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Heroes: A Realistic Depiction of Heroism

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Abstract

In the world we live in, heroes are traditionally thought of as perfect individuals who always save the world. Perfection, however, is unrealistic in the real world. The television series *Heroes* is a form of text that provides viewers with heroes that are more realistic to the real world and easier to relate to. *Heroes*, which debuted in September of 2006, follows various people around the world who have recently discovered that they have extraordinary abilities. With their newly discovered talents, the characters now have to decide how to use them. This study critically analyzes particular characters that illustrate the ability to be a hero without being perfect. Despite their incredible powers and their good intentions these characters are not always perfect; they have faults and make mistakes. The fact that these characters are not perfect is why real people can relate and connect to them. Even with their powers, the characters still struggle with everyday life, thus making them more realistic to individuals in the real world. This study will examine characters of the series in order to illustrate how they are realistic portrayals of heroes as well as examining other elements of the series that connect to today's society.

From the time we are born, we are told fantastic stories filled with courageous heroes who come out of the dark to save the day and conquer evil. Unfortunately, as we grow older we come to realize that the heroes in those stories do not actually exist in real life. As far as we know, there are not people who can fly through the air, walk through fire, or stop time. However, at the same time we also realize that there are certain individuals who stand out among the rest. An ordinary person can be a hero in their own right. A single mother working hard to support her child can be a hero. A teenage girl standing up to a guy who takes advantage of young girls can be a hero. The television series *Heroes* provides viewers with depictions of heroes that are just that. These are more realistic heroes. In real life, those who are heroes are not necessarily perfect; they have their flaws and they make mistakes. In the end, however, they do the right thing. *Heroes* is a text that focuses on more realistic portrayals of heroes; ones that could actually exist in the real world.

On September 25, 2006 Tim Kring's latest creation *Heroes* debuted on NBC. Almost instantly the show became a hit, drawing in an average of 14.3 million viewers. *Heroes* is a science fiction drama series set in present time about ordinary people who are born with extraordinary abilities and whose lives seem to connect and overlap with each other in various ways throughout the series. The characters in *Heroes* are not clear cut; they are complicated. *Heroes* takes on a unique approach for television in the way it is presented to audiences; it is set up similar to that of a graphic novel or comic book. "The series emulates the aesthetic style and storytelling of American comic books, using short, multi-episode story arcs that build upon a larger, more encompassing arc." (*Heroes*).

Throughout the first season, many characters on the show are discovering the powers and capabilities they possess and are learning how to use them. The series illustrates how the characters struggle with their newly discovered abilities and how to deal with the dangers and responsibilities, such as preventing world obliteration, that come with them.

In order to effectively analyze the characters in the series *Heroes* one must first understand how the definition of a hero has developed overtime and how a hero eventually becomes defined as a perfect individual. The following Literature Review provides an overview of various analyses of heroes; each examines a different aspect of heroism.

Literature Review

Herbert L. Carson did an analysis of the hero in modern tragedies in his paper "Victim as Hero." Carson's study takes an in-depth look at the modern hero and compares the characteristics to those of heroes from classic literature. He states how the term hero when used for modern tragedies, no longer means commendable qualities, "Instead of men with such cosmic qualities, we have petty and commonplace people" (1962). Carson feels that the hero of modern tragedy is a more relatable character to audiences, which is why he is becoming more of a common character. Carson writes that there are critics who believe the modern hero weakens the elements of a tragedy because of their commonness, "how can they compare to the enlightened dignity of an Oedipus or a Hamlet?" (1962). Carson responds by stating that while these new heroes are not as magnificent as those of the past, they are not pathetic ones either. His study continues to focus on the differences between the tragedies of the past and those of present time.

Carson's study takes a good look at the modern day hero, while Will Wright also studies heroes but in terms of popular culture in "The Hero in Popular Stories".

In "The Hero in Popular Stories", Wright examines popular culture, heroes and how they affect each other. Wright's article seems to focus more on where stories derive from and how they are, like the hero, "the essence of culture" (2005). He explains how stories and story telling are what makes humans different from other creatures. Wright states that humans are drawn to popular stories because they showcase human life with the tendency to be more dramatic, "the dramatic situations we find in popular stories always represent familiar social concerns in exaggerated, entertaining versions" (2005). When Wright goes on to talk about heroes he insists that "it should be remembered that all heroes – the idea of the hero – are inherent in the structure of stories, so that any analysis of heroes, even of popular heroes, concerns basic issues of social explanation, not just transient issues of culture fashion" (2005). Carson and Wright each examine the idea of heroes differently as does Bronwyn T. Williams who observes heroes in a unique way by looking at the intelligence of action heroes.

