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The Role of a Hero: Forms of Heroes in
Joe Abercrombie's *The Heroes*

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Abstract

This essay examines the portrayal of heroes in Joe Abercrombie's fantasy novel *The Heroes* by using theories of Ibrahim Taha and Northrop Frye.

To begin with, the essay employs Taha's theory of the "semi-hero" in fiction, which is a response to the notions of the classical hero and the antihero. The semi-hero, as a compromise between these two, is perceived as both positive and negative, and can fluctuate between the two opposites. In order to analyze several significant characters, the essay also employs Frye's five different modes of the heroic figure: superior, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic, which are ranked according to the power of action and how they are elevated by other characters. This is used to better show how the characters come from similar literary origins as classical heroes, and to show how they divert from those origins.

The analysis reveals that Abercrombie's hero is perceived as a "role" to play throughout the novel. A hero is not something one is. For younger characters, it is simply an image utilized for different reasons. For the older, playing the part of a hero during a war is simply an excuse for violence and a figurehead for masculinity (no matter if the intent was altruistic or not). Abercrombie lets his characters fail and succeed in their given missions, which leads to them being stuck in the middle ground between being a hero and anti-hero.

The essay concludes that Abercrombie's *The Heroes* is an attempt to tailor a new hero archetype, thus engaging in the development of the fantasy genre as such.

Keywords: Joe Abercrombie; *The Heroes*; hero; antihero; semi-hero; Ibrahim Taha; Northrop Frye

All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander
are lost.

- J. R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

A “Hero,” as defined by Gerald Prince’s *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), is the protagonist of a story, who usually represents positive values such as courage and selflessness. The fantasy genre has very much relied on this positive image of the heroic figure. From the fellowship in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* to the wizards of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, heroes abound. Many of these heroic figures are good at their core, but sometimes they struggle with inner and outer turmoil to maintain this goodness. Yet, they always come through in the end. All heroes are not equal, however: some can be classified as demigods while others are average Joes who accept a challenge that fate presents and often acts with bravado and success.

This essay will look at Joe Abercrombie’s novel *The Heroes*, set during a time of war between the North (a land of disparate tribes with a culture akin to those of the Vikings or Celts) and the Union (a more developed aristocratic society akin to renaissance France or England). The plot takes place over the course of a week, during which the different sides fight over the titular Heroes, a hill of stone statues used for strategic value. The focus of the narrative lies on how the different characters on both sides experience the war. As soon as the prologue starts, it is clear that this is not a story about the selfless hero battling evil, as Abercrombie starts the novel with a quote from Bertolt Brecht: “Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.” The quote hints at the overarching theme of the book: heroes are not always what they seem. The characters themselves reflect this, in that they are driven by their own agendas and motivations, which are often more selfish than selfless. At first glance one might sooner call them anti-heroes than classical heroes and yet the narrative does not seem to allow for this simple dichotomy. This paper will argue that Abercrombie’s characters fit what Ibrahim Taha

calls the “semi-hero.” The essay will analyze the semi-hero characters by connecting them to and showing how they have evolved from the five heroic models established by Northrop Frye.

In his “Heroism in Literature: A Semiotic Model,” Taha first defines the difference between the hero and the anti-hero, arguing that it depends on whether or not a character’s success or failure to accomplish a goal can be said to be perceived in a positive or negative light (2002, 8). For example, if a hero sets out to change their village without disrupting the order of things, this would be positively received (2002, 3). They are more interested in improvement rather than uprooting what once was. The hero is, therefore, a reflection of their society, mirroring its viewpoints, and tries to only improve it (O’Faolain 1971, 40-44). The anti-hero, however, wants to bring what they perceive to be positive change, regardless if the village deems that action to be negative, creating a conflict between the two. Anti-heroes often lack traits like bravery, idealism, or morality in comparison to the traditional hero (Prince 1987, 6). Both want to bring about a change for good but act according to what society deems to be either good or bad, thus succeeding or failing in being perceived positively. Taha then argues that there is room for a third type of the hero since success or failure, in this regard, is more abstract and subjective rather than fixed and absolute (2002, 9). He uses the notion of the “semi-hero” to label a character who drifts between hero or anti-hero. The semi-hero can both fail and succeed at being perceived in a positive light to themselves, others, and the reader, depending on what their actions are during the story. Therefore, this new category can be perceived as more complex in a narrative, dabbling in areas of grey instead of black and white (2002, 10).

Semi-heroic characters have become more common, and are practically preferred, in the Fantasy genre, as for instance the characters in the famous series by George R.R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Authors such as Martin do not criticize the work of Tolkien and Le Guin for their classical heroic characters; instead, they offer their own tributes to the archetypes that the former created, thus deviating from the traditional versions (Carroll 2015, 60). Abercrombie continues this evolution by questioning the very image of a hero and what role they can take in a narrative. The characters do share similarities with other classical heroes, especially in what moulds they have grown from but diverting in the path they take in the story. Abercrombie’s characters are not new forms of heroes; they are simply evolutions of the modes established by Northrop Frye.

