

## The Empty Man of Action vs. The Active Heart: Dispassionate and Dramatic Characters from *James Bond* and *Sherlock Holmes* to *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Hamlet* and *The Hobbit*

### DEFINING CHARACTER

Since we are describing empathetic space as an expression of character, we now tackle the fundamental question of drama:

What is character?

The term has been defined in many conflicting ways. The confusion over defining this core term of drama is found across the literature: consider Hawthorn (2017). The conflict, though not the resolution, is nicely spelled out in Moller (2017, p. 56), where she points out that for decades many have rejected the idea that the concept of character can even be a useful critical category. “Like the idea of unitary selfhood, “character” was dismissed as an anachronism and “as much an ideological construct as other basic concepts of western “logocentrism” (Hillis Miller 1992, 31). Generations of students have been taught that character analysis—in particular the sort of character analysis that deals with fictional characters as if they were real people—is, at best, a naively mimetic undertaking.” This insight about a central ideological divide over such a core term helps reveal the division that now exists in universities between the schools of narrative craft and those of narrative theory. Despite this excellent critique, however, even Moller has some trouble giving a clear and simple definition of the term character, instead summarizing Forster.

We suggest that character, in both life and literature, is composed of the tendencies in the actions of a person. What do we mean by “tendencies”? Those patterns in the desires, hopes, dreams, approaches, impulses, tactics and techniques of a person. Why is character so important to us as humans? Simply because the past tendencies in the actions of a character also tends to predict how a person will act in future situations, and this is often the most important information we need to know in the most important situations we face in life.

Imagine you meet Jim, a very interesting fun guy, in a local bar one night. Your conversation goes on for hours: you find you’ve so much in common and Jim is smart, fun, interesting, insightful and clearly loves talking with you and you feel you’re yourself funny and smart with him. And so a friendship starts: you meet at the bar every two or three days for a few weeks.

Then one night when it’s raining your car breaks down just twenty minutes outside of town so you call Jim at the bar and explain the problem and ask him to come pick you up. And he gives excuses. You press him and he says “Look, the bar’s really hopping tonight: can you call someone else? I’d love to do it but ... anyway, let’s meet up tomorrow night, how’s that sound?”

In this moment, you realize the difference between Jim’s great personality and his character. It turn out that Jim is what’s known as a fair-weather friend, someone who loves to be around you when all is good but who won’t be there if you ever need him. Now you have learned about Jim’s tendencies, and you learned about them by putting him into a situation where he had to choose and this revealed something hidden about who he really is. It revealed his character—Jim is very self-centered and selfish, and thanks to this insight into him now you’re careful not to take this new friendship too far. Suddenly gleaning the difference in a friend between a projected scintillating, fun personality and an underlying selfish, egocentric character is a lesson at the heart of many dramas in life and literature: this insight is for example there at the core of Holly’s relationship with Harry in *The Third Man*, lies at the core of the protagonist’s first girlfriend in *50/50*, and also in Paul Reisman’s character in *Aliens*, and is the revelation at the center of many romantic stories. And the reverse is also often true: think of how many forbidding, unfriendly personalities then reveal a strong and helpful character hidden underneath?

The example of Jim shows how crucial character is for our social bonds: think of the pressing practical importance of such questions as,

will this friend be generous and giving? Will this leader be trusted to be brave and loyal to the group? When I leave town on a short trip, can this lover be trusted not to sleep with my friend and can this friend be trusted not to make a move on my lover? These are questions about what this person is likely to do, an extrapolation I make based on what I know they've done. It is a question of the predictability and the trajectory of a person's tendencies. It is a question of character.

The biopic *Raging Bull* (1980) illustrates this in a painful and comic moment. Down on his luck and all alone, the retired boxer Jake La Motta needs to raise some money. So Jake gets an idea: he has a very valuable trophy, his old jewel-encrusted Boxing World Championship belt. Jake takes a hammer to his esteemed trophy belt and smashes the jewels off and then takes them to the pawnshop. The owner patiently explains that the jewels are not worth much but that the belt would be worth a lot. But of course, as even Jake now realizes, he has destroyed the belt and so has destroyed his own chances once again. His forlorn slouch in the scene as he realizes this seems like a revelation of character: he seems to realize that this action of his, destroying the belt, manages to sum up his whole overall character and story.

From the start of our tale Jake has been a boxer to his core: he tends to solve every problem by hitting it with all the force he can. This marked tendency which has come to define his life certainly worked great in the ring—it won him the bejeweled world championship belt, for example, but the same tendency didn't work so well in his two important relationships, the bond with his brother/manager and with his wife. When he had a conflict with them he struck out physically and as a result is now permanently estranged from them. At this point in Jake's life he has begun to realize and take responsibility for his guilt, and so the destruction of the belt, done in a growing fury, also feels like Jake is punishing himself for his own choices. A kind of brilliant *mis-en-abîme* of Jake's entire story, this broken heraldic trophy becomes a perfect expression of all his tendencies and choices and of their good and bad results.

