

Liam Carpenter-Shulman

Professor Yi He

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The Scoundrel's Journey: Visions of American Individualism in *Star Wars*

1. Introduction to the project (~1 paragraph)

The *Star Wars* franchise is a global cultural touchstone. Today over 10 movies, several animated television series, a dedicated theme park, billions of dollars in merchandise and limitless future projects owe their existence to the initial 1977 release of *Star Wars*, and by extension the success of the original trilogy. In the decades since *Star Wars* first hit theatres, the expanse of the franchise has been joined by a wave of scholarly inquiries into the nature of the hit new mythology. Why was this rather simple tale such a hit? My research engages with these discussions through the lens of an archetypal analysis of Han Solo and an evaluation of the fraught social and political environment in the United States of the 1960s and 70s.

2. Preliminary literature review (~1-2 pages)

My research required forays into two distinct areas of scholarly literature. First, I examined existing literature providing different analyses of *Star Wars* as a cultural myth and examining its place within the social and political environment of the late 20th century. In conjunction with this I had to investigate non-media studies sources in order to grasp the examinations of American Individualism and how the ethos has developed and shifted over time, particularly in the *Star Wars* era. The combination of these two areas of scholarship allows me to analyze Han Solo through both a mythical and social political lens.

In his article "American Individualism Reconsidered," Eric Mount Jr. notes that individualism is in many ways "our myth and our religion, our ethos and our ethic" (366). He traces

the origins of the ethos which he calls a “distinctively American ideology” (362) to the formation of a unique American identity connecting politics, economics, and religion in the post-colonial states. He cites a noted scholar, Alfred Kazin, who describes the American Revolution’s most noted effect as “to create and perpetuate our secular religion, the free individual” (363). Using arguments from prominent scholars, Mount maintains that individualism is a central part of the American identity and wields power over every aspect of American life.

And yet he argues that American individualism is not unchallenged and not without variation. There is what Mount describes as the “Horatio Alger myth of the self-made man” (364) which exercises power over the economic sentiments of Americans, privileging individual capitalist ideals over Marxist communitarian ideals. There is also the Puritan form of individualism which “functioned squarely within a corporate, organic context” with the “individual in the community” providing the basis for the ethos. Thirdly, there is the “the myth of the individual moving away from family and social roots to mature by standing alone as he makes a series of free, individual choices” (364).

It is this variation of individualism that Daniel Yankelovich observes and reports on in his piece “How American Individualism is Evolving.” He describes several social shifts away from an individualism focused on the political arena towards an ethos which embraced “self-expressiveness.” In his words, “by the end of the 1970’s the majority of Americans had decided that self-expressiveness was too important for artists and writers to monopolize: everyone should have the opportunity to develop their potential for inner-expression” (1). Specific value shifts Yankelovich notes include “less value placed on what one owes to others as a matter of moral obligation ... and less value placed on sacrifice as a moral good, replaced by more pragmatic criteria of when sacrifice is required for economic reasons” (2).

Evidently there seems to be an understanding that individualism and its characteristics have defined both organizational and individual development in the United States. However,

friction remains under this big tent of individualism and the dominant ethos at any given time is subject to change and evolution.

Star Wars (1977) finds itself positioned within the “me-decade” coined by journalist Tom Wolfe and cited by both Mount (364) and Yankelovich (1). Despite this, there seems to be a dearth of scholarship devoted to analyzing *Star Wars*’ place within the framework of the individualized American. Instead, scholars have focused on *Star Wars*’ power as a personal myth, often within a political framework. David Meyer does exactly this with his article for the *Journal of Popular Culture* titled “*Star Wars, Star Wars, and American Political Culture.*” He compares Luke Skywalker to the idealistic President Jimmy Carter (101) and notes that George Lucas took inspiration from President Nixon when creating Emperor Palpatine (100). He asserts that the darker and more thematically confusing *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) “well reflected the political upheaval of 1980” (103).