Frye divides the heroic figure into five separate modes, or rather five types of heroes according to the criteria of power or perceived power. The hero is considered to be lesser, greater or equal to an average person (1973, 33-4):

- The *superior hero* is a figure of myth. In some cases, the superior hero becomes something akin to a god or other divine being, prime examples being the Pantheon of Roman Gods and Gandalf the Grey in *The Lord of the Rings*.
- The *romantic heroes* are figures of legend or folktale and are slightly superior but still regarded as a human, like Beowulf or Achilles.
- *High mimetic heroes* are regarded as human and are only superior in their authority, leadership, or powers of expressions. They are often leaders to others and are the most common sort of figures which Aristotle, for example, had in mind in *Poetics* (335 BC). Examples of this are Aragorn, King Lear, and Oedipus.
- *Low mimetic heroes* are everyday people who leave their ordinary lives for a higher purpose, such as Bilbo Baggins and Harry Potter. They are perceived to be of lesser, or equal, in power (be it social or literal power) to other people in their surroundings, and readers may respond to their common humanity.
- The *ironic hero* is a hero that is regarded as being lesser than the common man or possessing traits that do not fall in line with the previous modes of heroes. The *ironic hero* does not seek the same goals as other forms of heroes, and instead are considered heroes loosely. They can sometimes be likened to an anti-hero, a protagonist who is characterized by negative, or at least unconventional, traits that differ from the traditional hero (Prince 1987). Ironic heroes dominated comedy for many years but in time the term came to represent figures like Randall Flagg (Stephen King's *The Dark Tower*) or Geralt of Rivia (the Netflix TV series *The Witcher*).

This essay aims to show that Abercrombie employs these types with which the readers of fantasy genre should be familiar, but he makes them drift between the hero and anti-hero types. Thus, they become fresh new takes on heroes in the fantasy genre that correspond with Taha's semi-hero.

In terms of thesis structure, the essay will employ Frye's modes. Using five characters from the novel, the paper will examine how they fit into each mode while analyzing them with Taha's distinctions between hero, antihero, and semi-hero in mind. The essay will thus show how Abercrombie's characters are built on the tropes of fantasy heroes and how they show a particular development in the genre. The aim is to show that the semi-hero can be found in the *romantic*, *high mimetic*, *low-mimetic* and *ironic* hero categories in *The Heroes*. The *superior hero* is excluded from the analysis, due to there being no leading character that would be considered fit to inhabit this role.

The Romantic Hero: the case of Curnden Craw and Whirrun of Bligh

The residents of the North are made up of many different clans or groups of warriors. Among these warriors are the Named Men, who are individuals that have earned a Name, a form of title which serves as a reward for their deeds in war or battle, but sometimes a Name can be ironic in nature. These warriors are often called heroes, worthy of remembrance in the form of songs, a tradition that bears a resemblance to the poetic Eddas of the Vikings. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two other real-world examples of this tradition (Weiner 2017, 5). High mimetic figures, such as Beowulf and Sigurd, could be likened to figures like Skarling Hoodless, who united the North in the war against the Union, or The Bloody-Nine who was known to be the greatest and most feared hero in the North of the current age. This duality of being a hero while at the same time inspiring fear proves to be a common motif in *The Heroes*.

This notion is most at play with characters like Curnden Craw and Whirrun of Bligh. Craw, by the time of the novel's start, is already a famed Named Man. He has won battles, earned a Name and is talked about with reverence by other Northmen. Craw leads his dozen Named Men against the Union for most of the novel and is tasked with holding the Heroes, the location, by the current king of the Northmen, Black Dow. This already lies in contrast to the typical fantasy hero where they do not start off the story as heroes but need to become one (Lima. 2017, 12). Something that falls more into the goal of low mimetic heroes but is not needed for the romance hero types.

Craw is described by many other characters as being straight edge (Abercrombie 2011, 411) in that he is known to be fighting honestly and overall trying to do the *right* thing. The right thing, as Craw describes it, means standing by your fellow man, doing your duty to your chief and being true to yourself (Abercrombie 2011, 357). At first sight, Craw seems to be what Taha describes as a classical hero who places his commitment to his society above himself (2002, 3). Craw, however, is quite cynical towards being a hero, in that he is tired and burned out. When he was younger, Craw had a hunger to make a Name for himself, but with age that sense of assuredness in his abilities and role in society faltered. Despite this, he tries to emphasize loyalty and remaining on the path that he deems the right one. Craw's motivation is simple: to serve and obey his chief while standing by his dozen men. Alexander Welsh describes this trait, putting the values of his superiors or society above his own, as a defining characteristic of the classical hero (1992, 147) which Craw seems to possess even to a fault.

