

UNITED WISDOM

Hero, Antihero and the Difficulty of Moral Judgment

Meaning and Direction

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Epigraph

That is no city which belongs to one man.

— Sophocles, Antigone, Haemon’s reply to Creon about sole judgment; R. C. Jebb translation, immediately after Creon asks whether to rule by another judgment.

What this article is about

In discussing a book, the word “hero” can appear to answer two questions at once: who occupies the centre of the story, and whom we should trust. Yet an interesting character can do harm, someone with a worthy intention can choose an unacceptable means, and a reader’s sympathy can coexist with disagreement. This article considers these distinctions without sorting people into fixed categories of light and darkness. Its concerns are a particular action, the knowledge available to its agent, other participants’ positions, and the grounds of judgment. Selected passages from Aristotle, Sophocles and Shakespeare clarify the questions without constituting a single moral system. Their civic and religious differences remain important. The imagined contemporary situations below support original reflection; they do not establish literature’s effects on behaviour. Understanding a motive need not excuse an action, and revising a judgment after new information need not abandon responsibility. The purpose is greater precision, rather than an infallible method of reading people.

I. Two meanings of one word

Imagine a reading group in which one member calls a character the hero because nearly everything is seen through that character’s eyes. Another objects by listing cruel actions. The disagreement can last a long time while the participants answer different questions. One describes the story’s arrangement; the other evaluates conduct. It helps to clarify the word first. A central character, a moral exemplar, someone who performs a particular admirable deed, and a favourite character need not be the same person. This distinction makes discussion more precise. Neither narrative prominence nor our interest in someone’s fate automatically confers moral authority; an objectionable act does not prevent a work from following its agent.

Judgment also needs an appropriate scale. Saying that a decision was unjust does not mean that everything about its agent is known. Saying that someone deserves sympathy in a

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particular misfortune does not endorse earlier conduct. When these claims are merged, every qualification seems a retreat: pity supposedly becomes acquittal, while condemnation becomes permanent exclusion. A judgment can instead have several parts. We can identify harm, acknowledge a difficult situation, and leave what remains unknown unresolved. Each part requires its own support in the text. The character’s attractiveness, or our overall impression of the character, cannot do all that work on its own.

Here “antihero” is a working description of a central character who lacks the familiar attributes of an admirable exemplar. It is neither a complete history of the literary term nor a catalogue of personality traits. Courage, honesty, a clear purpose or expected nobility may be absent in different works, but those absences do not carry an identical moral meaning. Hesitation differs from deliberate cruelty. The question “hero or antihero?” therefore needs a narrower companion: what did the character do, what made it possible, and who bore the consequences? This brings discussion back to the particular episode rather than allowing a label to decide it.

II. Narrative attention grants no permission

When a story stays close to one person, readers gain access to that person’s anxieties, plans and excuses. Other participants may appear only briefly. This can produce a questionable measure: the central character’s actions receive extensive explanation, while everyone else is judged by an outcome. An imagined narrator might spend a page explaining a late arrival and a sentence describing a colleague’s irritation. The amount of explanation is unequal even if their obligations were shared. A discussion of fairness should notice who can speak, whose pain is represented, and whose reasons remain uncertain. This is a question about narrative form, rather than an accusation against first-person narration itself.

In Poetics VI Aristotle distinguishes action and character. XIII selects an intermediate figure for a particular tragic construction, while XV treats ethical purpose, likeness and consistency separately. Their separation is useful: an action’s structure is not replaced by a portrait of its agent. Ancient prescriptions for a genre nevertheless cannot become laws for every modern story. XV’s hierarchical statements about women and enslaved people belong to that historical text and are rejected as norms here. Our limited use concerns choice and representation, while retaining a critical distance from the theorist himself. Consulting an authoritative source does not require assent to all its assumptions.

Detailed representation may invite understanding, but permission for an action requires a different ground. If a character explains deception by fear of losing a job, we learn a possible motive. Evaluation also asks who was deceived, what was concealed, and what alternatives were available. Missing details should not be filled with convenient assumptions in the character’s favour. Equally, a bad outcome does not automatically make every explanation an

empty excuse. Responsible reading distinguishes what is shown, what we infer, and what remains unknown. Those levels permit disagreement about an interpretation without turning the intensity of narration into a moral privilege for its central figure.

