

Anti-Heroes, Defined¹

There's something comforting about a purely heroic protagonist, like Superman, who always does the right thing for the right reasons. But there's something we find *compelling* about a morally "gray" or ambivalent protagonist – like Hans Solo in *A New Hope* – who only *usually* does the right thing, and only *usually (or eventually)* for the right reasons.

Let's dig a little deeper into what an anti-hero is, and why they've become so prevalent in stories.

Anti-heroes (or AHs) do the right thing, but maybe not for the right reasons — and they lack at least a few of the characteristics we've come to expect of traditional heroes.

Four Types of Anti-Heroes

Not all antiheroes are created equally. In fact, there's a sliding scale of these morally ambiguous protagonists. Unsurprisingly, the first type is...

1. The Classic Anti-Hero

Typical qualities of a fictional hero include confidence, bravery, stoicism, intelligence, handsome looks, and superb fighting capabilities. The Classic Anti-Hero is the inverse of some of these things: self-doubting, fearful, anxious, and lacking in combat skills. In general, the character arc of these AHs follow them overcoming their "weaknesses" to vanquish the enemy.

These AHs are not necessarily on the grayscale of morality; they simply defy readers' preconceived notions of heroes and heroism.



Figure 2. Bilbo eyeing up Smaug in *The Hobbit* (image: Warner Bros. Pictures)

EXAMPLE: Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit*

The "Anti" — Bilbo hates adventures and loves his hole in the ground full of creature comfort; he's really just an "average guy." When he is offered the job of "burglar" by a party of dwarves on a mission to reclaim their stolen treasure from the dragon Smaug, he politely declines, thinking they couldn't have approached a more ill-suited person.

The "Hero" — We all know how this infamous hero's journey turns out. Bilbo joins the dwarves and, while he gets off to a bumpy start (he forgets his

HANDKERCHIEF!), the arduous journey allows him to discover his inner courage. From taking



Figure 1. *Sherlock will solve your case – but only if it suits him.*

DEFINITION: An **anti-hero** is a type of character who lacks the qualities of a traditional hero, such as physical strength and stature, *morality, or interest in "playing by the rules."* Anti-heroes are not the villains of the story, however, because **there are good reasons to cheer for them**, despite their complex motivations and questionable actions.

In addition to Sherlock, *examples* include Megamind and Bilbo Baggins.

¹ Original: <https://blog.reedsy.com/anti-hero>; revised for class by Joseph Sigalas

down trolls to stealing precious stones from dragons, the hobbit leaves the story more self-assured than he entered it.

2. The Knight in "Sour Armor"

In terms of morality, these heroes are pretty good. They know right from wrong, but are typically very cynical and don't feel that they can make a difference in the grand scheme of things. Otherwise known as a "reluctant hero," they don't feel any urgency to join the fight against the villain and are really more concerned with doing their own thing.

The Knight in Sour Armor *will* eventually join the fight, but only when they feel they personally have something at stake in the outcome.



Figure 3. Han Solo doesn't care about your problems (image: 20th Century Fox)

EXAMPLE: Han Solo in *A New Hope*

The "Anti" — At the start of the Star Wars franchise, Han is a mercenary primarily motivated by personal wealth. He only agrees to help free the captive Princess Leia because Luke Skywalker promises him a huge reward. Thinking the Rebel Alliance is doomed, Han refuses to stay and help in the fight against the Death Star.

The "Hero" — After leaving, Han has a change of heart and returns during the climactic Battle of Yavin, just in time to make Darth Vader say "could you *not*?" His return ultimately allows Luke to safely destroy the Death Star.

3. The Pragmatic Anti-Hero

Now we're starting to wade a little deeper into the gray area. In a nutshell, Pragmatic Anti-Heroes are a slightly darker version of the Knight in Sour Armor. They're both self-centered to a degree and reluctant to accept the role of hero. But while the Knight in Sour Armor is typically slow to step into battle, the Pragmatic Anti-Hero is more ready to spring into action if he or she sees wrongdoings. The key difference is that Pragmatic AHs are *also* willing to do some not-so-good things in order to achieve their goals.