During the story, most of the emotion comes from Crow talking to his fellow companions in between battles, where they are constantly butting heads over what to do (Polack 2015, 86). Crow's view of heroism becomes clear during these conversations: he sees little glory in hero's work or the *black business* as they call it. Crow sees the appeal and importance of keeping up the image of a hero. He refers to himself as having a coward's gut but having a hero's voice when it matters (Abercrombie 2011, 429), and he often tries to avoid bloodshed, fearing that someone will try to play the hero. It is a recurring theme in *The Heroes*, that even the greatest of warriors must play the part to save face.

The reader can feel some sort of contempt coming from Crow, in that every time he talks about the topic he often winces and scoffs, finding himself embarrassed when he tries to embellish the deeds of another. Among his dozen, we find Whirrun of Bligh, a living legend to many of the Northmen. While Crow might lean slightly more to the high mimetic hero, Whirrun is Abercrombie's proper version of the *romance hero*: a warrior whose deeds are fit for folktales and songs (Frye 1973, 33). Much like other romance heroes, such as Beowulf or Batman, they are considered almost divine by others, but the narrative makes it clear that they are of mortal make (Rollin 1970, 435). Whirrun is a strange character with stranger ways. He has a penchant for making dramatic entrances while carrying the Father of Swords, an oversized blade that has been passed on from hero to hero, his combat skills are unrivalled among the Northmen, and is driven by prophecy.

The idea of prophecy is common in Fantasy novels, and in recent years this motif has become more diverse: Martin uses them as self-fulfilling prophecies often misinterpreted or manipulated to suit one's own needs, and Robert Jordan (*Wheel of Time*) plays with the idea of the prophesied hero failing his duties. Eduardo Lima states in *The Once and Future Hero: Understanding the Hero in Quest Fantasy* that this more diverse motif has been an ever-growing presence of fantasy due to wanting to break the mould of prophecies deciding a hero's fate (2017, 13). Abercrombie has a more whimsical idea of prophecy in its content regarding Whirrun: a witch once told him that he would be shown his destiny by a man choking on a chicken bone, which happens to be Crow, along with where and when he is supposed to die. Seemingly knowing this gives Whirrun confidence in himself and leads him to discard more and more armour as the days go on. Even more than Crow, there are already songs and tales being spun around the strange warrior's deeds. Whirrun does not seem to care much for being called a hero but plays around with the idea for his own amusement.

During their many conversations, the Dozen tell the younger members that being a hero is simple: everybody wants a piece of you. Legends like Skarling Hoodless have fifty rivers

named after him even if he never came near them; in fifty years they speculate there will be just as many rivers named after Whirrun (Abercrombie 2011, 94). While Craw and Whirrun have the will to play the part of living heroes, Abercrombie shows the reader that according to them, being a hero is not based on conventional methods. “What makes a man a hero?” [Craw] asked the wet air. ‘Big deeds? Big name? Tall glory and tall songs? No. Standing by your crew, I reckon.’ Whirrun grunted in agreement.” (Abercrombie 2011, 260). This group believes that a hero is someone who stays true to their friends even if they do not achieve anything grand or glorious.

When the younger members wonder why the veterans dislike the glorious stories and songs about their deeds, Craw reflects that “‘There’s two sides to every coin, but there’s my very point. People like simple stories.’ Craw frowned at the pink marks down the edges of his nails. ‘But people ain’t simple.’” (Abercrombie 2011, 95). This is the idea that Abercrombie tries to convey through these conversations: the younger generations often idolize their heroes. One year, a person is considered a hero, and the next they are a villain, but it is never that easy in the end. Even Craw is guilty of glorification, as he often talks about the way things were back in the old days, when things were simpler and more honest, but as other characters point out, the old days were just like the new days (Abercrombie 2011, 571). Craw’s focus lies on the legacy of a name, in that the Name itself is not important but what people associate with it when they hear it. As Whirrun states, “A name’s got nothing in by itself. It’s what you make of it. Men don’t brown their trousers when they hear the Bloody-Nine because of the name. They brown their trousers because of the man that had it.” (Abercrombie 2011, 417). Implying that a hero’s Name can be considered a curse as much as a blessing, the Bloody-Nine is uttered in fear more than reverence throughout the novel while the chief antagonist to the Union, Black Dow, finds himself without friends. That is the harvest of a lifetime in the black business, Craw reasons regarding his chief. The business of war and killing, he bitterly argues, is what a hero is good at (Abercrombie 2011, 323).