### THE CENTRALITY OF DETECTING CHARACTER FOR SURVIVAL

Character is at the very center of our dramas for one excellent reason: evolution. All of us, from the moment we are born, have a driving need to perceive and understand and predict the tendencies of the people all around us. We need to know who to trust, who to fear, who will feed

us, who to depend on, who to love and befriend and shun and hate. We need to learn to read and predict and diplomatically interact with characters in nearly all situations in life; we need to know and predict their goals, tactics and methods. It is a major challenge to be born into a human community without being able to understand the communication system or detect character. Detecting character is not so easy thanks to the many-faced evolution of personality (a social mask that purports to reveal character but is really a dissimulation). It seems even the most perceptive of us can be fooled by someone, to expect tendencies that are not actually there, and the results of this mistake range from disappointment to divorce to death. At the same time we know it is dangerous for us to reveal our own tendencies: this can allow others to predict and manipulate us, and so it becomes important for us to recognize, exert, regulate and hide parts of our own character. And of course, as Jake LaMotta comes to realize, it is also hard to see inside ourselves, to see our own character: to even begin to see the most obvious and awful patterns in our own tendencies we often need the stress of a drama. Often we can only see our own actions when they are reflected in the cold faces of our disappointed friends, of our estranged families, in our own smashed trophies lying broken in our hands.

### THE SOCIAL CIRCLES OF INTIMACY

And so in life we are careful about revealing our character. I do not reveal my mistakes, my secret fears or hopes or secrets, just to anyone I meet: some tendencies I can reveal to a distant friend, others to a close friend, others only to a trusted brother or parent or lover, someone who has been there for me in the past, who has a proven tendency to keep secrets. There are in fact a series of concentric rings of trust, rings of revealing character tendencies which we might call the rings of intimacy. Someone slowly becomes a good friend by building and observing the circle over years through many rainy nights and stormy days. Only after the test of time will I trust her with my character flaws, my mistakes, my vulnerabilities and insecurities.

### CHARACTER ARC DEFINED

Recognizing flaws can lead to a struggle to change, which is also not easy: in fact to inculcate new habits and new tendencies is extremely hard. In the children's novel *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo Baggins leaves his

comforting hobbit hole he is a coward who faints when he hears a scary story. But then through some rough, painful, frightening experiences, he gradually changes: after being caught by trolls, chased by goblins, fleeing Wargs and cowering in Bearn's house from a giant bear, Bilbo can finally face the spiders and then a dragon and then a war. And so as characters from Bilbo to Jane Austin's heroines show us, we can learn step by step to be courageous. In both life and drama character is deep and strong but like a hard metal it can be slowly worked into new shapes. This process of a major change in one's tendencies is called a *character arc*.

### INNER AND OUTER GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND CONFLICTS DEFINED

So far in our definitions we have avoided invoking any historically laden term like "the self". But we now suggest that the human trick of personality, the false mask of projecting character, and also the concept of the rings of intimacy, both open up a distinction between external and internal desires, goals and struggles. A struggle to change one's intimate secret tendencies is often labeled an "inner conflict" or an attempt to achieve an "inner objective" to distinguish this from struggling to achieve an objective in the world, which is often called an "external objective" (Hauge 1991). One person might become a Doctor to gain respect, another to gain community, another to feel worthwhile, another to gain money and security, another to gain power. External objectives are powered by internal objectives but do not mirror them: as we see in the film *Legally Blonde*, the protagonist Elle struggles to get into to Harvard Law School (an external objective) not to get a law degree but to prove to her ex-boyfriend that she's worth loving and marrying (an internal objective).

Intimacy is a key term here in distinguishing these two types of motives. A relationship with intimacy requires trust, a sense of safety in revealing vulnerabilities, hopes, fears and dreams. Internal objectives play such a central role in drama because it is risky to reveal these intimate tendencies to someone: we keep our intimacies hidden from larger social circles because we fear how they might be used against us. Think of being in high school and being afraid to tell someone about a crush you have on a certain person.

The risk that circles our intimate hopes and fears, the concern that they might become public in a bad way that hurts us, means that intimacy and

vulnerability usually increase as a relationship grows stronger: they are a kind of glue that can strengthen a bond between two people. As we noted earlier, the bond, the level of intimacy in a relationship, is usually calibrated as appropriate to the other's place in our concentric social circles of trust—the roughly concentric shrinking rings of neighbors, co-workers, friends, close friends, family, lovers and spouses. And over time a relationship can travel in either direction through these circles (which are not always fixed or in exactly this order). The more intimate a revelation is, the smaller the circle, the greater the level of risk being taken and so the greater the trust being placed on the person receiving it. And betrayals of an intimate trust and of intimate secrets sever the bonds, leaving painfully-torn hearts.

Also, sudden violations or disruptions of these circles of intimacy also cause drama. A wedding can bring someone entirely new into a somewhat stabilized group of family and friends, and the effect is rather like a new giant planet entering a solar system that then disturbs all the old orbits. Marriages always cause problems and changes and collisions in existing relationships, which is one reason why weddings are so often at the center of dramas. But other large events can disturb these circles as well, bringing new tests and allegiances. For example, the threatened failure of a business will often challenge the hierarchies and circles of trust in a group (*The Big Night*, *The Godfather*). So will the revelation of any complex betrayal. Imagine you heard that a young man in your neighborhood had an affair with his father's business partner's wife, and then had one with her daughter. Anyone who heard only these facts would know that this betrayal is guaranteed to cause uproar across the circles: that there will be drama, that suddenly all the old bonds of trust are threatened in some way, and so all the circles in these two families will need to be redrawn. Knowing nothing else about these people, we understand this is a dramatic situation, that vulnerabilities, insecurities and intimacies will be shaken loose, that characters will be challenged and relationships changed. We also know that these families will probably want to hush up this situation as it reveals too much intimate character information.

