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## Loyal and stubborn heroes: the main character's personality in Classic Hollywood cinema

### Abstract

This research aims to analyze the main characters' construction in classic Hollywood cinema by focusing on their personalities. This work follows Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's notions of classic cinema. The sample includes films from 1930 to 1960. Character is understood as personality and as a psychological unit.

Characterization is defined by each trait that refers to the totality of their character. We start with the hypothesis that there are central tendencies for creating heroes and heroines in classic cinema. However, these tendencies also correspond with the film narrative model, which is shaped by the functionality of the narrative categories in the story. Personality is among those factors that shape the construction of the character. We applied a methodology of film narrative analysis to a sample of 64 films from six extensive genres in classic Hollywood cinema. The results confirm that the main character in classic cinema is conditioned and shaped by their adaptation to the film's genre. The hero is usually positive according to what is considered socially acceptable values; the dramatic needs of the plot predetermine their definition. The Hollywood main character's personality is based on their functionality as they serve the narrative needs of the story.

### Keywords

**Classic cinema, Hollywood, film genres, Studio System, film narrative.**

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze character construction in classic Hollywood cinema by focusing on their personalities. First, we identify the main character's tendencies and then categorize them. Ultimately, can we recognize frequent practices that articulate character as a category within the fictional narrative in Hollywood's Golden Age films produced between 1930 and 1960? We start from the hypothesis that there were inclinations regarding the construction of heroes and heroines in classic cinema. A film narrative model is also shaped based on the narrative categories and the film genres. Thus, according to the film genre guidelines, classical cinema develops story models marked by causality between scenes and motifs. This narrative construction shapes characters who are conditioned by their role within the story; character is among the factors that shape their personality. Although it is challenging to demonstrate this approach, we believe that our analysis answers this research question. This hypothesis is complex and contradictory since classic Hollywood cinema is so broad and varied that there are no formulas for creating characters. However, we believe that specific

keys complement the studio system's practices and can be distinguished and modeled. Therefore, our main objective for this work is to identify paradigmatic construction logics and models of drama in relation to the main character's nature in a sample of films from classic Hollywood cinema within specific film genres. The second objective is to evaluate this drama construction (i.e., the character's nature) as a category that benefits action or is inconsistent with it in order to give the character dimensionality and contrast. Character analysis has a narratological objective as it is a fundamental element for constructing the character. Our research aims to understand the mechanisms that shape a narrative category coherent with classic film practice by studying the main character's personality. We are aware of the ambitious nature of these objectives, the difficulty and complexity of the analysis, and the difficulty in reaching relevant conclusions within three decades of general practices. This period includes starkly different models and character genders. However, we believe we can model practices recognized as classic Hollywood cinema samples. Thus, we can acquire a global vision of Hollywood, compatible with more specific studies that consider other approaches and perspectives that study certain film genres, samples from the same decade, or a synchronic and evolutionary point of view, taking gender constructions into account, etc.

Following Bordwell, Staiger's and Thompson's premises, the notion of classical cinema is a theoretical construct based on a unified system of film practice, which is coherent and constant despite its many nuances. It instrumentally articulates cinema's history, making it a defined, limited concept with a functional nature that has often ignored its need to be justified. According to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1997, p.4), classical cinema comprises "an aesthetic tradition of an acceptable coherence that maintains individual creation," with an integrated system of production that maintains them.

Losilla (2003, p. 12) argues that classic cinema is a construction by "the scholars," an academic product created "as a closed system of writing, the main variant of what Noël Burch called the Institutional Mode of Representation", that does not consider the underlying currents that run through such a broad period and immense sea of films. This conception could also be supported by the cinephile who has "invented the Hollywood of nostalgia."

We do not deny the validity of Losilla's assertions, but a historical-cultural review requires categorization. As Bordwell (1995) admits, there is no classic-film type. Still, countless variants and alterations of an unreal paradigm allow it to be studied as a film corpus with enough features to determine a formal and stylistic coherence. Thus, a classic film style within a system of film practice in Hollywood between 1917 and 1960 can be established as a definite and limited theoretical concept that constitutes a premise of absolute functional value in film narrative studies.

This study focuses specifically on analyzing the character's personality. This means that it should be considered as a simulation of the person. This concept of the character does not follow the structuralist approaches that study characters through a role (formally in which the aspects observed are categorized into gestures and actions, in an attempt to generalize them) or as an actant (as a valid element due to the place it occupies in the narrative, as well as its contribution to the development of it) (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017, p. 183).

We use a phenomenological approach to analyze the character and their personality, in which we consider the nuances of their personality and behavior. We observe how the character is constructed as an individual, behavior, and transformation through a phenomenological analysis.