When going through battlefields, Craw winces at the fallen “heroes” and the corpses having a hero’s smell. Death could perhaps be one of the legacies that a hero leaves behind. This falls in line with the rise of the semi-hero, who came into being due to the legacy of death after the World Wars (Lima 2017, 12). Many of the characters seem to find themselves pondering the cost of war, the legacy of death, and the meaning behind heroes. According to Craw and his dozen, a hero is either heartless or mad, while Whirrun says that he tries to bridge the gap between the two, much to Craw’s amusement, separating being a hero from being good in the context of a war.

Eventually, during the last climactic battle, Whirrun loses his life even though the prophecy had told him otherwise. In his final moments, the dying Whirrun states that this is one of the two fates of a hero: to die in battle or live long enough to not be worth remembering. Whirrun returns to the mud, a hero as remembered by his friends.

Much to Craw's dismay, he quickly notices that songs about Whirrun are already being replaced with songs of other newly made heroes (Abercrombie 2011, 510) showing how quickly heroes are replaced. The outcome of these two characters is one dying and the other retiring for good from the hero's business. Craw returns home and tries to become a carpenter, but in a bitter but ironic twist, he is called back with an offer to fight once more. Not feeling any satisfaction with his carpentry, Curnden Craw returns to the fold. The black business is the only legacy that he can leave behind when he himself finally returns to the mud.

High mimetic Hero: the case of Bremer dan Gorst

The *high mimetic* hero is a common archetype, as Frye argues, and we can add that it is often found in fantasy (Frye 1973, 34). They are often portrayed as figures of authority, objects of admiration, and many times leaders for a group of individuals. They often have the characteristic that can be likened to what Tolkien refers to as "Northern Courage" (Carretero-González 2015, 42), in that they can inspire others and face danger no matter the odds.

Abercrombie's take on this type of character comes in the form of Bremer dan Gorst, former King's First, a title for the personal guard to the king of the union, and now a royal observer of the Northern Campaign. Gorst is a fierce fighter, unrivalled by anyone in the Union Army. A distinguished fighter, he can quickly turn the tide of a battle through sheer ferocity and battle lust. Quiet and stoic, Gorst gives the appearance of being the epitome of the classical high mimetic hero. But looks can deceive in many ways: the colonel is something of a laughingstock, in part due to his high, piping voice, which is contrasted to his bull-like appearance, but also to the fact that Bremer is somewhat of a disgrace. A few years before the events of the novel, his blunder had almost caused the death of the king, and to redeem himself he is sent to the North to observe the campaign and help defeat the Northmen. In this, Gorst falls in line with what Gerald Prince would call the classical hero's mission in defeating evil in pursuit of peace and justice (1987, 40).

This is where Gorst diverts the most when it comes to the fantasy hero and what sends him into the grey territory of the semi-hero: namely his motivation for why he fights with such ferocity. Gorst's motivations are very selfish, mainly shown through his inner monologues,

which reflect his actual feelings towards the other officers, the war, and his desire for noblewoman Finree dan Brock. In stark contrast to his stoic exterior, Gorst can be quite vulgar and harsh in his reflections, all the while being quite self-critical. He rarely vocalizes these thoughts, in part due to his unusual voice but also due to Gorst knowing that his thoughts are “wrong.” An example is when he is talking to one of the leading generals. “*Perhaps it will also have saved my career. Your division can all drown if I can be the King’s First Guard again. ‘My motives were not selfless.’*” (Abercrombie 2011, 208, italics in original). Gillian Polack refers to Abercrombie using these inner monologues, not only to let Gorst have an internal development but also to widen the overall feel of the story but not the emotions that come with it (2015, 86). One can however argue that Gorst does actually widen the emotions by embodying traits that most of the other characters lack, such as ferocity and battle lust. The emotions in the book are not singular, but multifaceted just like the characters themselves.

Gorst’s ferocity is shown clearly in the different battles that he participates in, where he takes many lives from the Northmen. When he returns from these battles, Gorst is often described as a hero by officers and footmen alike. When applauded, Gorst feels embarrassed and uncomfortable at the idea of being labeled a hero due to being very self-critical. He does, however, put a lot of weight in the image of a hero. When writing letters to the King, he often refers to the other soldiers as being heroes and fighting bravely, when in truth he cares little for them and feels that the war is a waste of resources and lives (Abercrombie 2011, 271). Gorst does use the idea of a hero to help elevate others in the King’s eyes, even if he himself does not really believe in it. After Gorst conquers a hill on his own, killing fifteen men in the process, he is called the king’s last hero by a fellow officer. He finds himself smiling at the praise but at the same time feeling appalled, due to him being no better than a glorified killer. “*The king’s last hero? I want to be fucking sick*” (Abercrombie 2011, 380, italics in the original). The interior monologue shows his disgust at the very idea of him being called a hero.

