

A Character Function Analysis of *Duel* (1971)

In Hollywood cinema, there is no exact regulation for the maximum number of characters. In ancient Greek, the protagonist came to the stage as the first actor or “protagonist”. Soon after, Aeschylus added a second actor, “the antagonist”, to conduct dialogue with the first actor (Henson, 2005: 26). The function of the antagonist was to introduce the protagonist to the spectators instead of requiring the protagonist’s self-introduction. The second function of the antagonist, replacing the chorus, was to interact with the protagonist in a form of dialogue to move the story forward (26). The minimum number of characters would therefore appear to be two, but according to Wendy Henson, “it is risky. With a lesser actor, it would be absurd” (Henson, 2005: 30). Henson notes:

No one says you must include more than two characters, but writing drama is easier when you have at least three. Personally, I find my writing really starts to flow when I have five (85)

In the early twentieth century, Vladimir Propp made the suggestion that the fairy tale required seven characters (1968: 80). These are the Villain, the Donor, the Helper, the Princess, the Dispatcher, the Hero and the False Hero (79-80). It seems that Propp neglects the function of the Father, the older generation of the family member who is absent in the first plot function, Absenteeism. In his recent study, *The Fairy Tale and Plot Structure* (2015), Terence Patrick Murphy suggests that there are in fact eight characters by including the absent family member (2015a: 169).

Propp classifies fairytales into two genres: a genre of fairytale with villainy and a genre of fairytale with lack (1968: 102). Murphy renames the two genres in the modern time’s sense:

the genre with villainy is the survival plot story and the genre with lack is the marriage plot story (2015a: 169). Murphy further clarifies that in marriage plots, there are eight characters, but the number of actual characters may be five; in the survival plots, there are seven characters, but the actual number of character may be four (169). In the survival plot, a love interest for the marriage function sometimes absent. That is why the survival plot has one character fewer than the marriage plot. For instance, the Villain may carry out the function of the False Hero, and the Princess may carry out the function of the Dispatcher; the Villain may carry out both the Dispatcher and the False Hero functions.

The Cast of Characters in the Marriage Plot

1. The Father	who absents himself or herself, including sometimes through death
2. The Heroine	who goes on a journey, reacts to the Gift Donor and weds at the end
3. The Villain	who struggles with the Heroine
4. The Dispatcher	who dispatches the Heroines on a journey
5. The Donor	who tests the Heroine and provides her with a magical agent
6. The Helper	who assists the Heroine in some manner
7. The False Heroine	who presents unfounded claims
8. The Prince	who weds the Heroine

(Murphy, 2015a: 37-8)

The Cast of Character in the Survival Plot

1. The Father	who abdicates his responsibilities as a Father
2. The Hero	who unwillingly departs on a search, reacts to the Information Donor and survives at the end
3. The Advisor	who attempts to warn the Hero about an upcoming danger
4. The Dispatcher	who dispatches the Hero by setting a trap for him
5. The Donor	who tells the Hero about something bad that has happened in the past
6. The Helper	who saves the Hero by accident, sometimes dying as a result
7. The Villain	who attempts to kill the Hero

(Murphy, 2015a: 81-2)

Propp defines a villainy act or a lack as creating a move (1968: 92), and the typical fairy tale story consisting of the first move with a struggle and the second move with a difficult task is considered as a complete tale (103-4). For a story with two moves, there is just a struggle and a difficult task (103). The first move contains the struggle and the second move has the difficult task (104). In other words, if a story has both a struggle function and a difficult task function, the story has two moves; two independent stories are combined into a complete story. In order to decide whether a complete story has two moves or not, it is necessary to consider the roles of the Villain and the False Hero. In this respect, it is wrong to treat the Villain and the False Hero as the same character participant.

