

Hero

Etymology (word origin; word source):

Coined in English 1387, the word hero comes from the Greek "ἥρως" (hērōs), "hero, warrior", literally "protector" or "defender", the postulated original forms of these words being *ἥρῳς, hērōs, and *H₂r̥wā, Hērwā, respectively. It is also thought to be a cognate of the Latin verb *servo* (original meaning: to preserve whole) and of the Avestan verb *haurvaiti* (to keep vigil over), although the original Proto-Indo-European root is unclear.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the Indo-European root is **ser* meaning "to protect". According to Eric Partridge in *Origins*, the Greek word Hērōs "is akin to" the Latin *seruāre*, meaning to safeguard. Partridge concludes, "The basic sense of both Hera and hero would therefore be 'protector'."

The Modern Fictional Hero:

The word "hero" or "heroine" is sometimes used simply to describe the protagonist of a story, or the love interest, a usage which can conflict with the superhuman expectations of heroism. William Makepeace Thackeray gave *Vanity Fair* the subtitle *A Novel without a Hero*. The larger-than-life hero is a more common feature of fantasy (particularly sword and sorcery and epic fantasy) than more realist works.

In modern movies, the hero is often simply an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, who, despite the odds being stacked against him or her, typically prevails in the end. In some movies (especially action movies), a hero may exhibit characteristics such as superhuman strength and endurance to the point of the hero being nearly invincible. Often a hero in these situations has a foil, the villain, typically a charismatic evildoer who represents, leads, or embodies the struggle the hero is up against. Post-modern fictional works have encouraged the increased popularity of the antihero, who does not follow common conceptions of heroism. Examples of modern heroes are Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen, Percy Jackson, Bilbo Baggins, Luke Skywalker, and Superman.

Villain

Etymology (word origin; word source):

A villain (also known in film and literature as the "antagonist," "baddie", "bad guy", or "black hat") is an "evil" character in a story, whether a historical narrative or, especially, a work of fiction. The villain usually is the antagonist (though can be the protagonist), the character who tends to have a negative effect on other characters. A female villain is sometimes called a villainess (often to differentiate her from a male villain).

Think of the word villain and you may imagine criminals, pickpockets or fraudsters. But the association of the word with crime is relatively new. In fact the word originally referred to a particular class of people on the lower levels of feudal society.

The word derives from the Latin *villanus*, meaning 'one attached to a villa or farmhouse'. *Villanus* moved into the English language in two forms: *villain* defined by the OED as 'a low-born, base-minded rustic' (from c.1303), and *villein* 'one of the class of serfs in the feudal system'. Over a few hundred years the word comes to signify illegal activities. This is a classic case of social and political forces shifting the meaning of a word. It is very common indeed for the rich and powerful to influence the language in this way, although it must not be forgotten that subcultures and subversives throughout history have also played an essential part in influencing language change, as any dictionary of slang will reveal.