Moreover, to meet someone who wants to ignore the socially accepted gradations of intimacy and barge prematurely into an intimate circle is usually alarming, and hints at some inner imbalance of emotions and a promise of hidden future dramas. If you are on a blind date with someone and he offers you the key to his apartment or shows you

that he has already tattooed your name on his arm, you know that a lot of drama, in his past and potentially in your future, lies just below his strained smile. Usually the circles of intimacy must be carefully negotiated and if someone can't do this properly, he is probably wrestling with internal conflicts that tend to push him into messy choices and dramas.

After providing this rather simple account of character, intimacy and vulnerability, let's see how these concepts map onto the Western dramatic tradition, which purports to be a great instruction manual for understanding character in ourselves and in others.

### DISPASSIONATE CHARACTERS AND DISPASSIONATE SPACE

Intimacy and internal objectives are missing in a whole class of stories. Consider now the shared singular characteristic of protagonists such as Hercules and the classic versions of Sherlock Holmes, James Bond and Superman, or think of the lead character of many children's shows from the classic Spiderman (ABC 1967–1970) to today's *Paw Patrol* (*Spinmaster* 2013–). These characters all possess only clear external objectives—monsters to kill, mysteries to solve, bombs to defuse, enemies to destroy—and have carefully been shorn of most signs of an inner emotional life. Reflecting this simple clarity of purpose, such characters possess remarkable powers to change their world and have no internal emotional goals to struggle with or achieve, no intimacies to cover over, no vulnerabilities to protect, no emotional conflicts to slow them down as they charge forwards through their highly elaborated and exotic worlds. They are in a sense emotionally invulnerable, possessing an inner strength that mirrors their external imperturbable strengths. We will call this form of character a *dispassionate* character.

These characters also have something else in common. They tend to solve problems with 'high stakes', an inept term of story craft which means that their goals are very pressing matters of life and death. The 'high stakes' often involve numerous members of the public, usually with no cohesive intimate bond: our hero must save the 747 plane before it crashes, then he must go on to save the country or the planet or the universe. In other words, often the people who need to be saved have no personal intimate conflicts or connection to the hero.

Not surprisingly, these heroes tend not to focus on problems or conflicts inside the smaller, more intimate circles: we are fascinated by them not because their struggles are so like our own but rather because the

lives of so many hang on their success. Their journey needn't be about working on inner problems because the outer ones are so pressing. These characters also tend to lack a clear character arc. Hercules and Sherlock Holmes are essentially invulnerable with no inner conflicts and so have both no particular tendencies that must be changed and no impetus to change. The classic Superman is the exemplary case. As shown here in Fig. 2.1, the strong stance of Superman shows he is never in doubt, never ashamed, never guilty, never afraid of intimacy, never in a personal crisis of any kind. His problems revolve around the proper techniques for stopping this week's super-villain. His only vulnerability, a weakness in the presence of Kryptonite, is itself a physical external problem. Try to imagine Superman crying, or cringing over a memory from middle school, or dealing with a wife who has breast cancer. He does not have the inner emotional machinery to engage in such dramas. Thankfully for him, he also doesn't have the time: he has to rush off to defuse a bomb or thwart another super-villain.



**Fig. 2.1** Superman, who lacks vulnerabilities and intimacies and internal objectives but is never lacking in external objectives like Save the Planet, Stop the Villain, etc.



Though their roots extend far into classical storytelling these dispassionate characters continue to save our worlds in cinema and television today: consider for example the first film of the successful Marvel franchise *Thor* (2011). Like Superman, Thor has no emotional problems to grapple with, no fears or guilt, no intimacies to confess to a lover in bed. His big turning-point is the moment he decides to sacrifice himself for his friends, but this is not a dramatic change demanding some new hidden strength he never knew he had: nothing before this moment has led us to think of him as weak or insecure or even selfish. From start to finish of the plot, Thor is simply a god with the sunny smile and look of a buffed surfer dude who once again saves our universe from some very one-dimensional enemies.

The same can be said about most versions of both Sherlock Holmes and James Bond prior to the 2000s: before the social trauma of 9/11 such characters appeared in film after film solving murders and saving the world without ever being noticeably marked in any psychological way by their tireless efforts. Such characters tend not to have character arcs, since there is no inner emotional struggle to overcome, no problematic tendencies of action that require changing. They therefore make great central characters for film franchises because they are known, fixed characters, always ready to be wheeled out for the next mystery or battle, the next foe and the next show of fireworks.

There are also dispassionate heroes who lack any of the extraordinary powers and methods of these characters but who are just a plucky brave version of an everyman. Consider Jack, the hero of the 1994 hit *Speed*. Jack thinks fast and solves problems and jumps into save others, but he has no special abilities. He also has only the slightest of discernible emotional arcs: perhaps he is learning through his adventures with Annie (his romantic interest) to trust a partner and no longer go it alone. We might read this change into his story, but aside from a few thrown-away lines Jack's commitment issue is a very slim emotional problem with no scenes of dramatic conflict dedicated to it. Our examples also reveal something else: by traditionally skewing male, such dispassionate characters have also helped define masculinity itself as invulnerability.

