

Lesson 1: Understanding the Anti-Hero Archetype

Defining The Anti-Hero Archetype

Anti-Heroes are protagonists who lack the conventional heroic traits we typically associate with the "good guy" in a story. Instead, they exhibit qualities that are often morally ambiguous or even outright villainous.

The defining characteristic of the anti-hero is their ability to challenge and subvert our expectations of what a hero should be. They are often deeply flawed individuals who struggle with personal demons and inner conflict, which can make them more relatable and realistic than traditional heroes. These characters all possess qualities that are often at odds with traditional heroism, yet they remain compelling and captivating to audiences.

It's important to know that anti-heroes (and actual heroes) don't have to be likable. But they do need to be interesting. The point isn't always for your anti-hero to be a well-liked character, rather a character who is unique and compelling enough to want to follow throughout the story.

The Appeal of Anti-Heroes

One of the reasons why anti-heroes have become so appealing in recent years is because they offer a different perspective on storytelling. Rather than giving us a traditional hero who always does the right thing, anti-heroes allow us to explore the darker, more complicated sides of humanity. They offer a level of complexity to storytelling that can be incredibly satisfying to readers and viewers alike.

Anti-Heroes often serve as a way for us to explore our own inner demons and conflicts. We may not always act heroically in our own lives, and seeing characters on screen or in literature who struggle with the same issues can be validating and cathartic.

On a more superficial level, anti-heroes can also be downright badass. Their rebellious attitudes and unconventional methods can be attractive to those who are tired of seeing the same old hero tropes played out time and time again.

The appeal of the anti-hero lies in their ability to disrupt our expectations and challenge our beliefs. They allow us to see the world in a different way and question our own values and morals. And in a world that can often feel black and white, that kind of nuance and complexity is more than welcome.

While anti-heroes have always been popular, over the past decade shows featuring anti-heroes like *Breaking Bad*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Dexter*, *Weeds*, and many more have elevated anti-heroes to a new degree.

Why Female Anti-Heroes are Important

Now that we've talked about the anti-hero archetype in general, let's talk about why female anti-heroes (the subject of this seminar) are so important. Notice how many women were featured in the short list of examples I just gave? Traditionally, anti-heroes have been developed by men *for* men. But it's 2023 and it's time for women to shine.

Female anti-heroes are crucial to storytelling because they challenge traditional gender stereotypes and offer a fresh perspective on what it means to be a woman in society. Historically, female characters have been relegated to supporting roles or one-dimensional stereotypes, but female anti-heroes offer complexity and depth to female characters that we rarely see in mainstream media.

Female anti-heroes allow women to explore the darker, more complex aspects of their own personalities without being judged or condemned. They offer a sense of empowerment to women who have been told that they must always be virtuous and selfless, and allow them to claim agency over their own lives and decisions.

In addition, female anti-heroes can serve as role models for young women by embodying traits such as strength, independence, and resilience. They show that women can be flawed and still be powerful, and that they can make their own choices even if those choices are unconventional or unpopular.

Personally, I find female anti-heroes extremely important because they offer a refreshing alternative to the limited portrayals of women in media, and allow women to embrace their own complexity and individuality.

Examples of Female Anti-Heroes

1. **Murphy Mason from the television show, *In the Dark***

Murphy Mason is a prime example of a female anti-hero. She is a young blind woman who spends her days drinking, smoking, and engaging in promiscuous behavior, all while working at her parents' guide dog school. She is not a likable character by traditional standards, but she is incredibly compelling and captivating to follow.

As viewers, we observe how some of Murphy's behavior can be seen as a result of her disability and lack of control over certain parts of her life, however, there are many times when Murphy's actions, behaviors and thoughts extend beyond her disability and become questionable personality traits.

It's a bit of a chicken and egg scenario. Are some of her behaviors and actions a result of her genetic composition and general personality or are they a manifestation of her trauma and disability?

What makes Murphy such a complex and interesting character to follow is that despite her bad behavior and actions, she's often trying to do things for the *right* reason, no matter how screwed up that "thing" is. She is also a character that has many paradoxes. For example, she is extremely selfish, yet she is also incredibly loyal to those that she loves. While Murphy gets herself and her friends into a lot of trouble, she also has a tendency to be the one with the right intuition and know-how to get *out* of situations.

Ultimately, Murphy would probably be classified as an unlikable female anti-hero and yet, most viewers find themselves rooting for Murphy to succeed. This is a testament to the nuanced and complex nature of the character and the reality that humans are not all or nothing. They contain a multitude of experiences that shape them.

2. **Beth Dutton from the television show, *Yellowstone***

Beth Dutton is known to be one of the most iconic characters on television today. She is the daughter of John Dutton, the owner of the largest ranch in Montana on the show *Yellowstone*.

From the first episode to the current season, Beth is introduced as a strong-willed woman with fierce determination and tenacity but can also be cruel, selfish, condescending, and arrogant. Her character is established to be nearly the opposite of every well-liked female hero in a series.