Williams approaches the study of heroes from a completely different angle than that of Carson and Wright. Williams exams the literacy of heroes by studying how they use it and what it says about them. He states that the action hero is typically a male character and "is usually capable of reading or writing anything he wants at any moment it is necessary" (2007). Williams mentions how the audience never witnesses the hero studying and learning all the knowledge that he happens to have. Even though the audience does not witness this, they still assume him to be an intelligent character capable of pulling out random facts when required to help resolve whatever crisis arises.

Williams alludes to the idea that intelligence is a reason why the action hero is as successful as he is, “the action hero’s literacy skills are part of his power that allow him to remain in control and always triumph” (2007). Williams continues on to say that although intelligence is an asset to the action hero it can also damage his reputation so to speak, “too much dependence on conventional literacy is not heroic or masculine” (2007). For that reason, Williams explains, there tends to be a sidekick to the action hero who is filled with even more intelligent, useful information. The sidekick tends to be the geeky guy. Not only does Williams say that the sidekick is free to showcase his intelligence, he also examines how the villain is allowed to as well. He states that the villain does not have to be as masculine and physical as the action hero; rather than use muscle the villain tends to use his intelligence to develop extravagant plans that will destroy the hero rather than use muscle.

Although Williams’ study took a new and interesting look at heroes, there is still more to be studied. In another study performed by Betty Houchin Winfield, she investigates perceptions of heroes in early America. In “The Press Response to the Corps of Discovery: The Making of Heroes in an Egalitarian Age” Winfield examined hero status in early America. She stated that early Americans did not really use the idea of heroes. Those of European background knew heroes from Greek Epics; however, they did not use that term for people of their time. “It would take another generation for the press to call the founding fathers heroes,” (2003). Winfield writes that Lewis and Clark were certainly celebrated when they returned from their excursion, but they weren’t thought of as heroes. During that time period those who were great men had the “duty and obligation” (2003) to be great. It was almost expected for men to be that way.

Contrary to being celebrated, heroes are sometimes isolated from the world.

Howard Jacobson looks at heroes and how their duties, and/or abilities tend to make them feel cut off from the world in “Disturbing the Peace”. Jacobson, while examining the loneliness and isolation a hero deals with, focuses mostly on Superman and how he must live a double life filled with secrecy. In his study, Jacobson is comparing the conflicts that Superman faces to those of the Jewish faith. Jacobson points out how Superman is in fact an immigrant to the United States; although Superman has lived in America most of his life he is in fact an outsider like some Jewish immigrants.

Jacobson is not alone in his study of Superman. Thomas Andrae examines Superman’s history and evolution in his study “From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman”. Andrae’s study is particularly pertinent because he takes an in depth look at the birth of Superman in America and how he comes to be thought of as an ideal individual. The development of Superman is critical to any study of heroes because Superman is essentially the archetype for any and all heroes. He is the original prototype of a hero or superhero. Without the existence of Superman, heroes or the idea of a hero may not be the same. Andrae examines how the Superman character was created by two seventeen-year-old boys at the height of the Great Depression and during the time of Nazi Germany.

Andrae also observes Superman’s popularity through the years and how he has evolved over the changing times. For instance, the study discusses how the original idea of Superman portrayed a character that used “violence or threats of violence to extort information or confessions from suspects,” (1987). Superman is one of the most popular and beloved characters in American culture. “An essential element of this popularity has

been his canonizations as an archetypical representative of the nation's highest ideals, the defender of truth, justice, and the American way," (1987). He is ironically often thought of as an ideal human being; this being ironic because he is an alien from another planet. "He's the embodiment of society's noblest ideals, a 'man of tomorrow', who foreshadows mankind's highest potentialities and profoundest aspirations," (1987).

Another author who examined Superman and his American ways is Gary Engle. Engle's article "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" analyzes the aspects of Superman which make him American. Engle illustrates how American Superman is by recalling how and where Superman was raised. As a baby Superman lands in Smallville, a small farming community and "is adopted by Jonathon and Martha Kent, who inculcate in him their American middle-class ethic," (1992). Once Superman is old enough, he even migrates to the city in search of the American dream.

Although Superman is a great American hero, he is not the only one. In Salvatore Mondello's study "Spiderman: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition", he takes a look at *The Amazing Spider-Man* and how Stan Lee hoped it would "bridge the generation gap which was tearing the nation apart in the late sixties and early seventies." (1976). Spiderman's popularity is also analyzed in Mondello's study. He feels the reason that Spiderman or Peter Parker appeals to younger audiences is because he himself is only a young adult and has to deal with conflicts and issues with which real teenagers and young adults often deal. "The Amazing Spiderman has found an enthusiastic young audience because it deals fundamentally with titanic battles between a teenage superhero and middle-aged supervillians," (1976). While Mondello analyzed the popularity of Spiderman, John

Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett examined the popularity and impact all heroes have on American Culture.