It should not surprise us that dispassionate characters and stories appeal largely to audiences who have no interest in the puzzles of emotional intelligence: instead the appeal of these characters is that they allow us uninterrupted fantasies of power and social importance that play out in spectacular manipulations triggered by their conflict with their

antagonist. We wish we could fly, or fling a mountain at a bad guy, or be valued and cheered and feted by a relieved galaxy. As a result such characters elicit no deep sympathy or empathy. However adrenalynic they make us feel, we never cry over the travails of Superman.

Mirroring their emotionally denatured form of character, and heightening the fantasy of power that carries the viewer past the emptiness of their emotional life, these tales are full of dispassionate spaces: spectacular barriers and opponents for these characters to battle against. The emotional fireworks are produced from this impact, and so we can say that the external goal of the character shapes the space of the story into emotionally empty external spectacle. Here spectacle is usually deployed to dazzle and create an adrenalynic reaction: Superman lifts buildings, Thor blows up the Bifrost Bridge, and Jack skids and slams his way through *Speed's* spectacular explosions. But of course while buildings explode, no heart is ever harmed or warmed: we do not see any wrenching emotional scenes and never find ourselves crying over tragic events. When death takes place it is almost always only to propel the next adventure with vengeance. And so we feel only adrenalynic jolts and, at best, we marvel. Dispassionate and Dantean space each have a corresponding form of Spectacle: Because empathy is largely missing, dispassionate spectacle is thus deeply different from Dantean spectacle, which is an individualized expression of a character's past joys or traumas and thus is imbued with an emotional dimension and with a far more elaborate construction and conception of the self. But first we must look at dramatic characters, the most common form of character in today's plays, novels, films and television shows.

### DRAMATIC CHARACTERS AND DRAMATIC SPACE

By contrast to their dispassionate brethren, *dramatic* characters do depend on the machinery of empathy, and are characterized by three differences from dispassionate characters.

1. They tend to pursue much more prosaic external goals like "Get the Job!" or "Win the Dance Contest!"
2. They do so with an active, conflicted heart; for example, they wrestle with confidence or guilt or loneliness or a need for love or to prove themselves.

3. They usually have character arcs: they usually either undergo a change in their tendencies or resolutely refuse to change, and an answer to this question of whether they will change marks the end of the story.

Let's examine the first difference, which is simply the very size of the external objective being pursued. Like dispassionate characters, dramatic characters are also actively trying to achieve some external goal, and often with the same urgency but, unlike the save-the-world high-stakes goals of dispassionate characters, the goals of most dramatic characters are the kinds we ourselves are likely to experience. Examples of common external dramatic goals include "get the guy/girl!" (*Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Once*, *Notting Hill*, *Knocked Up*), "fix the broken relationship!" (*Casablanca*, *La Notte*), get into college (*Say Anything*), plan a friend's wedding (*Bridesmaids*), win a contest (*The Full Monty*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Pitch Perfect*), or save the family farm or restaurant or bank or protection racket (*The Big Night*, *The Godfather*).

Generally speaking, we have far more to learn from watching someone solve a dramatic conflict than a dispassionate conflict: we are unlikely to ever need to save the entire world or stop a mad bomber or a war with the frost giants, but we often need to fix a friendship or save a business or plan a wedding. Such goals and problems engage our emotional intelligence while dispassionate goals and problems engage our adrenalynic reactions and our fantasies of power. In other words, dramatic characters generally try to face problems similar to ours armed only with abilities somewhat like ours while dispassionate characters use powers and abilities we know we will never have to solve problems we know we will never face.

Second, dramatic characters differ from their dispassionate brethren because they grapple not only with an external problem but also with an internal objective, such as to overcome a particular guilt or fear, or to realize some underlying desire. And now just as we noted that the domestic, familiar, prosaic nature of dramatic external goals engage us in ways that dispassionate goals cannot, we also see a parallel form of inner engagement and recognition. The *self*-reflective struggles and conflicts of dramatic characters are familiar enough to engage our emotional intelligence in a way dispassionate characters (who lack such vulnerabilities and concerns) cannot.

There is a third distinction that often holds as well: the worlds of the two kinds of characters are usually rather different. The dispassionate character's world can be a result of special skills: Sherlock Holmes lives in a world of clever and dangerous murderers, of microscopic observations and unique, surprising forms of knowledge about the ordinary; Thor lives in a mythological homeland. And this is the fantasy aspect of many dispassionate worlds: they function by such different rules from our own that they can be enjoyed without fear that our viewing pleasure will be interrupted by anything reminding us of troubling emotional or practical problems.

