Official Outlaws: The Evolution of the American Hero

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America's foundation rests upon a struggle for individual freedom. Founded by outlaws against the British crown, our nation early on embraced the concept of an enlightened freedom. Consequently, that sentiment has been maintained throughout the centuries, easily seen in the popular culture of the United States. Those who act with vigor and purpose often capture the attention of the American public, thereby holding a unique position of influence in our society. Athletes like Kevin Durant and Tom Brady are considered role models for both their tenacity and determination in their respective professions and their generosity towards their communities. Musicians captivate us with their hauntingly powerful lyrics, often easily relatable to the common man. Even our most popular films and television shows often feature characters who embody our current sense of individuality. Through our most revered historic figures, such as Thomas Jefferson and Dwight Eisenhower, or our most menacing and ingenious fictional characters, like Jack Sparrow and Travis Bickle, individuals thrive in America and in her psyche. According to Robert Ray in his article "The Thematic Paradigm," these American heroes appear to be divided between the "outlaw" individualist hero and the "official" community hero. Yet it is Ray's emphasis on a third type of hero, the "composite" hero, which proves to be the most telling of the American character. Exemplified by American greats like Patrick Henry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Roosevelt, the "composite" hero championed an uncompromising individuality even as he affirmed the idea of community.

The idea of the "composite" hero stems from the amalgamation of the "outlaw" and the "official" hero. According to Ray, both heroes can be broken down by their set of competing values regarding aging and maturity; society and women; and politics and law. The "outlaw" hero, according to Ray, flees from the confining rules

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