In “The Myth of the American Superhero” Lawrence and Jewett take a detailed look at several superheroes featured in American texts and how each depiction plays a part in American culture. Lawrence and Jewett also describe, for their readers, the American monomyth. Lawrence and Jewett discuss how the American monomyth is the plot for numerous American popular culture texts. It states:

“A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.”

Lawrence and Jewett feel contemporary American texts follow this plot structure where as heroic stories from early American society follow the classical monomyth plot structure. “Whereas the classical monomyth seemed to reflect rites of initiation, the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption,” (Lawrence). Lawrence and Jewett’s study provides excellent tools and thoughts for examining an American text involving heroes.

Although the above studies and analyses all examine heroes in different respects, there is still so much more that can be considered and investigated. New developments in the hero world are occurring all the time. The world is constantly being flooded with new heroes and new types of heroes. Areas such as those could be explored more.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper I decided to perform a critical analysis. In a critical analysis one is able to examine and evaluate a particular text or variety of texts. In a

critical analysis one breaks down the text into different parts and then studies each part individually and then again as a whole. Therefore, by using the critical analysis strategy I would be able to examine more closely the different characters in the first season of the television series *Heroes*. My research focused mostly on previous studies and analyses done on different heroes throughout time and their impact on society. For my analysis I focused on the characters and or heroes in the series and how they are not always purely good or bad. In order to effectively analyze the characters, I re-watched various episodes of season one. By re-watching particular episodes I was able to follow certain characters and analyze how they progressed through season one. Not only did I examine particular characters of the show, I also analyzed the series as a whole and how and why it speaks to today's society. I also read over various fan sites or other websites about *Heroes*. I was able to gather information from these sites that aided the development of the paper.

Analysis

In the past, heroes were typically portrayed as morally decent individuals who can do no harm. Heroes are the extraordinary individuals ordinary people can count on to save the day. The villains are the ones that are evil, indecent and morally wrong, not the heroes. Heroes are an idealistic version of the perfect person and are often worshiped. Thomas Andrae wrote how Superman came to be known as a Messiah; someone "sworn to devote his existence to those in need" (Andrae). Messiah translates to "anointed one" or "chosen one" and by definition is the expected deliverer for the people. In most cases a messiah is someone divinely chosen. Society has therefore manifested Superman into a divine savior and a specimen of perfection.

Perfection, however, is an idea that is unrealistic in real life. The characters in the television series *Heroes* do not always fit the mold of the perfect hero or person. Many of the characters on the show teeter back and forth between what is right and what is wrong. The television series *Heroes* is a form of text that provides viewers with heroes that are more realistic to the real world and easier to relate to.

The series *Heroes* does not consist of perfect model citizens who never make mistakes. Instead, the series delivers an array of characters with extraordinary abilities that do not always use them for reasons of good or in positive ways. In short, the characters are not perfect; they have their flaws just as real human beings do. This study will take an in-depth look at specific characters within the series in order to illustrate the realistic qualities of the character. Unfortunately, there are far too many characters to mention all of them. Seven individuals with powers as well as other characters were introduced in the pilot episode alone. The characters selected for this analysis prove to be the best examples of realistic heroes, starting with Claire Bennet.

Claire Bennet is a hero in the series that portrays realism. She is one that most high school girls can relate to, aside from the fact that Claire has the ability to regenerate. Audiences learn early on that Claire is a character who understands the great things her power can do for others. In the very first episode that we meet Claire, she runs into a burning train in order to save a man's life knowing that she will heal from the burns. In later episodes, she insists on staying in New York City where she could possibly be blown up in order to try and help stop Peter Petrelli, a character who has the ability to absorb the powers of other individuals, from releasing his radioactive energy on the city

of New York. Claire tries to and wants to use her powers for good, she wants to be a hero; however, despite her morality she falls into the trap of using them for harm.

A classmate, Brody, attempts to rape Claire and then leaves her for dead when she hits her head on a sharp object. Claire quickly learns the next day that Brody has done the same thing to other girls at their school. Claire decides to seek revenge on Brody and to stop him from doing the same thing to other girls. The next day at school Claire acts as if she does not remember what happened the night before so that Brody will not suspect anything. Claire asks for a ride home from him in order to confront him about the incidents. Once Brody agrees to give her a ride Claire asks to drive, Brody agrees to allow her. While driving, Claire confronts Brody about the attempted rape on her and other girls. Brody simply exclaims that he is not going to stop his despicable and shameful behaviors. With the knowledge that she can not die and she will heal from any injury, Claire crashes the car into a wall head on while traveling at a speed of about 70 miles per hour knowing Brody will be severely injured if not killed. Claire's action was done in order to save other girls from the same fate as hers; however, it was also done out of revenge and revenge is thought to be unethical and immoral. This example demonstrates that even Claire makes bad choices and mistakes, which is what makes her believable as a character. Her mistakes are what help real people relate to her. Claire's father is another character that real people can relate to.