III. The reader knows differently

Moral judgment concerns both what happened and what was knowable. A reader may witness a scene that a character missed or hear a confession concealed from everyone else. We can inadvertently give the agent our own information, saying that the person should have understood before the story supplied the relevant evidence. The reverse error is also possible: calling an act innocent because another character does not know its cause, even though its agent knows enough. Two brief notes can clarify the distinction: what do I know at this point in my reading, and what does the text show the decision-maker knowing?

In Hamlet 3.3.40–105 the audience hears Claudius discuss guilt and retained gains. Hamlet enters later and understands the visible situation differently. His postponement involves revenge and an imagined fate for the soul. That Christian vocabulary belongs to this drama; it is not a verified judgment about salvation. The episode exposes unequal information rather than supplying a general recipe for punishment. Strong interest in a central figure does not prevent us from naming a troubling intention. Hamlet’s prominence leaves his desired additional harm open to scrutiny, just as Claudius’s confession does not settle the question of the gains he continues to possess.

Attention must not become a claim to omniscience. Even an interior monologue offers a literary representation, rather than medical access to a mind. We may examine a discrepancy between speech and action in the text; no diagnosis follows from it. An imagined contemporary narrator can explain jealousy in detail without giving a complete account of every act. A more proportionate statement is: “In this scene the character knows about the request and nevertheless violates it.” Its strength comes from connecting judgment with available evidence. It leaves other aspects of the person outside what this episode establishes, instead of using a broad label to fill the gaps.

IV. A reason and a justification

An explanation asks how someone arrived at a decision. A justification asks why that decision was permissible. The two can be related without an automatic passage from one to the other. Fatigue can explain harshness without granting permission to humiliate a listener. Fear can make concealment understandable without cancelling the interests of those who rely on accurate information. In discussing literature, a motive should not be asked to do more than it can. An act can become intelligible without becoming good. Readers then need not choose between a cold refusal to understand and unconditional agreement with every action that has a history behind it.

Imagine a character who breaks a promise of confidentiality to protect a reputation. The fear of an unjust accusation may have real grounds. Yet the person who entrusted the information remains part of the situation. We can first describe both sides of the obligation and then consider possible means: seek consent, decline discussion, describe only one’s own conduct, or disclose everything without warning. If the story shows only the last choice, an alternative can be raised as a question rather than asserted as an available fact. Keeping that possibility conditional makes the judgment concrete. It does not win an argument by inventing an easy exit the text never supplied.

Worthy aims do not belong exclusively to the character we favour. An opponent may also appeal to safety, justice or fidelity. The question is what these words mean in action and whose participation they allow. Protecting order by silencing every objection differs from maintaining a rule that can be questioned. Care that ignores an expressed refusal differs from an offer of help. Such comparison neither equates all acts nor assumes that a conflict is symmetrical. It applies the question about means to each side, then identifies the differences in authority, vulnerability and consequence that the particular scene actually presents.

V. Action, possibility and consequence

Outcomes matter, but judging by outcome alone can be crude. Two characters can take similar actions and meet different consequences because of chance or another person’s intervention. This does not make consequences irrelevant. It means holding several questions together: what danger could the agent recognise, what could the agent control, what had others agreed to, and what actually followed? Praising a cautious choice only after success makes luck evidence of virtue. Recognising harm only after the worst outcome leaves risky conduct unexamined until disaster occurs. A more precise judgment gives the decision and its consequences related but distinguishable places.

An imagined manager promises extra work on a colleague’s behalf without asking, and the project happens to finish on time. A favourable ending cannot retrospectively create consent.

In another story, the manager asks, accepts a refusal, and the project fails because of an outside event. That failure alone does not establish that respecting another person’s capacity was mistaken. There is a difference between the quality of a decision and the success of the entire sequence of events. In real circumstances this distinction replaces neither professional procedures nor an examination of obligations. Literary reflection simply keeps open a question that a satisfying ending might otherwise conceal.

The price of an action may also be unequal. Risk can be an exciting test for one character and a threat to another person’s home, livelihood or reputation. When the narrative follows mainly the first, the second can become an obstacle. Attentive reading restores that person’s position as a participant: was the risk agreed to, was refusal possible, and was the concern heard? This does not ask literature to eliminate danger or ambiguity. It refuses to treat a person’s plot function as a complete account of that person’s interests. The excitement of an adventure and the permissibility of a decision remain different questions even when they concern the same scene.