Beth's complex personality is also made up of paradoxes that make it difficult for a viewer not to find some compassion for her. She is both vulnerable and strong, nurturing and aggressive, and fiercely loyal to those she loves. She has a sharp wit and a cutting tongue, and is not afraid to use them to get what she wants.

Despite her tough exterior, Beth has a vulnerable side that is often hidden from the rest of the world. She is haunted by a troubled past and struggles with her own demons, which often drive her to push away the people who care about her the most. When she does let people in, most notably her love interest, Rip, we see a side of Beth that allows us to fully grasp that she is not all bad or all good.

Taylor Sheridan, the writer and creator of *Yellowstone* has done a phenomenal job of showcasing how childhood trauma shows up in an adult who hasn't processed or done work on the inner demons that plague them. We often see Beth trying to "deal" with her issues the only way she knows how (drinking, smoking, promiscuity, fighting, being aggressive). We are shown that Beth has not been given the appropriate support, guidance or tools to deal with her painful past and thus, she's left to cope in the way she always has.

This creates compassion and understanding for the viewer as we recognize that Beth is often just trying to do the best she can with what she's been given.

3. Scarlett O'Hara from the book, *Gone with the Wind*

Scarlett O'Hara may be considered one of the most popular anti-heroines from literature as she is not an easily liked woman. She is spoiled, selfish, immature, and willing to be cruel to get what she wants.

Living in a time period where it was more acceptable for a woman to be seen, rather than heard, Scarlett rejects that ideal. She speaks her mind, even when it's inappropriate to do so, and tends to start disagreements just for fun.

Her inability to see her actions and behaviors against the backdrop of the tumultuous times they live in cause her to chase the wrong things like her childhood love, Ashley Wilkes, even though he's been promised to someone else.

As heartbreaking as it is, we see this pattern emerge when she enters into a fiery, passionate love affair with Rhett Butler. Ultimately, she is too single-minded and selfish to love Rhett the way he deserves and she is abandoned.

As the Civil War begins to ramp up in the South, Scarlett not only has to deal with her inner demons, but she has to wrestle with the very real life or death situations playing out in her state and her beloved childhood home of Tara.

What makes Scarlett such a compelling character to follow is that beneath her selfishness and desire for what she wants, she makes great sacrifices and endures unimaginable tragedy along the way. Her resilience, resourcefulness, and willingness to lead in those times makes her interesting and complex.

4. Jessica Jones from the Marvel comic books and television show, *Jessica Jones*

Introduced in the comics in 2001 by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Michael Gaydos, Jessica Jones was a former superhero who had given up her career after a traumatic incident with the villain Kilgrave, who had mind-controlled her for months. After breaking free from Kilgrave's control, Jessica became a private investigator in New York City, specializing in cases involving other super-powered individuals.

In the Netflix series, *Jessica Jones*, we see Jessica exploring themes such as trauma, addiction, and mental health. Jessica's PTSD from her time under Kilgrave's control is a huge motive for Jessica's actions and behaviors, and the portrayal of her struggles with alcoholism is a relatable reason why viewers have a soft spot for her.

Another reason viewers love to root for Jessica is that she often is acting out or living out her negative behaviors as a way of self-sabotage and self-harm. Unlike many other anti-hero, she reserves her worst behavior to hurt herself and not others. She is loyal and determined to help people once she gets out of her own way, but because she is so consumed with her trauma, PTSD and self-destructive behavior, it's hard for her to get into a place where she can change her perspective and use her skills for the good of the people around her.

Writing Exercises

Exercise #1:

1. Make a list of anti-hero characters from literature, movies, and television that you find interesting, compelling and unique (note that I didn't say likable or unlikable!)
2. Try to determine the deeper reason WHY you feel drawn to that anti-hero character

Exercise #2:

1. Make a list of traits that you find deplorable, inappropriate or "anti-heroic." If it helps, think of people in real life you detest or can't stand. What about them makes it so? Add those qualities or traits to the list.
2. Think of people who do, say, or act in ways that make you uncomfortable and make a list of those ways they make you uncomfortable.
3. Think of actions, behaviors or responses that confound or confuse you and make a list of those things that you can't understand.

Exercise #3:

1. On a piece of paper or in a grid on your computer, label two columns - one for "Negative Traits" and one for "Reframed Traits."
2. Take a look at the lists you created in the previous exercise and start listing out the most impactful "negative traits" that you want to explore.
3. In the next column begin to think about what a reframe of that negative trait would/could be.

Negative Traits	Reframed Traits
Controlling	Managerial
Hot-Headed	Passionate
Sneaky	Strategic
Manipulative	Persuasive
Violent	Able to defend oneself

The point of this exercise is to see that sometimes, a negative trait can be warped, twisted or reframed to be more nuanced than simply a negative trait. Additionally, your anti-hero's will not think of their traits as negative or wrong, instead, they will believe that the trait is a strength and/or a way to deal with or cope with situations.