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Explaining the role of character development in the evaluation of morally ambiguous characters in entertainment media

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ABSTRACT

The current project aims at better understanding how narrative characteristics in stories function in the liking, moral evaluation, and enjoyment of narratives featuring morally ambiguous characters (MACs). Shafer and Raney (2012) found that viewers differently enjoyed a heroic versus MAC-centered narrative. Building on this approach, a mixed-method design was used to investigate character development in two morally ambiguous narratives. Results of both a qualitative content analysis and an experiment provide support for the claim that character development is a central mechanism to explain viewer responses to MACs in narrative content. Thus, this study provides new directions for understanding characters in media research.

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1. Introduction

The presence of morally ambiguous characters (MACs) in the television landscape has consistently grown over the last years, as well as related research on these characters (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012). These MACs, sometimes also labeled antiheroes, separate themselves from the traditionally good and bad characters, because they do not consistently act in a “good” or “evil” way. For example, popular television characters like Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*), Dr. Gregory House (*House M.D.*), Don Draper (*Mad Men*) and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), are featured in storylines in which they intermix undeniably bad behavior with good motives and intentions. The liking and enjoyment of these characters seemingly contradicts tenets of Affective Disposition Theory (Zillmann, 2000), which states that viewer enjoyment is a result of seeing morally virtuous characters succeed, and immoral characters punished.

To investigate viewer responses to antihero narratives, Shafer and Raney (2012) explored differences in viewer responses to the main character of an antihero film (*Léon the Professional*) versus a traditional hero film (*The Rocketeer*) across the course of a narrative. In that study, viewers developed more positive dispositions towards both the hero (*The Rocketeer*) and the antihero (*Léon*) over the course of the narrative, however, in the beginning the antihero was rated as less moral than the hero. Additionally, while liking of the main character was higher for the hero during the film, both the hero and antihero were equally liked at the end. Particularly based on the diverging results regarding the moral evaluation of the main character,

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Shafer and Raney (2012, p. 7) concluded that responses to MACs follow a different path than responses to characters in traditional hero films: they are a result of moral disengagement driven by specifically developed antihero schemas.

A different possible route towards explaining viewer responses to antihero narratives, however, might be found in examining narrative characteristics specific to morally ambiguous characters such as the moral development of characters over the course of the narrative (cf. Gregoriou, 2012; Van Ommen, Daalmans, & Weijers, 2014). We propose that viewers use a well-developed *general* story schema when viewing fiction: the “canonical” story format (Bordwell, 1985, p. 35). Essential to this schema is the idea that the classical narrative story structure is characterized by changes, primarily resulting from “individual characters as causal agents” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 77). The main character propels the story forward because s/he is confronted with a problem that requires a response. The character is put in a (moral) predicament, acts according to his/her specific character traits and as a result, the plot develops and the character changes (Weijers, 2014, p. 71). Therefore the moral predicaments faced by morally ambiguous characters may actually lead to greater moral engagement on the part of the viewer as the MACs grow and change throughout the film. This idea contrasts the notion put forward by Shafer and Raney (2012), among others, that viewers rely on moral disengagement to like and positively evaluate MACs. Instead, in our view the viewer gets morally engaged with the main character *because* of the moral development and change displayed by the morally ambiguous character over the course of the narrative, which is evidenced by increasing moral deliberation and shifting moral priorities during the narrative. In line with Affective Disposition Theory, then, the moral challenges faced by the seemingly ambiguous protagonist simply increase viewer engagement and disposition toward the character as they progress from vice to virtue (or vice versa). As long as the ultimate outcome for the character is morally justified (cf. Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013), viewers can enjoy the narrative without needing to morally disengage.

This possible alternate explanation, which is explored in the current study, may have major consequences for the theoretical explanation of viewer responses towards MACs. It would mean that both character liking and moral evaluation are guided by the growing involvement with the main character and insight in the character’s moral deliberation over the course of the narrative. This growing involvement – or growing moral engagement – is a result of the insight viewers get into the character over the course of the narrative as a result of his or her deliberation about the behaviors of and consequences for the character. The narrative thus functions as a moral playground (cf. Hakemulder, 2000; Krijnen, 2007; Mar & Oatley, 2008), which as a concrete case allows viewers to engage with and exercise “our emotions and imagination, our powers of perceptual discrimination, moral understanding, and reflection” (Carroll, 2000, p. 368–369). The more viewers are aware of the moral deliberation of the main character and ultimately in favor of the choices s/he makes, the more the ambiguous character is liked. As a result, the moral development of the main character over the course of the narrative – particularly (but not exclusively) from vice to virtue – could be of utmost importance for understanding how character development drive changes in character liking and moral evaluation.

In the current paper, we first outline current research on morality in narrative with a focus on morally ambiguous characters. In line with Shafer and Raney (2012), we focus on the impact of character development over the course of the narrative on character liking, moral evaluation and enjoyment of the main character. Next, we conduct a qualitative narrative analysis (cf. Van Ommen et al., 2014) of two films presenting differential development of two very different morally ambiguous protagonists. We contrast two types of morally ambiguous main characters identified in prior research on MACs: One who displays moral development in his behavior over the course of a narrative (*Léon*) versus one who does not exhibit personal character development (*American Psycho*). Finally, we replicate Shafer and Raney’s (2012) experimental analysis of character liking and moral evaluations in these two films.

2. Morally ambiguous characters in entertainment

In the last decades, media psychologists and communication scientists have tried to explain the mechanisms that underlie the response to, or the perceptions, enjoyment, and appreciation of media characters (Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Limperos, & Woolley, 2015; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Sanders, 2010; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Zillmann, 2000). One primary theory in this effort has been Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) which conceptualizes viewers as “untiring moral monitors” (Zillmann, 2000, p. 54) whose evaluation of moral considerations in the narrative influence media enjoyment and character liking. To be more specific, enjoyment and liking are predicted to be higher when the narrative involves positive outcomes for good characters and negative outcomes for bad characters (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000). In addition to enjoyment of outcomes at the resolution of a narrative, ADT posits that dispositions towards characters develop and are formed over time as viewers observe character behavior, morally evaluate this behavior, and form anticipatory emotions (hope and fear) about possible outcomes for characters (Zillmann, 2000). In line with this, Raney and Janicke (2013) argue that viewers continue to like characters by continuously “recasting their motivations or behaviors as justified. We do so in order to maintain our positive dispositions, and thus to improve our chances of enjoying narratives” (Raney & Janicke, 2013, p. 160).

Prior work on soap opera characters has shown that over the course of a serialized narrative, attitudes polarize towards characters in this fashion – that is, good characters begin with a more virtuous perception by viewers, and over time are perceived to become more virtuous, whereas bad characters are perceived initially as villains, and over time are perceived to become even more villainous (Eden et al., 2011; Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010). However, there is a third category of characters neither consistently virtuous nor consistently villainous. These characters were termed “neutral” in Tamborini et al. (2010) and more accurately “morally ambiguous characters” in Eden et al. (2011). In both studies these

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