On many occasions, Gorst finds himself reflecting on the nature of his line of work. What truly sets him apart from a convicted killer? “*...I made myself guilty of mass murder so I could be proclaimed innocent of incompetence. Sometimes they hang men for this type of thing, and sometimes they applaud*” (Abercrombie 2011, 231, italics in the original). This gives credence once again to Abercrombie’s theme of war-time heroes being a part that you play or a symbol for violence and masculinity. Despite these thoughts, Gorst does not struggle against the culture that society has created surrounding his profession. Therefore, Gorst cannot be slotted solely into the anti-hero category. Taha describes the anti-hero as an individual that cannot adapt to society’s values, which is portrayed negatively in the novel, and tries to bring

change by fighting it (2002, 4). This does not apply to Gorst. While he *is* critical of the norm of glorifying killers as heroes in war, he does not seek to change it. Instead, he revels in it. Gorst can be quite apathetic to the idea of being a hero, he scoffs at being called one, but appreciates the sense of admiration from others. Abercrombie pits Gorst against General Jalenhorm in terms of contrasting ideas of a hero. While Jalenhorm praises him and other soldiers for being heroes, Gorst thinks of the general as a fool for believing so.

Eventually, his conversations lead Gorst to a conclusion: heroes are quickly forged while good men are rarer. Abercrombie distinguishes being good and being a hero, at least in the eyes of certain characters, to show the brutality of the war. The good man may spare a life, but here the hero instead takes as many as they can. Jalenhorm plans on issuing a reckless charge against the Northmen, in hopes of finding redemption for a previous blunder, to which Gorst tries to stop him for a single reason: “‘You are a good man.’ *A floundering incompetent, but still.* ‘War is no place for good men.’” (Abercrombie 2011, 433, italics in the original). Gorst does not see himself as a good man: he is a killer first and foremost. A selfish man, he briefly considers killing Finree’s husband, Hal, just so Gorst can console her, but he never gives in to that temptation. Instead he saves Hal, once again being proclaimed a hero. The heroic moment leaves a sour taste in the reader’s mouth since it was done not out of kindness, but out of necessity.

Around the camp of the Union, the legend of Bremer dan Gorst grows, stories about him getting exaggerated depending on how many times they are told. This is also where we see Abercrombie’s idea of heroes not only being respected but feared. Hal and Finree dan Brock discuss him at length, Finree being surprised at the former’s slight fear of Gorst. Hal tells her: “Everyone should be at least a little scared of Bremer dan Gorst.” (Abercrombie 2011, 122). This goes well in line with how the Northmen regard the importance of a name: with admiration and fear.

Word of Gorst’s heroics eventually reach the King, which leads to Gorst being pardoned for his previous incompetence and being invited back to serve in the capital. The camp seems cheerful according to Gorst, people smile at him and hoot as he passes by while he searches for Finree to deliver the good news. When he finds her, however, he finds that she and her husband are to be elevated into a new position. This statement finally causes Gorst to tell Finree his feelings towards her and what his true passion is: war. During this speech, he slowly loses all this hot air and realizes his mistake. Finree’s contempt for him is clear, and leaves Gorst with her spiteful thoughts: “So you love war. I used to think you were a decent man. But I see now I was mistaken.’ She stabbed at his chest with her forefinger. ‘You’re a

hero.” (Abercrombie 2011, 599, italics in the original). With bitter irony, Finree presents what she thinks a hero really is. Playing the hero is an excuse for killing, not for saving lives. A hero is nothing more than a front for masculinity and brutality, not selflessness and kindness.

Afterwards, Gorst is left feeling the gloom of the world once again: it is not bright and happy but grey and dull. Gorst immediately feels that he needs to fight and kill someone, but the war is done, and it is time to go home (Abercrombie 2011, 600). Bremer dan Gorst as a character is the most apathetic of heroes in this novel. One could argue that he is a great hero, while others may argue that Gorst is a pathetic or despicable character. Gorst is used by Abercrombie to show how much the Union and the North depend on the image of the hero, and not really focusing on what the man actually accomplishes in war. As a hero, Gorst’s exterior fulfils all the classic traits of the fantasy hero being brave, stoic and possessing an almost unrivalled battle prowess, but the interior hides a self-critical individual with interests and ideas that do not align with the thoughts of what a hero should be.

In order for Gorst to be labeled an anti-hero, he would have had to try to bring change to the concept he is critical of, a sentiment shared by Finree, but in the end he does no such thing. Gorst likes being showered with admiration, even if he admits that he is nothing more than a glorified killer. Abercrombie uses Gorst to show the hypocritical attitude towards killing, in that a person does not have to be good to be a hero. They simply must be at the right place, at the right time.

Low mimetic Hero: the case of Red Beck

Beck is the closest Abercrombie comes to what Frye describes as the *low mimetic* hero, or the everyday person, who leaves their home to find some greater purpose (1973, 34). Much like other low mimetic heroes in fiction he has an ordinary life but craves something more, something greater. Being the son of Shama Heartless, a famed Named Man who died before the events of the book, Beck feels a responsibility to continue his father’s legacy. This is shown very clearly in his introductory chapter where Beck is chopping wood: “Pretended he was a great hero like his father had been, won himself a high name on the battlefield and a high place at the fire and in the songs. He was the hardest bastard in the whole damn North, no doubt. Far as pretending went” (Abercrombie 2011, 75). Already, Beck is playing the role of a hero, foreshadowing his eventual realization of the role.