According to Casetti and Di Chio (2017, p. 178), the character is equivalent to a "way of being" and a psychological unit. The character's personality, Vale states (1989, p. 80), is the most critical factor in their characterization. Gutiérrez Espada (1978, p. 116) also points out that characterization should be studied with the character's purpose, intention, and actions.

The first issue when referring to character is the polysemy of the term. Thus, for example, Puig (1990, p. 99) speaks about "good or bad character." Even the expression "to have

personality” carries a set of characterizing adjectives. However, we will not use it in this sense, unlike Bentley. To have “a well-executed character” would, according to Bentley (1982, p. 66), “[confirm] a version of an old image.” The observation we make of character is not based on its evaluation but its categorization in order to determine dominant tendencies.

This work does not address character as a component of the person's personality. Therefore, we avoid perspectives from psychology and prioritize an audiovisual narrative view. It is necessary to establish the difference proposed by Vale between characterization, character, and characteristic when referring to character from a narrative approach. Helwig (1970, p. 27) –from the field of general theoretical characterology– defines character as “expression in a clear form, the profile, the lines that stand out.” From this perspective, the character is a totality in which each trait refers to the whole. Vale (1989, p.78) adds that characterization comprises “all aspects about a human being, of which character is only one; and characteristics are the simple factors on which character is built.”

Our idea of character is related to Alonso de Santos' definition (1998, p. 224) of personality, as “everything that individualizes us as a living organism and gives us the value of a person,” a concept also shared by Field (1995, p. 36). We will equate the concepts of character and personality from a narrative perspective rather than a psychological one. Therefore, by character, we mean the system of traits that define the character, thus individualizing them and giving them the value of a person. Thus, it is a specific category referring to a “way of being” that considers the character as a simulation of psychological unity. Character is shown through their decisions, actions, and reactions to external stimuli.

## **2. Methodology**

The universe of this research comprises all the characters from all the films produced by the Hollywood Studio System between 1930 and 1960. Although Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1997) marked 1917 as the start of classic cinema, this work's narratological perspective and the importance of dialogues in the characters' characterization has led us to exclude silent films. Thus, we have defined what we have generically called classic cinema –the Golden Age of Hollywood– as the three decades from 1930 to 1960.

The analysis population is limited to the main characters, which allows us to evaluate the hierarchy of the characters in each of the film texts. We took a sample of 64 protagonists/films within this population because it is impossible to use every one of the characters from the vast universe of our subject of study. We have not discriminated against the protagonists based on their gender and have included both male and female characters. We have found only one character for each of the films analyzed: those works with choral characters or shared protagonism. We determined which character took on an organizing or guiding role in the story. That is the one with a “differential distribution” (Bal, 1985, p. 100), i.e., with a more significant presence in the story and at crucial moments within it.

We applied subjective sampling by reasoned decision, where the sample units are not chosen based on stylistic procedures but “according to some of their characteristics” (Corbetta, 2007, pp. 288–289). First, we take cases from the main film genres from the studio system (melodrama, film noir, comedy, adventure/historical/action, Western and musical). We include action films under adventure/historical/action within the same category; peplum or war films have also been included. In short, it refers to narratives that revolve around aims requiring action and those marked by overcoming obstacles. Reducing this to six major genres is necessarily incomplete, although other more general categorizations could also be subject to criticism (Selbo, 2015). One of the reasons we turn to genre classification is because, as Coursodon notes (1996, p. 228), most of the production is composed of a genre from Hollywood's Golden Age. These films are thus identified with thematic, narrative, and formal conventions recognizable to the audience.

We add that “the film genre will largely condition the construction of the subject of the action,” since “a characterization of the subject is expected according to his or her incursion in a film of a specific genre, as part of its specific conventions” (Pérez-Rufi, 2017, pp. 31–32). For this reason, we believe that we need to contextualize the analysis of the characters' personalities within the film genre in which they appear.

Secondly, we chose works by the most notable classic Hollywood authors within the classical system of practice. A selection from the tradition of “great works” (Allen & Gomery, 1995, p. 104) is once again necessarily reductionist. However, we believe that a varied sample can achieve results representative of the universe of this study.