Noah Bennet, Claire Bennet's father, is a character that constantly struggles between good and evil. Although Mr. Bennet does not have a power, he is certainly a prominent character throughout the show and at times, a hero, even if only to his family. Mr. Bennet is a man who cares very deeply for his family and would do anything to keep

them safe, especially his daughter Claire. Claire was given to him as a baby by Kaito Nakamura, a leader of the company which Mr. Bennet works for, with instructions to raise her as his own until she develops a power. Once Claire develops a power Noah would have to turn her back over to the company. Almost instantly Noah became attached to Claire. Knowing what could happen to Claire if he were to turn her back over to his company, Noah decided he would do anything and everything he possibly could to protect Claire and his family, no matter what. Protecting one's family seems a noble and honorable thing to do; however, the ways in which Noah Bennet chooses to protect his family is what causes audience members to wonder about his true intentions and his morality. Some of the questionable things that Mr. Bennet does surround the work he does for "the company".

"The Company" proves to be a complicated and intriguing element to the series. As if discovering you have supernatural powers is not enough to cope with, the characters also come to discover the existence of a secret organization known only as "The Company" which seeks out those with extraordinary powers for reasons that are questionable and seemingly unethical. Audiences are never given the exact story behind "The Company" and what its actual intentions are. Throughout the first season the characters are constantly interacting with "The Company" and trying to figure out whether or not they can trust it. "The Company" is aware of the fact that there are people in the world with extraordinary powers and tries to find them and apparently catalog them. Whether or not "The Company's" intentions are good or bad is a question that is never truly revealed to the majority of the characters or the audience. However, in several instances "The Company" does not appear to be honest or ethical. For instance, Mr.

Bennet and other individuals connected to “The Company” never really know who is in charge and why they do what they do, leading one to question “The Company’s” true intentions.

Interestingly enough, “The Company” is actually a nickname for the Central Intelligence Agency, better known as the CIA. Therefore, one could presume that “The Company” in *Heroes* could be a reference to the CIA and how citizens at times struggle with government paranoia and whether or not to believe the government is working for the people. Mr. Bennet has been involved with this company for the majority of his adult life.

While working for this company, Mr. Bennet has done and continues to do certain things that are not always honorable. For example, he has abducted different people who have powers so that “The Company” can perform experiments on them in order to know everything that their powers can do. For example, in an early episode Mr. Bennet drugs and abducts Matt Parkman, a police officer with the ability to hear people’s thoughts. After a few days the individuals are released; however, they have no recollection of the events that occurred during their abductions. This is because Mr. Bennet’s business associate “the Haitian” has the power to erase people’s memories. If one were to judge Mr. Bennet solely on his involvement with “The Company”, one could conclude that he is an indecent, immoral and even dangerous person. In later episodes, however, the audience learns that one of the reasons he stays with “The Company” and continues to do their dirty work is to protect Claire and others who have powers from Sylar.

Sylar is the series only true villain so far. During the first few episodes of the series Sylar is often referenced, however, he is never fully shown, only glimpses or

shadows of him. He is not truly revealed until episode eight. Sylar's power is more confusing than others. It seems he has the ability to control people's minds and movements. His main objective is to steal the powers of others by cutting open the individual's skull. The writers have left it vague as to how Sylar actually obtains the person's power, but once he opens their skull he gains the individual's power. At one point Mr. Bennet learns that Sylar is coming after Claire. He believes that if he keeps working for "The Company", he will be able to find and stop Sylar before he reaches Claire. He also believes that if he stays with "The Company" that one day he might have the opportunity to destroy it.

Another example that shows Mr. Bennet in a poor light is how he lies to his family about who it is that he works for and what exactly it is that he does. In order to keep his family safe and allow them to live a normal life, Mr. Bennet keeps his family in the dark about his work for "The Company" and the real reason why he was given Claire. His family believes he works for a paper company when in reality he works for "The Company." Noah Bennet goes to such great lengths as to hide the truth from his family that he has "the Haitian" erase certain parts of their memories when they witness something unexplainable that involves "The Company" or people with powers. Eventually his wife, Mrs. Bennett, begins to suffer from random memory loss and headaches because of the number of times Mr. Bennet has had her memory erased. Once again, a person could conclude from this example that Mr. Bennet is a harmful person; however, when he made these decisions, he always had his family's best interests in mind. Mr. Bennet was desperately trying to protect them; he never intended to harm them. Eventually Mr. Bennet tells the truth about everything to his family and proceeds to

dedicate all his time to destroying “The Company” so that it can never harm his family again.