This glorification of heroes becomes clearer when we look at how Beck and young Northmen revere songs about heroes and their deeds. The use of songs as a cementation of

glory, often exaggerated or fabricated in some form, is a common idea in *The Heroes*, especially for boys like Beck, whose motivation at the start of the book is to fight and win a name, or “do the business fit for the singing of” (Abercrombie 2011, 212). This business usually entails killing, the horror of which Beck has not yet experienced firsthand.

As the story progresses, Beck’s idea of heroes drastically changes. In the beginning, Beck wants to win a Name in battle, much like how his father had before him. Beck quickly finds that the band of warriors he is recruited to are far less glorious than he imagined (Abercrombie 2011, 78). Most of them are scared young boys, a fact that Beck himself tries to hide with little success and sows the seed of doubt in his heart. Frye states that in tragic events, the low mimetic figure often becomes isolated by a certain weakness, mostly to create some sort of empathy for the character (1973, 38). In this case, it is Beck’s doubt that begins to become a central aspect of his character. Beck’s chapters start to develop towards the common motif that the rest of the characters exhibit: losing/having lost faith in the concept of a hero or at least being highly critical of it. This theme is common throughout Abercrombie’s novel and other works in the same universe, as noted by Joachen Petzold in his work on Abercrombie’s *The First Law* trilogy (2017, 147). For Beck, this change comes following his first battle with the enemy where the horror of war finally catches up with him.

The fighting becomes too visceral for the young boy and after seeing soldiers on both sides being maimed, Beck’s courage finally fails him. Fearing for his life, Beck springs out of a hiding place to quickly kill a man he believes is a Union soldier. To his horror, he finds that he has accidentally killed the last of his fellow recruits. This is the first time the reader sees that Beck is deviating from the classical hero type, towards a more negative image. When he is discovered, Beck, who is covered in blood, is brought before his superior, who believes that Beck has killed the Union soldiers single-handedly and gives him the name *Red* Beck. He has finally earned a Name, but through deceit letting him remain in a positive light. Beck learns that being a hero is mostly an image to uphold or a part that you play. It does not matter what you did if your appearance remains intact.

Beck is not the only character whose Name is nothing more than a name that stuck through pure coincidence. Abercrombie plays with the idea of how much more hearsay and embellishment counts towards a Name than one’s deeds. In Beck’s crew, the warm but weary Curnden Crow earned his name for the sound he made when he choked on a chicken bone, while Wonderful earned her name due to a turn of phrase (Abercrombie 2011, 321). The most important member of this group is Beck’s childhood hero, Whirrun of Bligh. Being next to this legend makes Beck feel like a fraud, and he ponders out loud how he thinks a Name will change

him to become more courageous. To which Crow simply answers: “Name or not, you’ll just be the same man. No better. Maybe worse” (Abercrombie 2011, 418). Receiving a Name does not change Beck, but he learns that he needs to try and play the part of Red Beck, a person he is not.

Towards the end of the book, the last battle is over with many casualties on both sides, with Whirrun of Bligh among them. Seeing all these heroes die around him leads Beck to tell the truth of his Name to Curnden Crow, who acts as Beck’s wise mentor during this short time, a common trope in the fantasy genre (Lima 2017, 18). Crow, however, does not give him any sage advice or rousing words. Because he lacks bravery, Beck believes he cannot rightfully be called a hero: “‘I’m a fucking coward.’ ‘Maybe.’ Crow jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Whirrun’s corpse. ‘There’s a hero. Tell me who’s better off’” (Abercrombie 2011, 534).

Beck returns home but is forever changed. Abercrombie leaves Beck much as he is found in his introductory chapter: axe in hand in front of some wooden logs; but instead of eagerly wanting to go out and earn a Name, he takes comfort in a simple fact: “He was no hero, and never would be.” (Abercrombie 2011, 580). Beck’s beginnings are akin to the classic low mimetic hero who sets out to become a hero and has a very clear idea of what that entails. Beck learns, however, that in this world a hero is never something someone *is* but a role that someone steps into. Beck is successful in his goal of earning a Name, but only through a lie. By never admitting how he got his name to the general populace, except for Crow, Beck shows that he cannot be categorized as a classical hero. Interesting to note, is that Beck as a character cannot with confidence be called a hero, which may fall in line with when Frye writes that the low mimetic hero has difficulty retaining the hero title in comparison to other modes (1973, 34). The low mimetic hero does not necessarily have the qualities of the classical hero that Prince defines (1987 [page]).