In a story, it may happen that the Villain and the False Hero are the same personae, but in this case, there will be different functions carried out by the same character. After the

Rescue Function, the second move (a new story) starts:

A tale may have another misfortune in store for the hero: a villain may appear once again, may seize whatever Iván has obtained, may kill Iván, etc. In a word, an initial villainy is repeated, sometimes in the same forms as in the beginning, and sometimes in other forms which are new for a given tale. (Propp, 1968: 58)

In the second move, a new Villain appears. This character may be called the Second Villain as well as the False Hero (63). Propp notes: “There are no specific forms of repeated villainies (i.e., we again have abduction, enchantment, murder, ect.), but there are specific villains connected with the new misfortune” (58). Here, Propp indicates that in the new round of villainy, a new villain will carry out the Villainy Function (58), and the new Villain will be punished:

Usually only the villain of the second move and the false hero are punished, while the first villain is punished only in those cases in which a battle and pursuit are absent from the story. (63)

The Villain and the False Hero (the Second Villain) never encounter each other because they appear in different moves. The False Hero never appears when a fairytale only has one move. It is possible that the Villain may happen to be the False Hero in the second move for various reasons including the Hero has not completely defeated the Villain in the Struggle, when the Villain escapes and comes back to find the Hero again, when the Villain pretends to be dead, or when the Villain shifts his shape to appear again. These are the main ways in which the storyteller can make the character of Villain reappears.

The Dispatcher can be divided into the Bad Dispatcher and the Good Dispatcher.

Usually the Villain carries out the function of the Bad Dispatcher and the good characters carry out the Good Dispatcher including the Father, the Princess or the Godmother. In each of these ways, out of the seven characters proposed by Propp, the number of the characters in a fairytale may be reduced to five. In some cases, the absent Father is optional. This again makes the number unstable.

Hollywood has a minor tradition of film that may be described as two-character conflicts. Although other characters may function to warn, to help or to hinder the Hero and the Villain, the Protagonist and the Antagonist, the central conflict revolves around the life-or-death struggle of the two central figures. In this paper, I aim to elucidate some of the most salient aspects of this minor form. By means of a character participant and character function analysis of Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971), I will explore the participant role of the Hero, the Advisor, the Real and False Villain, the Helper and the Hinderer.

Duel (1971) was the first movie directed by Steven Spielberg with a screenplay by Richard Matheson. *Duel* is the story about a man in a car who is chased relentlessly by a truck driver in a repeated attempt to kill him. The idea for *Duel* is based on a real story. On the day that President Kennedy was assassinated, Richard Matheson and his friend were driving home after a game of golf. On the way, a huge truck started to tailgate their car. The huge truck kept speeding up when they attempted to elude it. It was Matheson's friend who pulled off into a dirt siding and spun the car around, with the truck passing them by at high speed. Afterwards, Matheson wrote down the idea "man gets chased by a truck".

In *Conversation with Steven Spielberg on Making Duel* (2004), Steven Spielberg notes that the first version of *Duel* was 74 minutes long. Later, in order to meet the correct format for the ABC Movie of the Week, the film's length was extended to 90 minutes. If *Duel* is

divided into three acts, Act I is from the beginning to the moment David Mann hits the fence near Chuck's Café, Act II is from the moment David Mann goes into Chuck's Café to when he hides his car besides a small hill and falls asleep in the car, and Act III is from the moment he is shocked by the sudden truck horn blast until the death of the truck driver at the end.

In Act I, there are three major telephone conversations. The first telephone conversation consists of a hen-pecked husband calling the census district office to complain that his head position is being taken away by his wife. This telephone conversation helps to set up the motif of emasculation. It is also a dangling cause of the third telephone call. The second telephone conversation is a butcher calling a radio station to say that his special talent is playing on meat. The second telephone conversation helps to set up a second motif: weird things and weird people may be encountered, like the driver of the huge truck without any specific reason. The third telephone call is made by the Hero himself to his wife. At the level of filmic discourse, some pivotal information is revealed by the third telephone conversation. First of all, along with the first telephone call, this conversation helps to set up the Hero's emasculated and weak character traits. This is demonstrated by his wife's accusation that a man at the party they both attended the night before attempted to sexually harass her. His wife wanted her husband to teach the man a lesson, but the Hero did not fulfill his wife's request. His wife indirectly reflects the Hero's cowardly aspect. The second function of the third telephone conversation is to tell the audience why the Hero starts his journey. The Hero must see a person called Forbes to talk about some important business. Because of the telephone calls and the radio programs, the Hero does not notice the driver of the huge truck immediately. Instead, it is only when leaving the gas station that the Hero starts to pay attention to the truck's presence.