Although not every father works for a corrupt company or is forced to do unethical things, these examples still clearly demonstrate the realistic dilemmas and issues that one is faced with in everyday life. Mr. Bennet has to constantly deal with conflicts of what is ethical and what is best for his family, and often the two differ. His actions are a realistic depiction of how difficult it is to always do the right thing, because, in life there are times when it is hard to see what the right thing truly is. Noah Bennet is not the only character on the show that does wrong in order to protect family.

The character Niki Sanders also proves to be a hero with realistic qualities. When the series begins Niki is a single mother struggling to support her son Micah, and provide him with a decent education. Niki’s husband DL is in prison for stealing two million dollars and murder. At this point in the series this is the only information provided about DL thus leading the audience to conclude that he is nothing more than a criminal. Due to the fact that Niki is the only supporter for her son she is forced to make ends meet by stripping via the internet. In addition to her internet stripping, Niki borrows money from a known mobster, Mr. Linderman, which ultimately causes her more trouble. When Niki is unable to reimburse Linderman she is forced to work off her debt by helping him blackmail another character, Nathan Petrelli, a lawyer running for Congress.

During this time Niki begins to realize that she has a split personality, her twin sister Jessica who was killed by their abusive father. It seems that in certain situations Jessica, who has super strength, takes over Niki. However, Jessica is not always acting in the best interests of Niki and in some cases causes more problems for Niki. In some

incidents Jessica becomes extremely violent and even murders people. In the second episode, "Don't Look Back", two men show up at Niki's house to collect the money she has borrowed from Mr. Linderman, unfortunately Niki is unable to pay them at this time. As the two begin to rough her up Jessica intervenes and brutally murders the two men.

Despite Jessica's violent personality she does protect Micah and tries to keep Mr. Linderman away from him who wants to use Micah for his own benefit. At the end of season one, Niki is finally able to control Jessica and proceeds to save her family from Mr. Linderman and then help Peter Petrelli, the character who will ultimately release his radioactive energy on New York City, battle the villain Sylar.

Although Niki's actions are at times indecent and can lack morals and ethics; she is still a hero. Everything that Niki does, whether it is good or bad, she is doing out of the love she has for her son. All that Niki wants in life is to provide a good life for her son and protect her family and therefore, to him and a lot of other mothers, she is a hero. Despite the fact that Niki has a power, it does not solve all of her problems. This element also helps to make her character more realistic. She still struggles to survive and provide for her son. That is a problem that many people in the real world are faced with and can relate to.

Another character who represents a more realistic depiction of a hero is Nathan Petrelli. Nathan is often faced with ethical and moral decisions. Unfortunately he often fails to see what is right and wrong because of his own ambition; however, in the end, when it matters the most, he makes the right choice. When the series begins Nathan is a lawyer running for Congress in New York. He has a wife, two young sons and he has recently discovered he has the ability of human flight.

It becomes apparent to the audience early on that Nathan is too obsessed with his campaign for Congress and only cares about his family in terms of how they will affect his campaign. An example of this can be found in Nathan's relationship with his brother Peter. As previously mentioned, Peter has the ability to absorb the powers of others, although at this point in the series he is unaware of his power. Peter continually reaches out to Nathan about reoccurring dreams he is having where he flies. In some of Peter's dreams Nathan even appears and flies with him. Peter can not shake how real the dreams feel and he wants to explore the possibility of it all with his brother Nathan. Peter also confides in Nathan that he feels he is supposed to be someone big in life; that he is meant for great things. However, instead of being there for his brother Nathan insists that Peter is being ridiculous and obsessive and he brushes him off time and time again. Never once during these conversations does Nathan confess to Peter that he can fly. He even tries to deny the fact that he can fly after Peter witnesses Nathan flying while trying to catch Peter who jumped off a building while he was attempting to see if his dreams were telling him something; that he could fly. Peter is not the only one that receives Nathan's cold shoulder.

Nathan also shows little sympathy or concern for his mother after she is arrested for shoplifting a pair of socks. She claims she stole the socks because she wanted to feel alive. She was obviously having trouble dealing with the loss of her husband. Instead of trying to help his mother or understand what she is going through he yells at her because the incident could hinder his campaign. From this, one could conclude that Nathan places his campaign and work above the welfare of his family.