The same is also true for the label of anti-hero, as Taha states that the anti-hero often fails in his mission and disappoints the reader (2002, 3). Beck becomes a semi-hero simply because he achieves his goal in a very doubtful manner. Even though Beck earns a Name through a lie, he remains in what his society deems to be a positive light. (Taha 2002, 5). Beck’s true actions may be doubtful or negative, but he leaves the lie, and the glory that comes with it, behind and ventures home. This act could be considered positive, which helps him walk the subtle line of the semi-hero.

Ironic Hero: the case of Finree dan Brock and Prince Calder

The story of Lady Finree dan Brock and the estranged Prince Calder is one of being highly critical to the idea of a hero. If one were to categorize these characters according to Frye's five modes of heroes, then the *ironic hero*, or anti-hero in some cases, seems to be the most fitting label for these two outliers (1973, 34). Finree and Calder start the novel with very similar backgrounds, both being pariahs in their respective camps of the war, one for being an ambitious young woman and the other for being considered an arrogant coward, the lesser son of a greater man. Due to this perception, both fall in line with Frye's ironic hero category since they are deemed to be lesser than the average person, in both physical and social power which lies in contrast to the low mimetic hero who is considered more of an equal to their society (1973, 35).

Both come from nobility, Finree being the daughter of a general and Calder being the son of the former king of the Northmen and are treated as outliers by often stepping out of line due to their ambition and how they both seem to be critical of their respective society's values. It should come as no surprise then that they share a very cynical view on heroes, with both having a foil to this line of thinking. Calder has his brother Scale while Finree has her husband Hal. Starting with Finree, heroes in her line of reasoning are something of a glorification or part of a joke in many ways. This can be seen in her talks with her husband, a soldier who wants to do what is right: to be good and honest (Abercrombie 2011, 423). Finree jokingly calls Hal a hero when he tries to get what meagre supplies he can afford and ration them out to the soldiers in need (Abercrombie 2011, 128) and more often than not she tries to step in on his behalf, much to the chagrin of his fellow officers.

For Finree's goal of having her husband become Lord Governor to be achieved she must be willing to be bold and arrogant, otherwise, the risk of them being forgotten and discarded by the nobles would increase. She shows this several times, one of which occurs when Bayaz, the first of the Magi, makes an appearance at the camp. Bayaz is clearly an influential figure in the Union, a legend of both political and magical power, where an entire room full of military officers goes eerily silent when he enters (Abercrombie 2011, 220). Finree's ability to differentiate those who have authority and power from those who do not, leads her to on several occasions confront Bayaz over her and Hal's status in the Union. She and Bayaz seem to come to a mutual agreement that soldiers are often likened to heroes in qualities of bravery and loyalty (Abercrombie 2011, 426), much like the classical model of the selfless hero (Prince 1987, 40). They do seem to believe that this is not a quality fit for someone

to lead, which brings Finree to planting the idea of making Hal the Lord Governor of Angland, the province furthest to the North in the Union, with her by his side to guide him.

Her ambitions come to a brief and critical halt, however, when she is kidnapped by Northerners to be used as a hostage. During this time, she uses her cunning to negotiate a deal to release her and many prisoners, but she is unable to secure the freedom of fellow noblewoman Aliz. Like Beck, Finree is only partly successful in her mission yet is still applauded as a hero. Much to her annoyance, she only sees this as a front: a hero is nothing but an image to uphold. The outcome of her story eventually concludes in Bayaz appointing her and Hal as Lord and Lady Governor, much to Finree's surprise.

The First of the Magi does not do this out of the kindness of his heart; it is quite the contrary as Bayaz is often shown to be a devious figure and a manipulator behind the scenes. Showing that he is above the crown, he selects them for pragmatic reasons and makes it very clear regarding the security of their new position: "Remember this, though. People love heroes, but new ones can always be found. With one finger of one hand I make you. With one finger of one hand ... I can unmake you" (Abercrombie 2011, 555). Finree accepts his offer and brings Hal the news while coming to a simple conclusion: that heroes are interchangeable labels, which can be used to further one's own ends (Abercrombie 2011, 557). Finree fulfils the same role as Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings* as the shieldmaiden or peace-weaver in Abercrombie's own way in that she actually achieves a sort of peace but has selfish motivations for them rather than the goodness of her heart (Carretero-González 2015, 44).

On the other hand, we find Calder. The former prince is not well-liked among the Northmen, due in part to his scheming nature and willingness to use his slippery words to achieve his goals. He is ironically called a hero several times during the novel (Abercrombie 2011, 192). Calder is often a foil to the other Northmen, who see a war as a chance to gain glory and honor, or a chance to become a hero. Calder, however, sees the current war in a different light: "'War's a way of getting things,' he said. 'If it gets you nothing, what's the point?'" (Abercrombie, 2011, 227). Calder likes to talk for two reasons: he loves to hear his own voice and he knows diplomacy can get him far. This does however leave him in a negative light amongst the rest of the Northmen.