In Act II, David Mann spins his car around near Chuck's Café, and the truck passes by at high speed. David goes into the café, and discovers that the truck is now stopped outside the café as well. David starts watching the male customers in the café secretly in order to try to find out the identity of the truck driver. Near the end of Act II, David initiates a physical fight with a man who he thinks is the truck driver. However, it turns out that this man is not the truck driver. David fails to find the truck driver and leaves the café after the truck has driven away. The second round of chasing starts after David's leaves the café shortly after he help at the scene of a school bus accident and is attacked at the snake farm.

In Act III, David hides in his car and falls asleep. When he starts back on the road, he finds out the truck has been waiting for him. David unsuccessfully flags an old couple for help, and then sees what looks like a police car, but is not. David then discovers that his radiator hose is out of order. He is unable to get any help, but by his own effort he decides to get rid of the truck driver once and for all. David lures the truck driver into driving at high speed and causing it to plunge over a cliff. The final image is of blood seen dripping from the destroyed truck and David sitting on the ground triumphant in the dawn.

Duel (1971) has a survivor plot. In this film, the Hero is David Mann. Matheson purposefully makes a metaphor for the last name "Mann" which is supposed to indicate that mankind does not last (Matheson, 2004). The Villain is the truck driver whose face is never shown; the audience can only see his boots, his jeans, and his arm when he waves the Hero to pass. Matheson offers an explanation for this decision in the bonus material of the director's edition of *Duel* (2004): "I never visualized it in any way as anything but a straight suspense story. What a normal man would do when presented with such a circumstance. How he was to respond. Finally, of course, even though he was a totally non-heroic type how he caused

the man's destruction who had been trying to kill him". David Mann executes the participant role of the Hero. He starts his journey aiming to meet Forbes. On the way, however, David encounters the driver of a huge truck who attempts to kill him. In the process, David meets several Helpers and potential Helpers. In the end, however, David, as the Hero, executes the function of defeating the Villain alone.

The Dispatcher: An Unseen Character

The Dispatcher function is carried out by Forbes, who is a character who is never seen in the movie. Forbes is only mentioned by David Mann in the telephone conversation with his wife.

Wife: Just forget it. You gonna be home by 6:30?

David: If Forbes lets me go in time.

Wife: Is it that important that you see him?

David: Huh. He's leaving for Hawaii in the morning. The way he's been griping to the front office, if I don't reach him today... I could lose the account. (*Duel*, 2004)

On the character-character discourse level, this is a telephone conversation taking place between the Hero, David, and his wife. On the way to see Forbes who seems to be a very important person, David makes the telephone call to his wife. The night before, David and his wife have gone to a party, and at the party, a man has sexually harassed her. She has told him about this, but he apparently has done nothing. As a result, his wife is angry with him. After the sexual incident, his wife asks David to come home in time because his mother is coming to visit. On the director-audience discourse level, the director wants the audience to know

why David undertakes the journey, and why it is too important to give up.

On the surface, this conversation exchange is a phone call made by a husband to his wife. On the director-audience level, however, it attempts to provide the audience with some necessary information in order to understand the plot development.

The Advisor

The Advisor warns the Hero about a forthcoming danger, but the Hero usually ignores this warning. In *Duel*, the Gas Station Attendant carries out the function of warning. In Act I, David Mann drops in at the first gas station he finds:

Gas station attendant: Want me to check under the hood for you?

David: Uh, please. Yes.

Gas station attendant: Looks like you could use a new radiator hose.

David: Where have I heard that before? I'll get one later.

Gas station attendant: You're the boss.

David: Not in my house, I'm not.

