power with economy. Moreover, it can be used as an effective device to suggest meanings without stating them overly. You can sometimes send a current of meaning flowing between two discordant facts by simply placing them side by side. The author may suddenly introduce a very naive or conventional character, whose innocuous comments may be in total contrast to the intelligent reader's own conclusions based on the hero's actions. However, such comments may remind the reader that before reading the story, he was similarly ignorant and imperceptive, making him comically aware of his own inadequacy. So one can see that the possibilities open to a writer can be many.

Activity 1.

In what respects is the anti-hero different from the traditional hero? (60 words)

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(Check your answer with the one given at the end of the Unit)

1.5 TYPES OF ANTI-HEROES

As we said earlier, the anti-hero story is mainly a twentieth century development. The scientific and technological revolution ushered in America and Western Europe a highly materialistic society which produced, by and large, an alienating effect on the individual and led to an estrangement in human relations, under conditions of ruthless competition. The chief protagonist in such fiction is self-obsessed with a penchant for violence, sex and crime.

1.5.1 Affluence and power

The ironic portrayals of feudal lords, overlaid with fantasy in the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is a telling commentary on a corrupt and decadent system.

Marquez's heroes have a special blend of Latin American braggadocio and an extreme sense of honour. When touched with the writer's bitter humour, they begin to work as two-way mirrors that reveal the mind of a murderer and at the same time become a living comment on the society they inhabit.

Activity 2

One type of anti-hero **belongs** to the oppressed section of society. He is an angry man conscious of the wrongs and injustices done to him. He falsifies the theory of 'noble descent' and struggles for change. The protagonists of Premchand, Gorky and **Anand** are anti-heroes of this kind.

The other anti-hero is a typical product of the highly materialistic **and** competitive society. **He** is obsessed **with** crime, sex and violence. We find the ironic portrayal of such characters in **Marquez, Carre** and Borges depict him as the **spy-hero** who relentlessly exposes **the** decadent values of society.

Activity 3

Hirts

Give your answer in about 15 points touching upon

- personal description and character of the young man;
- difficulties in getting his sister married;
- news of her death.

Write in greater detail about

- the inner **turmoil** of **the** young man; his disbelief — anger — frustration and his **final** course of action.

Give reasons for **whatever** course he adopts

1.8 GLOSSARY

You will find in the glossary a short list of literary terms used in this Unit

Anti-hero: Unlike a **traditional hero**, **an** anti-hero does not possess either superhuman qualities or an attitude marked by high purpose and lofty aims

Irony: A figure of speech in which a word or statement is the opposite of what is intended

Narrator: One who **tells** a story, either orally or in writing. In fiction, a narrator may be the ostensible author of the story.