The rise of the Novel and the modern theater have somewhat sharpened the distinction between the thrilling fantasy stories of kings and heroes and the stories of ordinary life. Though novels and modern theatre helped make dramatic characters into the most common form of protagonist in our stories, they did this largely by their emphasis on the specifically *domestic* dramas of their new middle-class and working-class audiences. These dramas are generally not about the struggles of a Hercules or the downfall of a king but focus rather on the conflicts in, say, a middle-class or working-class family. Slowly the older tropes of dispassionate stories were shunted into the tropes of adventure stories and thrillers, genres that have become the province of children and teenagers.<sup>1</sup>

This too has helped mark the general distinction of spaces we associate with the two forms of character: as the scope of story conflicts changed so did the role of spectacle. Compare an audience watching Hercules wrestle with dragons to an audience watching a husband and wife wrestle with their disappointments and thwarted longings as they argue about the cost of her new dress and his flirting with her friend at the bar. Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879) would not work well if just behind the couple we saw through a window a raging battle between armies playing out in the hills behind the house. With this placement of dramatic characters in domestic settings, story space must lose some of its spectacularity and serve the drama in new ways. When the external problem—be it dragon or armies—turns into a stack of overdue bills and a tendency to drink too much, dramatic space *must* recede to a supporting position and not distract us from the emotionally complex drama playing out in the foreground.

## THE DRAMATIC CHARACTERS AND SPACES OF *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*

Let's look at some examples of dramatic characters in some depth. The film *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) is a dramedy (a drama with some comic elements) featuring dramatic characters existing in non-spectacular dramatic spaces.

As we can see from Fig. 2.2, the little girl who opens the movie stands alone before a television in a small cheaply panelled, sparsely decorated living-room. She is rehearsing the hollow sentiments of some beauty pageant winner, carefully practicing the woman's false, inauthentic performance. Right away we learn that the little girl is an innocent, that she is not being supervised and that she is not a typical beauty, and we grow afraid that her goal to be like a beauty pageant winner will damage her permanently.

Next we meet her father, far away at some community college, giving a motivational lecture on how to be a winner and not a loser. The audience is small and uninspired by his talk but he struggles to smile and soldier on, trying to sell his book and his 'Be a Winner in Life!' philosophy as the bored room empties out.

Now we cut to his son, a teenager doing workouts alone in his room under the baleful glare of Friedrich Nietzsche, who has been painstakingly drawn with a sharpie on a bed sheet. We soon learn the son wants to be a fighter pilot and this is part of his training.



**Fig. 2.2** A typical location from the film *Little Miss Sunshine*, a dramatic space using low spectacle

Now we meet the family's grandfather who locks himself alone in the toilet to do drugs.

Next we meet the mother, alone in her car, driving fast while nervous and agitated: she lies with irritation to her husband as she speeds to the hospital.

At the hospital her brother, who has tried to cut his wrists, sits alone in utter depression. The hospital wants to keep him but he has no insurance and no money so she will have to take him in. Soon we will learn that he has lost both his college teaching job and his lover and wants both back.

All of these six figures have individual struggles and goals but only the little girl's and the suicidal brother's are overtly empathetic at the start. Slowly, though, we realize that they also share some common antagonisms. Each is found separate and alone in a location, and slowly we begin to see how this isolation expresses a common antagonist: they are each alienated, all lack love and care, and all are threatened by poverty and loss. Though each has their own separate *external* antagonist—the beauty competition, the book publisher, the military pilot program, etc.—all have a unified *internal* antagonist, which is expressed in many places but also in the dramatic spaces of the film. As we come to realize their common danger we feel a compassionate empathy for them all. Moreover, although each has his or her own separate external objective and singular inner objective, by the end of the film's set-up all six characters commit to a unified external objective, rallying around the compassionate goal of getting the little girl to the beauty contest and helping her to win.

In a film that opens with an announcement that everyone must fight to be a winner and each has a specific individual goal, we are surprised when it turns out that every single one of these six very sympathetic characters clearly fails in a very real sense to achieve what they want. The son permanently loses his chance to be a fighter pilot. The father loses his book contract in no uncertain terms and, after giving up all hopes of publishing has no idea what career he ought to pursue. The wife, who wanted a divorce, changes her mind and loses her chance to start a new life free from her shallow husband. The wife's brother learns he has no chance to gain his old job or his old lover back and faces professional ruin. The grandfather dies and is stuffed unceremoniously into the minibus trunk. And the little girl rather spectacularly loses the contest,

marking the resounding failure of this family's joint goal which underlay the entire road-trip.

But despite this range of failures, something remarkable happens in this film. In most stories when six main characters each and all lose in both their separate and their joint struggles to achieve external objectives, we are in a tragedy. Yet the ending of *Little Miss Sunshine* is very uplifting and positive. Why? Because while the six characters each and all fail to achieve their *external* goals, they each and all resolve their *internal* conflicts: they overcome their alienation and loneliness and unify as a family and help and find love in each other. Thanks to a confining, narrow unified and unifying space as imperfect as this family, the ancient cheerful VW van with its stuttering engine and its broken sliding door becomes the emblem of their growing and very empathetic communion: our compassionate empathy for each which has been growing in the first two acts now changes into communal empathy for all in the third act. And this is what matters to us: since these are fully-realized, vulnerable dramatic characters and not dispassionate characters, we care far more about their *internal* objectives and struggles than we do about their external objectives.<sup>2</sup>

## GENDER BIAS IN DISPASSIONATE AND DRAMATIC STORIES IN BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

As we noted above, dispassionate characters tend to be male while dramatic characters have a far less noticeable gender bias and, to judge from a quick glimpse of a few examples, this bias seems true even of children's media. *Jake and the Pirates* (Disney Junior 2011–) and *Inspector Gadget* (DIC 1989) both feature confident dispassionate male protagonists and are full of spectacular adventures. By contrast, a dramatic show like *Doc McStuffins* (Brown Bag 2012–) features a girl protagonist who is committed to an ethic of care and solves problems among her toy friends in her backyard. Similarly, the dramatic show *LEGO Friends* (LEGO 2012–), set in the ordinary life of a small town, features five main female characters who are drawn with enough depth and difference for the show's plots to be about learning to be honest with yourself and others, solving emotional problems among members of a group, and various other inner conflicts and issues of intimacy and trust.