Martin Miller and Robert Sprich take a different approach with their paper “The Appeals of ‘*Star Wars*’: An Archetypal-Psychoanalytic View.” They counter attempts from certain media critics to delegitimize *Star Wars* and its popularity by examining the film series through an Oedipal psychoanalytic lens. They view *Star Wars* as a “fairy tale which has at its core the oedipal myth” (207) where “in Luke Skywalker, we find a textbook example of a traditional hero like Beowulf or Sir Lancelot” (208). This fairy tale structure of *Star Wars* they argue offers the audience deep familiarity and potential for emotional connection with the story and characters.

Indeed, the theme of familiarity runs through many of my sources. With “*Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time*” Andrew Gordon catalogues how George Lucas compiled *Star Wars* out of bits and pieces of American culture, past and present. Gordon finds that cultural elements like *Flash Gordon* (315), *Forbidden Planet*, and *Wizard of OZ* (317) informed Lucas’ vision, all while he still maintained the overall familiarity discussed by Miller and Sprich in the “epic structure of what Joseph Campbell calls in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* ‘the monomyth’” (314).

Miller and Sprich also examine Han Solo's role in creating this familiarity through his assumption of the recognizable "loner who pervades both Westerns and detective movies and who was played to perfection by Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*" (214). In fact each source makes a passing note on Solo's role. Meyer describes him as "a typical western hero" (101) who "energetically expresses his disdain for the Force and for political causes generally, and vociferously maintains an explicit commitment to look out for himself rather than Luke or the rebel alliance" (109). To Gordon he is a "gun for hire," "straight out of the old West rides" (318).

However, rarely does Solo stand on his own in the eyes of these scholars. He is reduced to simply a foil for Luke. Gordon asserts that Solo "acts out Luke's anti-social desire for total independence" (323). Similarly, Miller and Sprich view Solo as the "psychopathic character" who forms just another "resolution of the Oedipus complex" (214) with Luke. Meyer treats him as Luke's "taunting, teasing, and protecting" (109) older brother.

While I understand the inclination to center Luke in character analyses of the heroes of *Star Wars* I find it a disservice to relegate Solo's role to only complimentary to Luke's in the creation of the myth of *Star Wars*, particularly in the context of understanding American Individualism in the 60s and 70s. Miller and Sprich even passingly present a potential acknowledgment of the importance of Solo's character in reflecting Lucas' audience as they note "his brand of psychopathology has had immense appeal for American audiences and perhaps points to a pathological element in our culture" (214). The next steps for my research are to try to further reconcile the mythical properties of *Star Wars* discussed by the authors and draw connections between Solo's role within that myth and the shifting social political landscape of individualism in 1970's America, and potentially explore Lucas' intentions with the development of the character.

3. Library research method (~1 page)

My research has up to this point relied heavily on the Brandeis online library and Google Scholar. My first step was a very simple Google Scholar keyword search with the keywords “American,” “Individualism” and “Social Change.” This brought me to Daniel Yankelovich’s report “How American Individualism is Evolving.” From there I began my search for *Star Wars* sources. Through a few quick Google and OneSearch searches I found few regarding Han Solo but a few broad *Star Wars* related articles. I forget which one I clicked on first but it really didn’t quite suit my purposes but I was able to look at its bibliography and find several sources with titles that seemed to fit my purposes. I then searched for those in the Brandeis Library, found them in ProQuest and once I was in ProQuest I took advantage of the “similar article” function on the right hand side of the screen to find additional *Star Wars* related sources. JStor proved helpful in helping me find my second source for the individualism aspect of my research.

As I continue my research I will rely on the bibliographies of the sources I have already collected to analyze their source materials which include interviews with George Lucas and news articles from the time period. I will once again be utilizing the Brandeis OneSearch function and Google to find the texts of these sources.