Nathan also has questionable ethical standings. He displays this when he commits adultery with Niki or rather her split personality Jessica. While on a business trip for his campaign, Nathan meets Niki who is there to blackmail him for Mr. Linderman. Nathan invites her to his hotel room. After talking for awhile and even discussing his wife and children Nathan leans in and kisses Niki. At this point Niki realizes she cannot blackmail Nathan and tells him she has to leave. While in the elevator Jessica decides to take over for her sister and goes back to Nathan's room and has a night of passionate romance with him. Nathan does not feel remorse for his actions. Clearly Nathan had no moral objections to cheating on his wife.

Nathan shows further lack in moral judgment when he agrees to go along with a plan set up by Mr. Linderman for him to win the election and allow a bomb to go off in New York City. In episode nineteen, ".07%", Mr. Linderman's true intentions are revealed. It turns out that Mr. Linderman wants to heal the world by destroying it and then build it back up. He explains to Nathan that the day after Nathan wins the election an atomic bomb will destroy half of the population of New York City. Linderman explains that "out of the ashes, humanity will find a common goal, a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear". Mr. Linderman's plan is for Nathan to "heal" the city and the nation. Even though Nathan realizes that his own brother Peter Petrelli will die along with innocent people he continues onward with the plan. These examples show Nathan in a negative light. However, at the end of the first season, when it counts the most, Nathan finally does the right thing.

In the last few episodes of the season Nathan is having second thoughts about his decision to allow the bomb to destroy the city. It becomes clear to everyone that Peter.

Nathan's brother, is essentially the bomb. As stated earlier, Peter has the ability to absorb the powers of other heroes. Unfortunately, Peter has absorbed atomic energy and it becomes evident that eventually he will not be able to control it, thus becoming the bomb that blows up New York City. Nathan's mother, Angela Petrelli who is aware of Mr. Linderman's plans, encourages Nathan to continue on as planned despite the fact that his brother, her son, and millions of people will die. It is not until the very last moments of the season finale that Nathan's redemption occurs. When Peter is just about to release his radioactive energy, Nathan grabs Peter and flies him high outside the earth's atmosphere where the explosion will not harm anyone, risking his own life, in order to save the lives of his family and the lives of the millions of people who live in New York City. Nathan finally realizes his family and saving the world is the most important thing in life and that he should not compromise them for the sake of his political power. When a person sacrifices him or herself for the lives of others such an action is considered to be heroic; therefore despite all his faults, Nathan Petrelli is still a hero. It is Nathan's faults that make him a realistic character. Nathan's brother, Peter Petrelli, also proves to be a hero viewers can relate to.

When audiences are first introduced to Peter, a mid-twenty year old, he is desperately trying to find out who he is supposed to be in life, and what his purpose is; a question most likely asked by everyone at some point in their life. Peter's "need to solve life's mysteries" is actually one of the threads throughout the entire first season. It is introduced in the opening narration of the first episode and is revisited in the closing narration in the last episode of the season. At the beginning of the season Peter is a hospice nurse; however, he plans to leave his job in order to find his purpose in life. This

very identity struggle is what makes Peter a relatable character. Peter Petrelli's ability to relate to audiences is similar to what Salvatore Mondello was saying about Peter Parker in his study "Spiderman: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition". Most people in life, especially young adults, are desperately trying to figure out what to do with their life, who they are and who they should be. As previously mentioned, Peter is having reoccurring dreams where he flies. These dreams help to encourage Peter to search for himself. During his search, Peter discovers he has the ability to absorb the powers of anyone who has one, which can prove to be beneficial and problematic at the same time.

In the fifth episode of season one, Peter is visited by Hiro Nakamura, who has the ability to time travel. Hiro has traveled to the past in order to give Peter a message, "Save the cheerleader, save the world." Hiro tells Peter he must save the cheerleader, Claire Bennet, in order to "prevent everything". Hiro provides Peter with the life purpose he has been searching for, he tells him "this is what you've been waiting for; be the one we need." After his meeting with Hiro, Peter finally feels as though he has a purpose in life. Peter knows he has to be the one everyone is counting on. Unfortunately, despite all his good intentions, Peter can not stop his own powers from causing harm. By the end of season one, it has become obvious that Peter is unable to control his radioactive energy and he will ultimately blow up New York City.

Although in the real world most young adults do not have to worry about blowing up a major city, they do have to worry about problems similar to Peter's such as his search for his identity, his struggle to do what is right and what is needed and his family issues. These real world problems and dilemmas are what audience members relate to and cling to. In the end of season one Peter understands that if he releases his radioactive

energy then the entire city will be destroyed. Peter would never want to hurt anyone much less millions of people; therefore, he decides he must sacrifice himself in order to save the world. The actions Peter takes and the sacrifices he makes are what make him a hero. His realistic problems and dramas are what make him a character almost anyone can relate to.