## EMPATHY INVADES THE DISPASSIONATE STORY: RECENT CROSS-OVER PRESSURES

Before we move on to Dantean characters and their forms of empathetic space, it is worth taking a moment to consider a large cultural shift in Western films: in the last two decades many of our traditionally dispassionate stories have become inflected by dramatic characters and character arcs. For example, although superheroes have traditionally been dispassionate characters, they have increasingly become dramatic characters, ever since the cross-demographic financial success of Sam Raimi's *Spider Man* (2002). *Spider Man* accomplished this feat (and the resulting box-office success) by bringing a new level of emotional realism to the character's relationships to his parents and to his romantic lead.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Peter Parker's superhero persona and spectacular adventures aren't introduced until over an hour into Peter's story: in that first hour we learn that Peter is vulnerable, under-confident and always emotionally reaching out to his romantic hope, and then when he tries to do the right thing we see him inadvertently becoming responsible for his uncle's death, acquiring a crushing guilt that makes his later superhero struggles both empathetic and purgatorial. This newer narrative architecture has greatly changed the demographic appeal of certain superhero franchises, bringing in women and other groups that had tended to be largely uninterested in genres dominated by dispassionate characters.<sup>4</sup>

*Spiderman's* success was followed by the successful reinvention in 2004 of a dispassionate science fiction adventure show as a dramatic series. While staying within the mythological outlines of the old *Battlestar Galactica* (ABC 1978), the re-imagined 2004 series took place in a far more dramatic universe with many well-drawn relationships and emotional conflicts, becoming a six-year critical and commercial hit for the Sci-Fi channel.

In 2005, this change was further marked by the remarkable success of director Christopher Nolan's film *Batman Begins*, which put emotional vulnerability and a dramatic therapy arc at the very center of the superhero franchise. We discuss Nolan's film in depth in the next chapter.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most striking moment in this shift came in the shocking opening sequence of *SkyFall* (2012), the twenty-third film in the James Bond franchise, when Bond was accidentally shot by his partner, a woman agent. Shaky, unable to shoot straight, shorn of his usual swagger and confidence, a newly vulnerable Bond was created, a dramatic



character now gifted with inner conflicts, and for the first time in the franchise a Bond film became peppered with affecting dramatic scenes and even occasional flashes of Dantean space. Like Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot (see note 5), *Skyfall*'s director Sam Mendes bluntly stated that this film too was inspired by Nolan's reworking of Batman into a dramatic character.

We also see this sea-change on television in the Marvel superhero universe. *Jessica Jones* (2015–) is a superhero who is nonetheless a dramatic character, a lonely, bitter alcoholic wrestling with issues of intimacy and trust. Despite her physical invulnerability and her continual need to save others from the bad guys, every episode is also a drama unfolding around relationship problems. Similarly, the show's noir atmosphere is not only serving as a series of codified visual cues intended to trigger genre expectations: the dark city Jones inhabits is also a reflection of her own dramatically-grounded state of misery and depression.<sup>6</sup>

Two explanations seem plausible for this recent melding of aesthetic forms. One is the resulting expanded demographic: combining dispassionate franchises with dramatic protagonists can terrifically expand a film's audiences. But there are plausible social explanations for why dispassionate franchises have become increasingly dramatic in their form and execution. One is the historical trauma of 9/11, which by undercutting the myth of US invulnerability introduced new uncertainties into our collective imagination. Another turning-point was the economic crisis that began in 2008, which brought so much precarity to the everyday lives of ordinary people. It is perhaps no surprise that since the crisis started so many previously invulnerable heroes have become vulnerable and self-reflective: perhaps audiences living with a new and constant sense of precariousness may find such vulnerable dramatic superheroes easier to identify with than their older dispassionate counterparts.

Another effect of this recent change in form that many have observed is that high-quality, non-spectacular drama has been pushed off the big screen in the last two decades and has taken over cable television.<sup>7</sup> For all the accolades and critical successes of a *Spotlight*, it is today very hard in Hollywood to make a mid-range budget drama that doesn't contain many spectacular elements. Arguably partly this is because the dispassionate form has been corrupted so that spectacle can now express inner struggles.

A last wrinkle worth mentioning here is the success of the dispassionate and yet highly empathetic film *Wonder Woman* (2017), the most

recent product of the growing realization in the Hollywood studio culture that women now make up a much larger proportion of the ticket-paying audience in genre-demographics that had been conventionally understood as young and male. On one level *Wonder Woman* (2017) is a typical dispassionate film, but our enjoyment of it is also highly empathetic for two specific reasons that stand outside the film's dispassionate story-structure. First, many of us are thrilled to see a woman finally taking on the superhero struggles that are nearly always given to men in our story culture, and this feeling grows stronger if we watch little girls in the audience cheering. This makes us feel empathy on three levels: first, we see an underdog community being recognized and growing out of its oppressive, restricted circle. Second, we see innocent children in the audience being given positive role-models and a vision of a world where they too have a greater sense of self and equality. And third, in our adrenalytic enjoyment we also feel a deep approval of the ethical and pedagogical work of the filmmakers.