VI. Disagreement has different grounds

In Antigone, admitting the deed is joined to an appeal to unwritten divine ordinances. Haemon’s exchange with Creon raises questions about the city and sole judgment. These grounds cannot be reduced to “everyone has an opinion”: the speakers invoke obligations and authority, rather than mere taste. A limited contemporary application asks what obligation each side acknowledges and who is entitled to judge. The ancient drama’s civic and religious setting remains intact. Our familiar vocabulary of individual choice cannot replace it, even where a particular question about the possibility of objection remains intelligible to a contemporary reader.

A difficult conflict does not make every decision equally worthy. Authority, access to speech and capacity to cause harm can differ. Someone who controls punishment occupies a different position from the person being punished. Shared appeals to loyalty do not equalise the price of their choices. In an imagined family story, an older person demands continuity while a younger person asks to change a particular obligation. We need to examine not only the declared values but also the division of work, the possibility of refusal, and the consequences of disagreement. Otherwise elevated language can conceal the relationship’s arrangement and present a powerful person’s convenience as the only honourable option.

A convenient modern judgment can conceal an assumption of its own. Readers may favour the character who uses familiar language and fail to hear a different ground. Attention first asks what the appeal concerns: law, kinship, gods, a promise, preservation of life, or personal dignity? Agreement, objection, or an acknowledged limit of understanding can follow. Respect for difference does not require accepting every norm. It requires addressing the position

actually offered rather than defeating an invented substitute. This matters in reading across traditions. Similar gestures of resistance can have different grounds, while similar words about duty can require different actions. A fluent translation cannot remove those differences.

VII. An antihero remains open to judgment

“Antihero” can sometimes function as a qualification issued in advance, making any expectation of decent conduct appear naive. Yet lacking conventional nobility does not exempt a represented action from scrutiny. We can acknowledge a character’s artistic force and still identify a particular injustice. Contradiction can be interesting without becoming superiority over others. Admiration for rule-breaking especially needs care. A breach alone tells us neither that the rule was unjust nor that it merely obstructed the agent’s convenience. The rule might protect vulnerable people. Those questions require separate attention even when the character’s style, wit and confidence make a powerful impression.

Imagine a character who mocks shared conventions but takes other people’s help for granted. Independence may prove selective: discard one’s own obligation while keeping the benefit of someone else’s. Comparing two scenes is more useful than debating the attractive image as a whole. What happens when this character demands freedom, and what happens when someone else makes the same demand? Does the rule remain the same? A difference needs an explanation. Unequal obligations might be justified by an actual agreement, for instance, but eloquent self-defence does not establish that agreement. The inquiry concerns conduct and conditions rather than the persuasiveness of a pose.

One automatic judgment should not replace another. A modest, confused or comic character is not morally inferior merely for lacking confidence. Failure does not establish a lack of dignity. A small act without a ceremonial speech can deserve attention: admitting an error, seeking permission, returning what was taken, or stopping pressure. Its narrative prominence may be slight. A reader can pause over it and explain its significance. Judgment then moves beyond a competition in charm. We need not like every character equally, but we can refuse to treat loudness, ingenuity or entertainment value as sufficient evidence of a decision’s moral quality.

VIII. Judging an act without inventing a final person

A bounded judgment need not be weak. “He broke a promise while knowing that someone relied on it” can be more precise and demanding than “he is a bad person.” The first gives a ground that can be checked against the text. The second can obscure the relevant scene and imply knowledge of an entire person. Refusing a final portrait does not cancel protection against repeated harm. Human complexity requires neither continued trust nor continued proximity nor waiting for improvement. Discussion benefits from distinguishing understanding, evaluation of an act, prediction, and a decision about acceptable closeness. They are related questions with different evidential demands.

In an imagined novel, a former deceiver acknowledges what happened. Readers can welcome the admission without declaring trust restored. The next questions concern action: what can be repaired, what cost will the agent accept, whom will the agent hear, and what response will not be demanded? An apology used to secure an immediate return to former relations differs from an acknowledgment that permits refusal. One episode nevertheless cannot establish the course of an entire future life. A proportionate response might be: “This admission changes my grounds for judging this scene; I do not yet know whether the change will endure.” Hope then remains distinct from another person’s obligation.

This reading permits ambiguity without using it as a convenient screen. Clear evidence of intentional harm is not erased by uncertainty elsewhere. Where evidence is insufficient, confidence should be limited. It helps to name the boundary: an intention is unclear, an alternative is unknown, a line is open to competing interpretations, or the text never establishes an opportunity to refuse. “Complex” explains little by itself. It becomes informative when several distinct grounds are specified. Complexity can then sharpen judgment instead of postponing it indefinitely or excusing whichever person has received the most pages.