The television series *Heroes* became a tremendous success early on in its first season. The popularity of the series grew even more while the second season unfolded. The amount of success the series earned causes one to wonder what makes it so popular, and why does it work? The realistic portrayal of each character most definitely contributes to the series success and popularity. However, there is more that factors into the amount of acclaim *Heroes* has earned; such as, the way the series incorporates other genres besides science fiction into the story line, the diversity of the characters, and the series' ability to speak and connect to the audience on an individual basis.

The series *Heroes* has the capability to capture audience members who might not typically categorize themselves as science fiction fans. Although the premise of supernatural powers tends to fall into the science fiction genre, the series *Heroes* also dabbles into other genres and therefore attracts other audiences. One can find comedy and romance, along with the intense drama within the series. The two characters Hiro Nakamura and Ando Masahashi can serve as a source of comedic relief. Hiro and Ando are best friends who spent their lives in Japan. Once Hiro convinces Ando he has the ability to time travel, Ando tags along on Hiro's journeys. Hiro is very serious about being a hero and using his powers for good; however, Ando does not always take it as seriously and the two end up in situations that are comical, as are their interactions with

one another. Romance can be found in numerous occasions throughout the series as well, whether it's between Niki and her husband DL, Peter and Simone or the tear jerker romance between Hiro and Charlie.

Not only are there different genres shown throughout the series to pull in audiences, there is also the fact that the show's list of characters is vast and filled with diversity. There is a huge variety of characters in the series *Heroes*. The characters range in aspects such as nationality, personality, occupation, and age. This provides audience members with the ability to connect with particular characters on numerous levels. Audience members who are parents can relate to Noah Bennet or Angela Petrelli, while young teenage girls can connect to the pressures of high school and being a teenager with which Claire is constantly faced. Young adults can also relate to Peter Petrelli's frustration with finding his purpose in life. Individuals are able to see themselves in the characters and that element draws them in. The commonness of each character in the series speaks to audiences. It provides them with the idea that anyone can be a hero. Everyone wants to be a hero and the series shows viewers that it is possible to be one even if you are just an ordinary person. The characters in *Heroes* are humans who were born with their abilities, they are not aliens from another planet, they did not come into contact with chemicals or spiders that changed their genetic makeup, they were born with their powers. The fact that there are numerous people within the series with these extraordinary powers instead of one or a select few also helps the viewer to believe that anyone can be a hero. There is still another element, however, that leaves the audience wanting more after every episode; the way the series uses elements of today's society to speak to its audience.

Once the series begins, it is quickly learned that the character of Claire Bennet has a lot to do with the main story line for season one. By the fifth episode, it is clear that Claire stands out among all the other characters when Peter is told by Hiro he must save the cheerleader in order to save the world. This could beg the question, why Claire, who is she exactly? Claire Bennet is a beautiful young white blonde American cheerleader from Texas. She is the epitome of the “all American girl” image. This could be a coincidence, an unconscious influence by society or it could be the writers’ deliberate use of common ideals within our society. Nevertheless, that which relates to society speaks to the audience as do the villains within *Heroes*.

There is another societal element that can be found in the series as well. Throughout season one, it can be observed that most of the villains or non heroes of the series are all adults. For instance, the mob boss Mr. Linderman who blackmails Nathan and tries to kill Niki is an older character. Noah Bennet who at times causes harm is estimated to be in his mid-forties. Nathan Petrelli teeters back and forth between good and bad and he is at an age between young adult and middle age. The younger characters such as Claire Bennet, Peter Petrelli and Hiro Nakamura appear to be the purest of heroes. In a society that idolizes youth it is no surprise that a show is created where the villains tend to be adults and the heroes tend to be found within the youth. The villains stand out for other reasons as well.

Clearly the characters who are heroes in the series speak to viewers; however, the villains do as well. The villains in *Heroes* can be extremely intriguing. Although audiences may hate their soul existence and the awful things they do to the characters they care about so much, do they secretly love them at the same time? Even if only for a

moment. it is possible to have sympathy for Sylar, the only true villain thus far. For instance when Sylar visits his mother in episode twenty-one, "The Hard Part", audiences are able to see another side of him. In this episode Sylar actually expresses to his mother his desire to end his destructive path and just be normal. One could almost feel sorry for him especially after his mother tells him he is damned when he reveals one of his abilities to his mother by turning sink water into snow for her. As shown with Noah Bennet and Nathan Petrelli's character, even though we might hate their actions and decisions in certain situations, we still love to see them prove us wrong and be the good guy in the end. In today's society people want to be able to believe that people will not let us down and that people are morally good. The villains are intriguing because they always leave you guessing as to whether or not they are going to do good or evil. Even if the audience loves them for the simple fact that it gives them a character to hate, there is a love there. Other elements of today's society are apparent in the series as well.