While taking place in a sense outside of the film's story frame, this rush of both compassionate and communal empathy is a central part of the design of *Wonder Woman*'s marketing campaign and of the film's planned and realized critical and audience reception: it is a mutual moral assent between filmmakers and audience, a clearly signaled promise of empathetic pleasure, announced and agreed upon largely in advance through the film's trailers, posters and reviews. These hooks are of course socially selective, pulling in people of certain social and political persuasion even as they fail to appeal to others. In other words, people of different political and social commitments are drawn to certain kinds of story participations that promise certain kinds of empathetic experiences.

This distinction between dispassionate and dramatic modes extends from story out into the culture at large. As both producers and audiences understand, a film's director often strongly signals what form of narrative space a film will have, and this signaling can reflect a gendered demographic following.<sup>8</sup> Though we deal only passingly with video games in this book, a similar distinction runs through that realm as well: though this is perhaps a gross oversimplification, FPS games often have a dispassionate story while many RPG games attempt to create a dramatic character with increased emotional investment from the player.

And so we make another assertion: this book argues that on some level these forms of dispassionate, dramatic and Dantean stories are not

only story forms but also frames of reception: that is, anthropological circles of empathetic reception within our fractured culture. These frames, with their power to direct empathy, gender and allegiances, are laced through our media and military economies. In media, empathy both is a tool of market share and a web for creating imagined communities (Anderson 1983, 2016) and so unpacking its machinery helps us deconstruct its increasingly prevalent commercial and political uses.

In that spirit we now move on to see how empathy functions in our *third* aesthetic form: the *Dantean* character who moves through the emotional miasma of *Dantean* space.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. In passing, we point out that our definition of dispassionate stories is different from the concept of escapist stories. To take children's literature for example, a dispassionate tale such as Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is largely based in reality, while a dramatic tale like *The Wind in the Willows* is in a magical land of animals who, however, are continually wrestling with their loneliness, their friendships, their pride and jealousies and self-doubts. Dispassionate characters can be involved in realistic stories and dramatic characters can power escapist fantasies: the different distinction we make here is about the presence of inner objectives. The boy hero of *Treasure Island* is dispassionate: resolutely shrugging off even the death of his own father, he has no discernible inner conflicts and simply must be resolute, brave and smart enough to defeat the pirates and get the treasure. By contrast, the adventures of Mole and Rat and Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* are dramatic: always emotionally conflicted and drawn with a level of emotional realism that belie the tale's fantastical elements. Moreover, these adventures are punctuated by dialogic character insights: the animals evince a remarkable empathetic astuteness about their own and each other's characters and limitations even as they show great concern for the roles of strong friendships and good neighbors. In other words, the distinctions we wish to draw are between external and internal conflicts and not between escapist and realistic stories.
2. Consider another example: the bare bones of the plot of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* can be described in a shallow but accurate way as a kind of dispassionate tale. In this version, three clever evil witches meet a moderately successful and contented man who has just won the great favor of his king. They then fool him into both committing evil and engineering his own destruction: they make prophecies that seem to predict his grand success as

king but which, just as he acts on them, each in turn then twists like an eel to correctly predict his, his wife's and his kingship's downfall.

If this was the core of the tale, if Macbeth's story was simply about how an unlucky king duels with clever witches, the play would be simply a dispassionate tale with fantasy elements. However, Shakespeare's tragedy is so unsettling and so memorable because, though it features some spectacular elements such as the witches, the ghosts and the battles, and some logical puzzles like the prophecies, it is largely dramatic in the sense we are arguing for. Macbeth himself is a dramatic character with fierce inner struggles: he first struggles to be a good vassal while trying to keep his ambitious wife's respect, then he wrestles with the conflict between loyalty and personal ambition, then he must watch helplessly as his clever wife and co-conspirator drifts off into madness just when he truly needs her most, and finally when she commits suicide he must deal with his resulting grief and guilt and finally find his own inner strength and resolve.

These personal struggles transform Macbeth's external problems, which by themselves might otherwise be just as otherworldly to us as those of Thor's mythologic kingdom, into dramatic situations. It is exactly Macbeth's particular relationship issues with Lady Macbeth and his inner struggles over gaining and holding power (struggles one might find in the corporate world, in a military career, a boy scout troop or even an academic senate) that makes his settings feel vivid and alive. These inner struggles make us pay attention to every nuance of every moment of the characters' lives.

In other words, the two forms do mix: dramas can use the elements of dispassionate stories, but the core distinction is over the nature of the character at the heart of the story because that nature determines the uses of spectacle. Moreover, because we are given access to Macbeth's intimate fears, his indecisions and his ghosts (all dangerous for a king to reveal), and then witness his loss of his wife, we feel compassionate empathy for him. Without this window on his intimate conflicts we would find it hard and unpleasant to watch a monster engaged in murder and then plunging a kingdom into blood and war. Thanks to vulnerable moments like his marvelous speech about indecision (in Act 1, scene 7, where he stands "upon this bank and shoal of time" trying to decide whether or not to kill the king), his battles become *dramatic* ones, struggles with problems we can all recognize and that are in no way the sole province of steadfast superheroes and fearless kings.