Figure 4. Edmund pondering if he would trade his siblings for Turkish Delights (image: Buena Vista Pictures)

EXAMPLE: Edmund Pevensie from *The Chronicles of Narnia*

The "Anti" — Each of the Pevensie children receives a name in Narnia, and Edmund's is "Edmund the Just." This is fitting, as Edmund is extremely pragmatic and believes people get what they deserve. In this way, he can be unsympathetic and unwilling to show mercy.

For instance, when his older brother "Peter the Great" battles the antagonist Miraz, Peter aims to disarm Miraz but not to harm him. Edmund, on the other hand, encourages Peter to kill Miraz and be done with it. Edmund also displays a need to prove himself and to come out from under his brother's shadow — qualities that stray from a traditional hero.

The "Hero" — Edmund behaves selfishly and even betrays his siblings, but he is young and still maturing. When push comes to shove and he realizes his siblings are under threat, he

ultimately steps up to the plate and helps defeat the White Witch — and commits further heroic acts throughout the series.

4. The Unscrupulous Anti-Hero

Intentions and motives are still good here, but we've waded into some seriously murky waters in terms of actions. The Unscrupulous AH is extremely cynical, and his or her drive to do good is often skewed by past traumas and a thirst for vengeance. Unscrupulous AHs generally take down a despicable villain — someone who "had it coming" — but instead of bringing this person to justice with as little violence or damage as possible, Unscrupulous AHs can become vicious, sometimes even enjoying the acts of destruction they've deemed "necessary."



Figure 5. *Conan the Unscrupulous* (image: Western International Syndication)

EXAMPLE: Conan the Barbarian

The "Anti" — Conan has no qualms about resorting to violence or petty crime: theft, assassination, mercenary work, piracy — it's all in a day's work. A fun day's work, that is.

The "Hero" — Conan often partakes in the above activities in his quest for power, riches, or just survival. However, his questionable deeds often lead him to achieve heroic feats. If he feels someone

has been treated poorly (especially if societal conventions as unfairly weighted against them), he will seek out justice without question or pay.

The above four types of characters present a sliding scale of the AH, and the chances that the AH will reform into a regular, morally good hero diminish significantly as you go up the scale

More Anti-Hero Examples

Here are a few more examples of AHs.

Sherlock Holmes from Sherlock

The "Anti" — Sherlock is a genius — or "high-functioning sociopath," as he's presented in the recent BBC version — and he gets bored easily. Solving crimes gives him something to do with his superior intellect. While Holmes might appreciate the fact that his work allows justice to be served, he's largely motivated by the novelty and challenge of cracking cases.

The "Hero" — At the end of the day, Sherlock helps fight crime. Whether or not he's doing it for selfless reasons, he has still dedicated his life to stopping criminals, and he does this using noble means. Different depictions of Sherlock also portray his sympathetic side to varying degrees — some allowing audiences to glimpse emotional connections between Sherlock and the crime he solves.

Example #2: Michael Scott from The Office

"I'm not going to tell them about the downsizing. If a patient has cancer, you don't tell them."

The "Anti" — Michael makes the lives of his employees at Dunder-Mifflin paper company very hard sometimes. He's constantly distracting them with his need for attention and validation, and he ends up making some very questionable decisions that can harm others

in his need to come across as a hero — you could even classify his need to be liked as a [tragic hero's fatal flaw](#). Oh, and let's not forget about the way he treats poor Toby.

The "Hero" — While Michael can be incredibly selfish, unaware of how his decisions negatively affect his coworkers, and downright rude, he has a good heart and loves (most of) the people who work for him. In the face of major downsizing, he fights for his branch and the job security of the people who work there. Michael has shining moments of kindness (such as the bird funeral), and viewers root for him — and pray for his continuing self-improvement.

Example #3: Megamind from Megamind

The "Anti" — A number of things put the "anti" in Megamind's label as "anti-hero": he's power crazy, self-centered, and an extortionist, to name a few. He is the greatest mind in the crime world.

The "Hero" — Things like his affection for his sidekick, Minion, his attempts to woo Roxanne, and his moments of loneliness and failure let viewers glimpse Megamind's vulnerable side. What solidifies his status as an anti-hero, however, is the fact that his newest enemy, Hal/Tighten, is even more evil and sinister than he is.

Once you know what an anti-hero is, there is no shortage of opportunities to spot them.