Protagonist

DEFINITION

What is a protagonist? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> The protagonist of a story is its main character, who has the sympathy and support of the audience. This character tends to be involved in or affected by most of the choices or conflicts that arise in the narrative. For example, Snow White is the protagonist of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Some additional key details about protagonists:

- A protagonist can be present in any form of art that contains characters and a story: novels, films, poems, dramas, operas, etc. Most stories contain one protagonist. However, if a narrative contains a subplot or several different stories, it's possible for each story to contain its own protagonist.
- Protagonists aren't always "good"—many are dishonest or even criminal—but they always have the sympathy and support of the audience.
- The opposite of the protagonist is the antagonist: a character that opposes or thwarts the main character. Not all stories that have protagonists also have antagonists.

Protagonist Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce protagonist: pro-**tag**-uh-nist

The Evolution of Protagonist

The term *protagonist* originally referred to the character who engaged with the chorus in Ancient Greek tragedies (the chorus is a group of actors who recite their lines in unison and represent "the masses," or the general public). However, the definition expanded over time. Sophocles was one of the first Ancient Greek playwrights to put more than two characters on stage, and thus further expanded the definition, bringing its meaning closer to our modern definition: the main character among many characters who appear within a story.

Types of Protagonist

Most protagonists fit into one of the following four protagonist types: heroes, antiheroes, villain protagonists, and supporting protagonists.

- **Hero/Heroine:** A hero or heroine (that is, a female hero) is a character in a literary work who overcomes a profound struggle or conflict to achieve some sort of success because of their own perseverance, bravery, or intelligence. Heroes often have to make sacrifices along the way, always for the greater good and not for personal gain. In contemporary literary works that aim for realism, it's common to find heroes with more complicated personalities, or heroes who aren't "perfect," as the heroes of classical literature often seem to be. Sometimes people use the terms "hero" and "protagonist" interchangeably, but this isn't correct. A hero is just one type of protagonist. Not all protagonists are heroes.
- **Antihero/Antiheroine:** An antihero is a type of protagonist that might lack the qualities found in archetypal heroes. Unlike contemporary heroes, who might have a few flaws in order to seem realistic, the antihero is distinctly unlike the hero in that they are often revealed not to have moral or particularly noble intentions. They tend to act on behalf of their own self-interest, but they aren't wholly corrupt or immoral, like a villain.
- **Villain Protagonist:** Unlike the hero and antihero protagonists, the villain is unequivocally the "bad guy," devoted to evildoing. Often a story's villain is the antagonist (the character working against the protagonist); however, villains can also be protagonists when they are the main character driving the story forward and have the audience's sympathy.
- **Supporting Protagonist:** A supporting protagonist is less common than the other types of protagonists. When a supporting protagonist does appear, it's often when a story is told from the perspective of a seemingly minor character in the story. There may be a character in the story who seems more important or who experiences more of the "main action," but the supporting protagonist's otherwise minor role in the story becomes more important because the story is told from their perspective.

How to Identify the Protagonist of a Story

It's often relatively simple to identify the protagonist. But in some stories it can be more difficult, particularly if a narrative is complicated by multiple sub-plots or contains many characters with important roles. Some of the most common situations that can make it a bit more complicated to identify the protagonist of a story are:

- **The protagonist doesn't get the most "time on stage":** In this situation, another important character appears more often in the narrative, but that character is still not the focus of the audience's sympathy. For instance, in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, the king (Creon) decides to punish a man who died fighting on the losing side of a civil war by leaving him unburied in a public place, which would mean that his body would not be sanctified by the gods. The man's sister, Antigone, defies Creon and buries her brother anyway, so Creon orders her to be placed in a tomb and buried alive. While in the tomb, Antigone hangs herself, and the rest of the play focuses on the aftermath of her death, which inspires multiple other suicides. Creon is ultimately on stage for far more of the play than Antigone. However, it is Antigone whose actions seem righteous wins the audience's sympathy, and whose death (as well as the deaths it causes) makes the play a tragedy, so

Antigone would be the obvious protagonist here. Another clue, of course, is that the play is titled after her.

- **Multiple protagonists:** While most stories will only have one protagonist, it's possible for stories to contain more than one—particularly when multiple subplots are woven into one larger narrative. For instance, Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* chronicles the history of the French invasion of Russia in 1812 through the narratives of five different families, with fifteen major characters, who receive approximately equal attention. In part because of this lack of a single protagonist, Tolstoy maintained that *War and Peace* was not actually a novel. It's not a book about one story or one person's life, like a traditional novel—rather, it's a book about war and peace. While *War and Peace* is an extreme example, it is possible for other books to contain a few protagonists from a few different subplots (and to still qualify as novels).
- **False Protagonists:** A "false" protagonist is a technique in which an author introduces a character who seems to be the protagonist but is later revealed to not be. For instance, the horror film *Arachnophobia* opens by following a nature photographer through the Amazon rainforest. The photographer appears to be the story's protagonist, but only 10 minutes into the film, a spider crawls into his sleeping bag and bites and kills him. The photographer's body is shipped back to the US for burial with the spider still in the coffin. Upon arrival, the spider finds its way into the barn of a man named Ross Jennings, who becomes the film's protagonist, since it's his predicament (a barn full of deadly spiders) that drives the story forward. By the time the film ends, the audience has completely forgotten about the false protagonist (the photographer), but the jolt given by the death of that seeming protagonist sets up the thrilling suspense that fills the rest of the movie.