Note now that nearly everything we have said about Macbeth can also be applied to the protagonist of the TV show *House of Cards*.

3. The famous upside-down kiss in the film became iconic because it unfolds within a clear romantic drama and because Peter is a sympathetic character

with real vulnerabilities and losses; he is an under-confident outsider who has been bullied, who then loses his father through an accident he caused (see empathy tactic 1 in our list of empathy tactics in Chap. 1). He also completes his character arc not simply by saving the world but also by sacrificing his love for Mary Jane, his romantic interest, out of care for her (empathy tactic 10).

4. To see this demographic shift, see for example <http://time.com/49440/box-office-reports/> also <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-woes-age-gender-718812>.
5. Another landmark in this shift was the 2009 ‘reboot’ of the *Star Trek* franchise by J.J. Abrams, itself powered by Paramount executives who were impressed at Nolan’s efforts and wanted a similar treatment of another classic and typically male-oriented franchise (<https://www.pressreader.com/usa/los-angeles-times/20090504/281990373470874>, accessed May 1, 2017). Though the original TV series anchored by Captain Kirk and the subsequent film franchise was clearly dispassionate in nature and audience, Abrams’ blockbuster film challenged all this from its starting moments. Opening with a giant space opera set-piece, its fierce, spectacular space battle soon twists surprisingly into a tearjerker, which ends when Kirk’s father sacrifices himself and his starship to save Kirk’s mother just as she gives birth to baby Kirk. For traditional *Star Trek* fans this empathetic melodrama between Kirk’s father and mother—a new origin story which managed to be operatically emotional, serious, exhilarating and ridiculous all at once—announced that the franchise will now feature a much more dramatic Kirk. This protagonist, having grown up fatherless and out of control, is both more spontaneous, more antisocial and more damaged than the original Kirk and so must spend more time navigating social relationships. Spock too is far more dramatic: burdened with a heavy grief missing from the original series, fiercely bullied as a child for being half-human, he self-exiles himself from Vulcan society, and then is unable to save his own mother who dies in front of him as his entire planet is murdered. As a result he has a moving emotional breakdown and must relinquish command of the Enterprise to Kirk. This new franchise also often features issues of emotional turmoil and self-examination among the crew, playing dramatic chords never seen before in the earlier Kirk-based series or films.

A similar dramatic fate has befallen Sherlock Holmes. Unlike most of the 200+ films made in the traditional dispassionate vein of Conan Doyle’s original stories, the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010–2017) has repeatedly put the bonds between Holmes and Watson and of Holmes and his brother Mycroft into emotional crisis. The intent of this humanisation of Holmes, who originally never strayed from the emotions of a sociopath (and the

many empathetic scenes this choice then made possible) has expanded the audience considerably beyond that of children's literature and mystery buffs.

Even US military recruitment advertisements have recently shifted to some degree from the dispassionate mode to incorporate dramatic story lines. Take a traditional type of recruitment video like the 2014 video to "Apotheosis" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFOilBZvfeA>, accessed May 1, 2017) or the 2017 commercial "241 Years of Battles Won" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiDvqdY7Edg>, accessed May 1, 2017). In their mix of impervious, invulnerable men saving the country, placeless emotional music and adrenalytic spectacle and editing both are in many ways indistinguishable from a dispassionate summer blockbuster. Now compare that to the character arc from fear to fearlessness of "Leap," the 2008 Marines video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwaskivJrZE>, accessed May 1, 2017).

6. See for example producer Richard Gladstein interviewed by Collider: <http://collider.com/producer-richard-n-gladstein-the-hateful-eight-pulp-fiction-interview/>, accessed May 1, 2017.
7. This is not a work of Dante scholarship but rather sees his work through the lens of later narrative craft. While some Dante texts are mentioned in the bibliography, my own favourite is a website edited by and with an extensive and thoughtful commentary by the scholar Teodolinda Barolini. <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/>, accessed May 1, 2017.
8. For example, Michael Bay is a consummate dispassionate director while Lisa Cholodenko is among Hollywood's finest dramatic directors. It is unlikely that they would be in competition for the same project simply because each works for a very different audience, with different forms of story and with very different gender conceptions. One expression of this is that Bay simply does not craft inner dramas and specializes in creating a certain Manichean moral universe ruled by spectacular battles of force. By contrast, Cholodenko does not portray characters driven purely by external objectives, nor does she make simple moral distinctions, nor does she depend on music to inform us of emotions, nor does she execute large spectacular displays with complex soundscapes that mix hundreds of tracks. If Cholodenko were to tackle these technical aspects of big-budget spectacle, the resulting spectacle would almost certainly be an expression of the inner emotional conflict of her well-drawn characters as they wrestle with questions of how to better care for, communicate with and relate to each other. As a result, each director's following shares a kind of reception that distinguishes it as a culture of sorts: Bay's is a dispassionate culture and Cholodenko's is a dramatic one, which is to say that each following has a different relationship to empathy, cinema pleasure, morality and to

community ingeneral. We will speak more about dispassionate, dramatic and Danteancommunities in Part III.

9. Dedicated to Thom Mount for all the adventure.

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