The sample is composed of the following films and their protagonists:

- Melodramas: *Dishonored* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1931), Marie Kolverer X27 (Marlene Dietrich); *Shanghai Express* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1932), Shanghai Lily (Marlene Dietrich); *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), Christina (Greta Garbo); *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936), Marguerite Gautier (Greta Garbo); *Jezabel* (William Wyler, 1938), Julie Marsden (Bette Davis); *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh); *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941), Regina Giddens (Bette Davis); *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942), Mrs. Miniver (Greer Garson); *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1943), Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart); *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), George Bailey (James Stewart); *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), Milly Stephenson (Myrna Loy); *The Heiress* (William Wyler, 1949), Catherine Sloper (Olivia de Havilland); *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), Margo Channing (Bette Davis); *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954), Maria Vargas (Ava Gardner); *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando); *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), Jim Stark (James Dean); *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955), Cal Trask (James Dean); *Suddenly, Last Summer* (J.L. Mankiewicz, 1959), Catherine Holly (Elizabeth Taylor).
- Film noir/suspense: *Little Caesar* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1930), (Little Caesar / Rico Edward G. Robinson); *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), Tony Camonte (Paul Muni); *Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), Samuel Spade (Humphrey Bogart); *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray); *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944), Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson); *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944), Harry Morgan (Humphrey Bogart); *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford); *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1946), Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson); *Notorius* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman); *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948), Frank McCloud (Humphrey Bogart); *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten); *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden); *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951), Guy Haines (Farley Granger); *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953), Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford); *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart).
- Comedy: *Duck Soup* (Leo MacCarey, 1933), Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx); *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), Ellie (Claudette Colbert); *A Night at the Opera* Sam Wood, 1935), Otis B. Driftwood (Groucho Marx); *Modern Times* Charles Chaplin, 1936), a worker (Charles Chaplin); *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), Susan (Katherine Hepburn); *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939), Ninotchka (Greta Garbo); *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940), Alfred Kralik (James Stewart); *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn); *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell); *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941), Bertram Potts (Gary Cooper); *Woman of the Year* (George Stevens, 1942), Tess Harding Katharine Hepburn); *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942), Maria Tura (Carole Lombard); *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949), Amanda Bonner Katharine Hepburn); *Monkey Business* (Howard Hawks, 1952), Barnaby Fulton (Cary Grant).

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- Western: *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), Ringo Kid (John Wayne); *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946), Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda); *Winchester 73* (Anthony Mann, 1950), Lin McAdam (James Stewart); *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), Sean Thornton (John Wayne); *The Man from Laramie* (Anthony Mann, 1955), Will Lockhart (James Stewart); *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), Ethan Edwards (John Wayne); *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959), John T. Chance (John Wayne).
- Adventures/historical/action: *Munity on the Bounty* (Frank Lloyd, 1935), Christian (Clark Gable); *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948), Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart); *The African Queen* (John Huston, 1951), Rose Sayer (Katherine Hepburn); *Moby Dick* (John Huston, 1956), Captain Ahab (Gregory Peck); *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), Moisés (Charlton Heston); *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), Cmdr. Shears (William Holden); *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston).
- Musical: *On the Town* (S. Donen y G. Kelly, 1949), Gabey (Gene Kelly); *An American in Paris* (Vicente Minnelli, 1951), Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly); *Singin' in the Rain* (S. Donen y G. Kelly, 1952), Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly).

Film narrative analysis is the methodology applied. We support Casetti and Di Chio's analysis model (2017, p. 33), among the many methodological film narrative analyses. According to Casetti and Di Chio, film analysis involves deconstructing the parts that make up the sample and later reconstructing them to identify their structure and working principles. By analyzing the character's personality, we aim to identify what structures characters are built on and thus model them, as we have previously mentioned.

Analysis methodologies such as the one proposed by Durán Manso (2020) include the study of the character's personality as part of a broader category; psychology. Similarly, Galán Fajardo (2007) identifies the personality type, which we associate with character, as a component within the psychological dimension.

Since character is the category that will be studied in the analysis of the main characters, we must first define how we determine the characters' personalities. We establish six keys from which to show their character based on the academic literature consulted:

- 1) Character is shown through the decision that the agent makes. According to Aristotle (1974, p. 150), it is "that which demonstrates the decision, i.e., what things, in situations where it is not clear, one prefers or avoids something." Vale (1989, p. 81) also states that the character's qualities determine their decisions about their actions.
- 2) Character is revealed through action; Vale (1989, pp. 82-84) indicates that cinema must show the character's personality through actions. Moreover, it is demonstrated through the protagonist's actions and everyone else's reactions. Although it may seem that we approach the notion of psychological unity when analyzing character, it is connected with a more Aristotelian notion of character made visible through action. In this sense, Field (1995, p. 31) affirms that the subject's personality must be communicated through action.
- 3) Personality individualizes the character and distinguishes them from others. According to Tomashevski (1982, p. 222), characterizing "is a procedure for recognizing them" in such a way that it would distinguish them.
- 4) Character is shown when reacting to an external stimulus. Alonso de Santos (1998, p. 228) argues that the characters establish their uniqueness and individuality as a reaction to certain stimuli "in order to avoid it by giving the same answers, they do not overlap with each other in the work." Character is thus revealed in what Alfeo Álvarez (2007, p. 173) identifies as the character's attitude toward their environment.
- 5) Character is constant. Although this does not imply that it is static, Vale (1989, p. 83) highlights constancy as an essential character attribute. It is thus distinguished from the character's possible emotion or passing feelings.