IX. Sympathy leaves room for another voice

Sympathy can be an important part of reading. It lets us remain with a character’s difficulty, recognise the cost of a choice, and avoid reducing someone to the worst act. It need not be the conversation’s only voice. A harmed person does not become less significant because that person speaks briefly or less elegantly. A reading group might retell a scene while preserving all known facts but removing access to the central figure’s interior excuses. Which interests then become more visible? This change of perspective does not establish a new version of events. It helps identify how the original description directed our attention.

That retelling should not invent a convenient speech for a silent participant. We can mark missing information instead of supplying our own apparently just fantasy. We know that a character lost property; we may not know that character’s view of forgiveness. We see a

refusal without necessarily knowing every reason for it. Responsibility sometimes means preserving the empty space. It limits our authority to speak for someone whose perspective the work has not disclosed. A comparable everyday caution might involve asking rather than declaring, “I know exactly how you feel.” This is an original contemporary application, rather than an established effect of reading classical literature.

Readers’ disagreement need not become a trial of their moral character. One admires a scene’s form, another examines an injustice, and a third recognises a familiar difficulty. Clarifying the object of discussion helps them hear each other. Nobody needs to disclose a personal history to validate a reading. Textual discussion can proceed without confession, and a participant can decline an example that feels too close. A careful conversation leaves that option open. It does not demand sympathy for a particular character as proof of maturity or treat a refusal of sympathy as proof of cruelty. Reasons can be examined together while keeping personal response distinct from an argument about the work.

X. Revising a judgment while retaining the question

A later scene can alter an earlier judgment. A character may have lacked crucial information, concealed a private benefit, or attempted repair. Revision does not make the first reading worthless; it was based on less evidence. Naming the change precisely helps: what has been added, which earlier assumption no longer holds, and what remains of the judgment? New information may explain a motive without justifying a means. Removing an accusation of deliberate deception may leave a question about carelessness. This gives readers a way to proceed without defending an initial conclusion at any cost, or replacing it with a sweeping verdict in the opposite direction.

Several separate notes can take the place of a final verdict: “I consider this act unjust for this reason”; “I sympathise with the character in this misfortune”; “I do not yet know this circumstance”; “Here my judgment changed.” Such notes do not offer a mathematical measure of goodness. They expose the reader’s work: the evidence, the inference and the personal response. This is more useful in discussion than an immediate demand to choose a favourite or a villain. Another participant can dispute one note without rejecting all the others. Different readings become comparable grounds rather than rival pledges of unconditional loyalty to a character.

Hero and antihero remain useful words when they are not required to answer everything. They can describe a position in the story, a pattern of representation, or a reader’s expectation. Moral judgment asks for more specific work: examine the decision, knowledge, means, authority, consequences and another participant’s voice. This guarantees no wisdom in everyday life. It does provide a more accountable literary conversation: understand without granting permission, condemn without inventing an exhaustive person, sympathise without

silencing someone harmed, and revise without declaring responsibility meaningless. A question can remain open where evidence ends, while a definite judgment can be offered where its ground has genuinely been identified.

What this means in practice

Choose one episode from a familiar work that can be discussed without excessive personal strain. There is no need to revisit a distressing experience or prove anything through personal disclosure. Describe the action briefly, keeping only events the text shows. Separately note what the character knows before deciding, what becomes known later, and what only the reader knows. Where something is unclear, retain it as unknown rather than supplying a convenient guess.

Record a motive explicitly stated or adequately supported by the text. Beside it, write your own reason for evaluating the means chosen. Check whether the motive has silently replaced a justification. Identify who bears the consequences, who could object, and whose perspective is missing. Do not invent a speech for an absent participant. You can identify an interest evident in the event while leaving that person’s feelings and future choice unknown.

Write three separate statements: what you agree with, what you sympathise with, and what you cannot yet judge. Find one circumstance that could genuinely change your conclusion. It should concern the text rather than an arbitrary rescue of a favourite character. In discussion, invite another reader to examine that ground without requiring identical personal sympathies. End with the question that remains open. This exercise is neither diagnostic nor a promise of changed behaviour. Its purpose is to make a particular literary judgment visible and open to examination.

Key quotation

> *My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;*

— William Shakespeare, Hamlet 3.3.104, Folger through-line 2435, original English. Claudius concludes his attempt at prayer. The line distinguishes utterance from an inward discrepancy he acknowledges; it supplies no universal test of another person’s sincerity.