His brother is the opposite of Calder. "Scale was all those things warriors admire – loyal, strong and brave beyond the point of stupidity. Calder was none of them, and everyone knew it" (Abercrombie 2011, 154). To many in the North, these are the traits of a hero and it seems that Calder even agrees to that fact but remains skeptical, nonetheless. The prince shows several times that he, like Finree, has issues with adapting to his society, or even fails to do so,

which would identify him as an anti-hero, as stated by Hans Robert Jauss (1974, 313-314). In contrast to Jauss' anti-hero, Calder never seeks to change the values of society. He only seeks to use it for his own ends: to win back his father's crown and protect his family.

A turning point for the former prince is when he finds out that Scale has, seemingly, been killed in battle. For all of Calder's smug comments, he still deeply loves his brother, which leads him into a heated confrontation with the king of the North himself, Black Dow. Calder, drunk on alcohol and victory, uses Black Dow's reputation as one of the fiercest and most dangerous Named Men in the current age, to goad him into a battle in the Circle, a sort of duel over leadership. Hardly anyone believes that Calder can win over Black Dow. He is not a warrior, he is not skilled with a blade, and he is no hero. But Calder has gotten a taste for playing the hero, something that even he did not expect (Abercrombie 2011, 443). Thanks to the interference of another character, Calder wins the duel and is crowned king. This is a heroic climax for Calder even though the victory was not outright his, as it was orchestrated by Bayaz, the first of the magi.

This can be likened to what Jauss refers to as the hero failing his objective which helps to identify an ironic hero (1974, 314), since even though Calder planned his victory, he fails to accomplish his goal. He becomes a pawn to Bayaz, who confronts Calder and deflates his ego: "You are no hero, Calder. I like that. You see what men are. You have your father's cunning, and ambition, and ruthlessness, but not his pride" (Abercrombie 2011, 591). When faced with the ultimatum of staying a pawn to Bayaz and thus retaining the title of king, or crowning his brother and therefore defying Bayaz, Calder chooses the latter more selfless option and crowns Scale as king.

What makes Finree and Calder fall into the category of semi-heroes, however, is that in the end both are partially successful in their goals and end up in being viewed in a positive light by their societies. Abercrombie takes advantage of the fact that both characters share traits that are common for an anti-hero, but by making them change course in direction throughout the novel leaves them in a grey area. Compared to Beck, they may lean more towards anti-heroes, hence why they are labelled as Frye's ironic heroes (1973, 34), but the fact that they constantly fluctuate between positive and negative actions also makes it impossible for them to be categorized *purely* as anti-heroes. The fluctuation is the defining trait of a semi-hero.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to identify how Abercrombie tackles the concept of a hero, both within the overarching narrative and how his characters are evolutions of older modes of heroes such as those proposed by Northrop Frye. By applying Frye's models to the protagonists of *The Heroes* it becomes clear that they follow the tropes to an extent and then deviate from the norms of both the classical hero and the antihero, which leaves them in a grey area of what Taha called the semi-hero. By letting the characters fluctuate between positive and negative light (in the perception of their surroundings and the reader), Abercrombie shows that a hero, especially in a time of war, is a label or a role that one plays. Most protagonists learn that the image of a hero is far more important than the actions that were taken since the respective societies base the concept on embellishing tales or glorifying the violence that leads to victory rather than the grim truth. The analysis clearly illustrates that the different protagonists of *The Heroes* are driven by varying sorts of motivations that sometimes lie in contrast to their societies' values, which raises problems when trying to classify each of them as heroes. Taha's concept of "semi-hero" corresponds well to the way Abercrombie reworks the fantasy genre by giving nuance to classical modes of heroes with contrasting and conflicting motivations.

This does not imply that the classical hero types are being entirely replaced, but rather that they are instead enhanced or reinterpreted to lend the genre a new vigor and thus to surprise the reader. One issue that may appear, as Taha states, is that the adjectives "failing" and "succeeding" can be considered quite divisive and thus further research can be done (2002, 5). To help develop the implications of this essay one can use it as a jumping-off point for further semiotic analysis and research in the genre. The fantasy genre has continued to develop in part due to authors like Abercrombie wanting to take tropes readers are used to and altering them to better portray the role that heroes have in the stories they try to tell. In *The Heroes*, that portrayal takes on a more literal sense in that a hero is just a role that a person plays and not something that one is. The role can be inhabited and used both for good, such as boosting morale, and selfishly by abusing the concept to suit a personal agenda. Likewise, a hero can be both respected and feared, which helps to further distinguish being a hero from being a good person. The hero image, therefore, becomes far more important than hero substance or motivation.

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