Since the devastating attacks of 9/11 and the fact that we are at a time of war, there is a desire for heroes in today's society. More importantly, however, society needs to believe that heroes can and do exist. Everyone longs for the comforting notion that they can and will be saved. Therefore, the reason why the premise of *Heroes* works as well as it does and is so successful can be directly related to society's desire and need for heroes. *Heroes* is not the only text with a hero to come during a time of despair in the country. As previously mentioned, Superman became a law abiding citizen at the time of The Great Depression and World War II. Superman developed further, because just like now, society wanted a hero they could trust to save them. The series *Heroes* would not work as well or be as popular if the country was not at war and 9/11 had not occurred.

There will always be an interest in heroes and superheroes; however, the attention and popularity that the series *Heroes* has obtained is beyond the simple attraction that superheroes have. Unfortunately, today's society is constantly bombarded by tragedy after tragedy and the knowledge that we are at a time of war, thus creating the need for heroes among the population. Individuals' desperately want something and someone they can believe in, they want hope, they need hope. The characters of *Heroes* provide them with just that. By displaying realistic heroes within the series, it provides real individuals with the hope that they too can be a hero or that heroes could exist in the real world and most importantly that they will be saved.

Conclusion

Stories about heroes and their amazing feats are heard constantly throughout one's life. In such stories, the hero always saves the day and restores order to society. Most often to be a hero entails that he or she is morally decent, ethical and flawless – a hero is perfect. There are no mistakes in the life of a hero. However, the same cannot be said for human life, imperfections and mistakes are apart of human nature. The television series *Heroes* does not consist of heroes that are perfect; instead they are flawed. In this regard, *Heroes* is a text unlike others of the past. The characters in *Heroes* are not perfect stand out citizens. Instead they are common people who happen to have extraordinary abilities. The way in which they choose to use their powers is what determines whether or not they are a hero. Unlike past texts, *Heroes* provides viewers with the notion that an individual can be a hero, despite having flaws and making mistakes. Human beings are nowhere near perfect, which is why the characters of the television series *Heroes* are more relatable and realistic. They struggle with real world problems and conflicts the

same as individuals in the real world do. The series is not another fantasy story filled with characters that are impossible for real people to live up to. Instead *Heroes* is overflowing with characters that make mistakes and have problems, characters that anyone can relate to. There is a diverse range of characters in the series that all provide various elements for audience members to relate to. By having characters and heroes who are imperfect, *Heroes* provides a more realistic depiction of a hero.

As well as having realistic portrayals of heroes, *Heroes* is a text that contains complex characters and complicated story lines. As displayed in the character analysis, it is often difficult to figure out the morality level of each character and who he or she truly is – a villain or a hero. The characters constantly keep the audience guessing as do the intricate story lines. As soon as the audience thinks they have the plot figured out, the writers throw a curve ball. The various levels, and twists and turns that the story line contains are complicated; however, it all makes sense in the end when more information is revealed. The writers have the ability to keep audience members guessing and at the same time reveal just enough information to leave you wanting more.

The complexity of the characters and story line no doubt attracts viewers; however, there is another element that factors into *Heroes*' success. The immense popularity that *Heroes* has earned is intriguing and it can be attributed to the way in which the series speaks to its audience by including various elements of today's society into the series. Such influence is obvious all throughout season one how of *Heroes*. Societal influence is displayed in the character of Claire who emulates the "all American girl" image. Society's idolization of youth is visible in the ages of the heroes and non-heroes/villains. One can also observe society's tendency to always want to see the good

in people. Finally, the most prominent societal element that is displayed throughout the series is society's overwhelming desire and need for heroes. Today's society is yearning for hope and the knowledge that they will be saved or that they can be the one to save the world. *Heroes* is a text that is extremely influenced by today's society. Societal elements are pouring out of this text which makes it extremely appealing to audiences as well as a rich and fascinating text to analyze.

Presenting heroes that are more realistic to the real world, the television series *Heroes* is unlike other texts involving heroes. The text has intricate story lines along with multifaceted characters. The immense popularity of the series can be attributed to each of those aspects as well as its ability to connect to audiences through various societal elements portrayed throughout season one. As the series continues, the heroic qualities of the characters as well as their flaws will develop and further demonstrate the realistic depictions of heroism that the text *Heroes* is filled with.

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