The Gas Station Attendant suggests to David that he replace his radiator hose, but David declines his offer. In Act III, when David is trying to drive up the hill, his radiator hose breaks so that he cannot drive fast enough to elude the truck driver. The old radiator hose becomes a genuine danger. It is also a dangling cause of the critical obstacle that the Hero must overcome in Act III. The Gas Station Attendant carries out the function of Advisor, warning the Hero of an upcoming danger. However, David treats him as a salesman trying to sell him

something unneeded. He is thus a character who appears bad to the Hero. Curiously too, the Gas Station Attendant confers authority on David for his ultimately shortsighted decision, which causes David to respond ironically about his lack of patriarchal authority in his home.

The Villain

In *Conversation with Steven Spielberg on Making Duel* (2004), Steven Spielberg states “The truck was the antagonist. In the story, it had to have a personality”. Spielberg’s statement is partly true. It seems that Spielberg considers the truck and truck driver as a composite Villain who threatens the Hero’s life. However, the truck driver carries the function of Villain, and the truck is the murder weapon used by the Villain. The Villain attempts to block the Hero from reaching his destination and attempts to kill him. The unique aspect of the Villain is that he remains mostly unseen. The audience can only see his thick heeled brown boots and the blue jeans that he wears. The Villain does not have a name. This outfit is the only clue for the Hero to try to identify him as the Villain in Chuck’s café, but this attempt is in vain because all the customers are dressed in a very similar manner.

The Category of the Potential or False Villain

A Potential Villain is not a Villain even though he looks like one. In Chuck’s Café, David sees the huge truck parked outside through the window. He then starts to look for the truck driver using the man’s clothing as a clue. There are five customers in the café who are all dressed in this way and they are seated together in a line at a counter. One of them must be the Villain, so David looks at them from behind secretly. From David’s perspective, there is a man in black sunglasses eating something, a fat man with a mustache, a thin man putting down his glass and talking to a man wearing glasses, and a man alone drinking his beer.

Beside the real Villain, the other four characters execute the participant roles of Potential Villains. They look like the Villain because they happen to wear similar outfits. Importantly, however, they do not initiate any action against the Hero. In this sense, the Potential Villain forces the Hero to discriminate wisely in order to avoid participating in unnecessary and potentially unproductive conflict. More widely, they perhaps hint broadly at the idea that in a dog-eat-dog world, any man may be the enemy of another.

In Chuck's Café, there is a man sitting alone eating his sandwich on the right side of the door. He also dresses in a similar way with blue jeans and thick heeled brown boots. David becomes convinced that this man is the truck driver he is looking for. Why David is so sure is unclear. However, David starts to talk to the man eating alone.

[David gets up from his table and walks to the door]

David: Look, uh heh heh -- I want you to cut it out.

Man: What?

David: Just-Just cut it out, okay?

Man: Cut what out?

David: Now, come on. I mean... please, I-I -- Let's not play games.

Man: What the hell are you talking about?

David: I can call the police.

Man: [Stops chewing] The police?

David: You think that I won't? You're wrong, mister. If you think you can take that truck of yours...and use it as a murder weapon, killing people on the highway, well, you're wrong. You've got another thing comin'.

Man: Man, you need help.

[David slaps the man's hand, and the sandwich drops from the man's hand.]

David: Don't you tell me I need help.

[The man gets up and hits Dave's belly, and pushes Dave on the billiards ball table in the middle of the café.]

In this conversation, David assumes that the man is the truck driver, attempts to negotiate with the tailgating issue with the man and he interpreters the man's utterances as pretense. From David's point of view, the man is the truck driver. Again, why David is so convinced that the man is the truck driver is unclear. From the other man's responses, however, it appears that he does not know what the problem is. This tends to show he is innocent. However, when David slaps the man's hand, the man gets up and hits David very hard. Perhaps he is the Villain David is looking for. The audience does not know until it tracks David's perspective to see the man drive off in a different vehicle. The man in the café who fought with David carries out the function of the False Villain.