4. Significance / motive (~1-2 paragraphs)

With this paper I aim to examine one of my favorite texts and characters and understand how Han Solo’s journey in *Star Wars* serves as a form of communication between George Lucas and the developing “me generation” of America. My own beliefs on the merits and detriments of individualism vs collectivism have shifted over time and already I can feel my understanding of the tension between the two developing with my research. I aim to communicate effectively to my reader how the media we consume simultaneously is informed by the social political conditions of the time and can instruct us how to live more virtuous lives.

As of now I view Han Solo as an instructive character. He starts as an egoist, devoted to the worst elements of American individualism, and perhaps reflecting Lucas' fear for the "me generation." However by the end of *Return of The Jedi* those elements are gone. He no longer denies moral obligation and no longer hides from sacrifice or political action. And yet he has not lost his sense of self, his individuality, and maybe most importantly his coolness. Solo's journey shows us that we need not sacrifice the good of who we are in order to change the bad. He allows American Individualism to evolve into a socially responsible, politically engaged self-expressiveness. I think it's important for all *Star Wars* fans to grapple with that transformation.

5. Weekly timeline (~1/2 page)

April 12-18: Turn in proposal, receive and digest feedback, begin drafting introduction and outlining body paragraph (overall structure)

April 19-25: Write, write, write

April 26-May 2: Begin own revisions, receive digest feedback

May 2-Due date: revise, write, submit

6. Annotated bibliography (minimum of 4-5 sources)

Gordon, Andrew. "'Star Wars': A Myth for Our Time." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 4, Salisbury State College., Fall 1978, pp. 314-26.

In this article the author responds to dismissals of *Star Wars*' plot and literary significance. In doing so, the author illustrates how *Star Wars* parallels historically powerful and popular mythical pieces of literature and draws from recognizable elements of American culture to create a uniquely 1970's American entry into Joseph Campbell's "monomyth." I use this article to frame my understanding of *Star Wars*' reception and storytelling structure.

Meyer, David S. "Star Wars, Star Wars, and American Political Culture." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1992, pp. 99–116.

This article contextualizes *Star Wars* with an examination of the political environment of America at the time. The author focuses on presidential elections, military spending, and international relations in particular with respect to elements of reality in which *Star Wars* had seeped into. An analysis of the characters within this political framework follows and assists me in understanding the political underpinnings of the *Star Wars* myth as I try to relate Han Solo's political development to the potential development of the *Star Wars* audience.

Miller, Martin, and Robert Sprich. "The Appeals of 'Star Wars': An Archetypal-Psychoanalytic View." *American Imago*, vol. 38, no. 2, Wayne State University Press, etc., Summer 1981, pp. 203–20.

In this article the authors explain *Star Wars*' popularity through an analysis of manifestations of the oedipal myth in the film. They provide a clear basis for *Star Wars*' place as a modern fairy tale and illuminating character analyses. This source will add to my basis of understanding *Star Wars* as a text which uses techniques and motifs to connect with both the conscious and subconscious of its audience.

Mount, C. Eric. "American Individualism Reconsidered" *Review of Religious Research*, Jun., 1981, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Jun., 1981), pp. 362- 376

This is an entry into the *Review of Religious Research* which explores the development of and contradictions within a scholarly consensus about what American Individualism is. The author summarizes definitions of and arguments for different forms of American individualism, and provides their own viewpoint for how individualism should be approached in the coming age. This will help me place Han Solo's form of individualism

within a broader American history of the ethos and evaluate possible forms of future development.

Yankelovich, Daniel. "How American Individualism Is Evolving." *The Public Perspective*, Mar. 1998.

This source is unique among my collected sources because it is not exactly a scholarly article but rather a report authored by public opinion analyst and pollster Daniel Yankelovich on findings from research conducted by his firm. He outlines specific social changes in the 60s and 70s based on a "forerunner" group of college students he interviewed which explain the social political environment of the 90s. This report forms the basis of my initial understanding of what individualism meant in the late 20th century.