Connections between traditions

1. **How does representation connect with assessment of choice?** Poetics VI distinguishes action and character; Hamlet 3.3.55–70 places an admission of guilt beside retained gains. Their limited common ground is the need to examine a decision rather than stop at a verbal portrait. Comparison tests the relation between what is said and what is chosen: character description cannot substitute for examining an act. This keeps narrative centrality separate from justification. The boundary matters: Aristotle describes tragedy's components, while Claudius considers repentance in the play's Christian vocabulary. Poetics and a dramatic theological confession do not become one doctrine.

2. **Can ambiguity coexist with a definite judgment?** Poetics XIII places a tragic figure between extremes; Hamlet 3.3.77–103 gives postponement a troubling purpose of revenge. Their bounded similarity is the possibility of sustained interest without unconditional approval. The comparison separates interest in a fate from assessment of a particular intention, preventing plot status alone from becoming an excuse. The difference remains: an ancient prescription for a tragic construction neither classifies Hamlet nor establishes the modern term "antihero." The desired additional harm is considered through this scene, rather than derived from Aristotle.

3. **Who can question a central voice?** Haemon's reply about the city in Antigone, following Creon's question about sole judgment, challenges a ruler's exclusive authority. In Hamlet 3.3.40–105 the audience knows what the arriving Hamlet does not. Both raise a question about the limits of one perspective. Comparing differences in voice and information exposes a central viewpoint's incompleteness and prompts attention to who can speak. The boundary is equally important: Haemon addresses a civic objection to a ruler, whereas the audience's dramatic knowledge is not participation in government. These ways of limiting a single perspective are not interchangeable.

4. **What obligation stands behind an admission of action?** After admitting the burial, Antigone invokes unwritten divine ordinances. In Hamlet 3.3.55–70 Claudius acknowledges the difficulty of relinquishing a crime's gains. The limited similarity is that conduct is considered against a ground beyond the speaker's convenience. The comparison identifies both the addressee of obligation and the price it demands, preventing "duty" from concealing differences. Its boundary is decisive: defending a burial obligation and acknowledging guilt for murder are morally and religiously different situations. They are neither equivalent nor expressions of a single universal faith.

5. **How does revision relate to consistency?** Poetics XV relates conduct to character and probability; Haemon's speech about learning and yielding, before Creon's objection about age, permits a changed decision. Their common concern is the relation between an explanation and

subsequent action. Comparison distinguishes a reasoned revision from an arbitrary change of mask: a new ground can explain alteration without erasing earlier consequences. A reader can then notice change without acquitting an entire person at once. The boundary remains between coherence in artistic representation and advice addressed to an acting ruler. Neither passage guarantees enduring moral improvement.

Primary sources

1. **Aristotle, Poetics VI, XIII and XV.** S. H. Butcher's English translation, Project Gutenberg 1974. XIII and XV were read completely, with VI's action/character context; VIII supplied plot context without further quotation. This is a theory of tragedy, not an experimental account of readers' behaviour. XV's gender and slavery hierarchy is rejected as a norm here. The Greek original was not checked.

2. **Sophocles, Antigone.** R. C. Jebb translation, Internet Classics Archive. Actual reading covered Antigone's admission and divine-law reply, the complete opening speeches of Creon and Haemon with their subsequent dispute, and later counsel to Creon as context. The epigraph is Haemon's reply about the city immediately after Creon's question about sole judgment: web line 768 in this HTML, which has no printed verse numbering. Complete-play or Greek-original reading is not claimed; a speaker's statement is not treated as the author's personal belief.

3. **William Shakespeare, Hamlet 3.3.40–105.** Folger Shakespeare Library. The sequence from Claudius's admission to the concluding lines was read completely, with scene-opening context. The key quotation is 3.3.104, Folger through-line 2435. This is original English in Folger's edited text. Characters' religious assumptions do not establish the actual fate of souls.

Russian quotations are United Wisdom's own translations: Sophocles from Jebb's English translation, Shakespeare from original English. The English fragments were compared directly with the named pages.

Tags

hero, antihero, moral judgment, literature, reading, character, action, plot, centrality, sympathy, responsibility, motive, justification, consequences, knowledge, perspective, voice, power, obligation, choice, ambiguity, Aristotle, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Antigone, Hamlet, poetics, revision, dialogue, interpretation

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