The Category of Real Helpers

The Helper is a character which carries out the function of aiding the Hero when the Hero is in trouble. In contrast, a Potential Helper is a character who appears set to help the Hero, but fails or refuses to help or whose help is refused by the Hero. Table 1 illustrates the

cast of *Duel* in its chronological order of appearance. Interestingly, except for the Hero and the Hero's wife, none of the other characters are listed by name. To be specific, there are more than 13 characters who appear in the movie, but not all of them are listed; in fact, there is more than one man in Chuck's Café, but in the credit list, only one man is listed as the "Man in the café". This is obviously the man who has a physical confrontation with David.

Each of these characters carry out the same Helper function. They are the Chuck Café owner, the Waitress and the Lady at the snake farm. Each of these characters provide help to the Hero. The owner of Chuck Café helps the Hero avoid more physical harm. When the Hero, David Mann, initiates a fight with the Man in the Café, the Man hits David back much harder. At this point, the café owner persuades the man to stop. After this, the man leaves. The Chuck's Café Owner carries out the Helper function. When David asks for aspirin, the Waitress provides him with some tablets. When David leaves Chuck's Café, he comes across a gas station on a snake farm. David asks the Lady to use her telephone and she let him make a phone call. In this way, the Chuck's Café owner, the Waitress and the Lady at the Snake Farm each carry out the function of Helper.

In contrast, the Old Man in Car and the Old Woman in Car, the Car driver and the Old Man in Hat are the Potential Helpers. In Act III, David flags the old couple down to ask them to phone the police to report the murderous truck driver. The Old Man in Car wants to do this favor for David, but the Old Woman says "We don't want any trouble" and keeps asking her husband to leave. When the truck comes toward them at high speed, they are scared into driving away. The Old Man is keen to help while the Old Woman refuses. The Old Man and the Old Woman thus function as only Potential Helpers because in the end they fail to aid the Hero. From far away, David believes he can espy a police car. But when David stops near the

car, he discovers the car is in fact from a pest control company. Once again, the pest control car driver functions as a Potential, rather as a Real Helper. Different from the former three Potential Helpers, the Old Man in Hat tries to help David, but is declined. David hits the fence near Chuck Café. The Old Man in Hat sees David and checks him, then offers his warmth to ask David needs some help or not. David refuses the old man's kindness.

The Category of Potential or Real Hinderer

A Potential or Real Hinderer is a character who hinders the Hero in some way, either by distracting him with something ultimately unimportant or by blocking his path in some way. A Hinderer is not part of the Villain's party, but he or she may inadvertently aid the cause of the Villain. In *Duel*, the Bus Driver carries out the function of obstacle creator. In Act II, David drives away from Chuck's Café. On the road, a school bus driver flags David to help by pushing the bus behind. Unfortunately, in order to help the bus driver, David's car becomes hooked underneath the bus's bumper. The truck driver seizes this moment in order to drive at high speed toward David's car. Being hooked underneath a bumper is an unexpected obstacle. The bus driver seeks help from the Hero, but instead, puts the Hero in danger.

The Cast of *Duel* (1971)

1. The Father	
2. The Hero	David Mann
3. The Advisor	Gas Station Attendant
4. The Dispatcher	Forbes
5. The Hinderer	School Bus Driver
6. The Helper	Chuck Café Owner Waitress Lady at Snake Farm
The Potential Helper	Old Man in Car Old Woman in Car Car Driver Old Man in Hat
7. The Villain	The Truck Driver
The False Villain	Man in the Café (physical struggle) The five men seated together in a line at a counter

Works Cited

Duel. Prod. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Universal Television, the United States, 2004. DVD. 26th Apr 2017.

Henson, Wendy. *Screenwriting: step by step: user-friendly basic training for people who dream of writing for movies and television*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. 2005. Print.

Matheson, Richard. "The Writing of *Duel*" in *Bonus Material of Duel*. Prod. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Universal Television, the United States, 2004. DVD. 26th Apr 2017.

Murphy, Patrick Terence. *The Fairytale and Plot Structure*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2015. Print.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans. Laurence Scott. 2nd edn. Austin and London: U of Texas P. 1968. Print.

Spielberg, Steven. "Conversation with Steven Spielberg on Making *Duel*" in *Bonus Material of Duel*. Prod. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Universal Television, the United States, 2004. DVD. 26th Apr 2017.