Protagonist vs. Antagonist

In order to better understand what makes a character a protagonist, it's helpful to also understand its opposite: antagonist. The antagonist is most often the protagonist's opponent in the story—such as a villain in a superhero movie, or the high school bully in an 80s teen movie.

The Protagonist and Antagonist in Stephen King's *Misery*

In Stephen King's *Misery*, a writer named Paul crashes his car on his way to Los Angeles, shattering both of his legs. He's found by a woman, Annie, who takes him to her house to nurse him back to health. Annie reveals herself to be one of Paul's biggest fans, and it gradually becomes clear that she's mentally disturbed and dangerous. Paul tries to escape a few times, but Annie always catches him and punishes him brutally (cutting off a finger and a foot). Annie is the book's antagonist.

King writes an extensive backstory on Annie, so her motivations are clear and her character isn't entirely impossible to relate to—and indeed, some readers might even pity her. In a way, she could be said to be the most multi-dimensional character in the book, but she still is not the protagonist. Paul is the novel's protagonist because its plot hinges on his fate, and the question of whether or not he will make it out alive. In other words, Paul is trying to carry out a series actions to move the plot forward (drive to LA, recover from his injuries, escape from the deranged Annie), while Annie is trying to stop Paul (with imprisonment, torture, threats), making her the antagonist.

EXAMPLES

Nearly every story has a protagonist, so there are countless examples to choose from. Below we've provided an example of each of the four main protagonist types: heroes, antiheroes, villain protagonists, and supporting protagonists.

Example of a Hero Protagonist in *Beowulf*

The epic poem *Beowulf* is one of the oldest surviving pieces of literature in the English language and its protagonist is an example of a traditional epic hero: he is relentlessly strong, brave, and just. The poem tells the story of Beowulf's bravery in battle against a monster named Grendel, who threatens to destroy the Danes. Later, Beowulf also risks his life to slay Grendel's mother, as well as a fire-breathing dragon. He sustains a fatal injury while fighting the dragon, but doesn't die until he has claimed victory and ensured the people's safety. The story closely follows Beowulf and his strength in battle, only mentioning others as necessary to better tell Beowulf's story, so there is no doubt Beowulf is the protagonist.

Example of an Antihero Protagonist in *The Catcher in the Rye*

In J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, a teenage boy, Holden Caulfield, has been expelled from multiple boarding schools and seems on the verge of being expelled from his current one. The novel follows the lonely, angry Holden as he abandons his school and wanders around New York City and searches for some form of companionship or comfort. Holden isn't a courageous character (he admits to being "yellow," or cowardly), nor is he honest (he perpetually lies), or strong (he admits to being weak). He's not terribly moral (he hires a prostitute) or tough (he ends up getting beaten up by her pimp). Holden dreams of being a hero—a "catcher in the rye," who saves kids from danger—but even that dream is based on him misunderstanding a classic poem. Put all together, Holden lacks the traditional attributes of a hero and is instead a teenage antihero. Nonetheless, Holden holds the audience's sympathy throughout the book (and many teenagers identify with him precisely *because* he is an antihero) and drives the plot, and is therefore the protagonist.

Example of a Villain Protagonist in *Despicable Me*

The protagonist in the animated film *Despicable Me* is Gru, a self-described villain. The plot hinges on Gru discovering that another villain is planning to steal the Great Pyramids of Giza, which makes Gru jealous, so he tries to thwart his rival's plan and pull off an even bigger evil plot (stealing the moon). Along the way, Gru does seemingly kind things (he adopts three orphaned girls, for instance), but always for the sole purpose of achieving his villainous goals (he thinks they can help him break into his rival's compound). While Gru does grow and change over the course of the story (he comes to love the girls he initially adopts and saves them from his rival), he never actually gives up being a villain. Still, Gru always has the sympathy of the audience and his actions and desires drive the story forward.

Example of a Supporting Protagonist in *Sherlock Holmes*

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a brilliant private detective with astonishing powers of deductive reasoning. But Doyle's stories about him are narrated not by Holmes, but rather by Holmes' "sidekick," Dr. Watson. Watson, then, acts as a supporting protagonist in these stories. It's through Dr. Watson's voice and perspective that the audience is told Holmes' life story. Even though the stories follow the actions of Holmes, the fact that Dr. Watson is delivering this narrative makes him as essential to the story as Holmes himself. He is a supporting protagonist because he is at the center of the story, even though the story isn't about him.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Without protagonists, most stories would seem to be lacking a plot. Protagonists are one of the key building blocks of a narrative, so the vast majority of stories have at least one. Here are a few reasons why protagonists are so important to stories:

- When a story has one central figure for an audience to follow, the story feels more cohesive. This character tends to tie together all of the story's elements.
- A protagonist tends to make a story more compelling, as the protagonist is the character that the audience relates to and cheers on through conflict of the plot.
- Because the story revolves around the protagonist, it's usually through this character that the audience discovers the story's central themes. The protagonist might be the champion of a particular cause or idea, or they might experience a realization that becomes the main subject and focus of the story.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page for Protagonist:** A helpful overview, with a few helpful examples.
- **The Dictionary Definition for Protagonist:** A basic definition that's very light on examples.
- **Why Your Protagonist Might Not Be Your Hero:** This short video explains why all protagonists are not heroes.
- **A Villain Protagonist in Action:** Gru explains his plan to pull off the "true crime of the century" to his minions.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Hogue, Chelsea. "Protagonist." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Hogue, Chelsea. "Protagonist." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/protagonist.