- 6) Character is an idea. According to Bentley (1982, p. 66), it would be the idea that the agent of the action could have about themselves, even the one that the author has about a person.

After defining the keys from which to recognize the nature of the character under analysis, we must specify the character's personality with adjectives in order to categorize them. We will follow the table of characteristics developed by Brady and Lee (1988), considered basic to human personality, with the contradictions proposed by Comparato (1992, pp. 96-97). Concerning character, some traits dominate over others. We will highlight the most frequent and representative ones in our analysis and their role in the narrative. The characters defined by Brady and Lee are as follows: frugal/spendthrift, gentle/violent, cheerful/gloomy; delicate/stupid; generous/greedy; clear/confused; gregarious/isolated; moral/immoral; gullible/skeptical; healthy/sick; naïve/malicious; cruel/benevolent; indecisive/impulsive; dirty/immaculate; intelligent/foolish; funny/disinterested; courageous/cowardly; boastful/humble; stubborn/obedient; fair/unfair; optimistic/pessimistic; calm/nervous; sensitive/insensitive; arrogant/courteous; extravagant/restrained; simple/complex; vulgar/noble; lucid/alienated; mysterious/clear: impetuous/calm; selfish/altruistic; loyal/disloyal; loquacious/taciturn; presumptuous/modest; effortless/afflicted; clumsy/skillful; shrewd/frank; historical/placid; gallant/rough; active/lazy.

### **3. Results and discussion**

The analysis results show that, within the lists of traits proposed by Brady and Lee (1998), the most frequent traits that define the protagonist in the analyzed sample of classic cinema are the following: loyal, stubborn, intelligent, courageous, moral, courteous, sensitive, mysterious, noble, arrogant, extravagant, skillful, and confused. All these qualities characterize them as a hero in a positive role, as they combine traits that could be socially accepted as virtues in most cases.

Prósper Ribes (1991, p. 146) emphasizes individualism as the most important compared to other qualities of the classic film hero. The absolute confidence in themselves would be a consequence and manifestation of their independence, leading them to command others without consulting them. This individualism stems from self-marginalization and disregard for societal norms.

Prósper Ribes adds that the hero's self-marginalization is a consequence of their independence, difficulty in romantic relationships, and distinct sense of personal, primitive, and ultimately a vengeful sense of justice.

The trait that most often appears in the sample analyzed is the protagonist's loyalty, which is understood as loyalty to their ethical and ideological principles and the characters they interact with. The main characters from *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, or *Ben-Hur* are paradigmatic when it comes to this trait. They would all be loyal to their principles from the beginning; despite their moral ambiguity at times, they would stick to them during the entire story.

The spy played by Marlene Dietrich in *Dishonored* seems to have unwavering loyalty to her country. However, that loyalty is first to herself and her interests as she allows the antagonist to escape through an act of love and thus betrays the trust placed in her by state commanders. On the contrary, doubt about loyalty to a close character who turns out to be much darker than the protagonist's believes is one of the main themes in *The Third Man*. Here, Holy (Joseph Cotten) must be loyal to his principles and ideals of justice instead of his criminal friend.

Stubbornness is the result of the classic film narrative's construction premises, as it stems from an agent of action achieving a goal. Classical American cinema, which is categorized as strong narration as opposed to weak narration typical of European cinema (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017, pp. 216-217), is characterized by following the narrative guidelines highlighted by Propp (1981): the protagonist must follow a specific path to restore an initial

balance. Thus, an event sets out a goal that motivates them. Therefore, the main character is shaped by this premise: the hero must constantly fulfill their purpose. Consequently, they must insist on the line of action and loyalty, which are fundamental to their characterization.

According to Prósper Ribes (1991, p. 158), the classic hero is the one who forges their own destiny. In his quest to preserve his niece, the stubbornness of characters such as Ethan in *The Searchers* is ultimately rooted in their individualism. When the classical hero agrees to put himself at the service of an imposed or proposed objective, they make it their own and persevere to make it happen.

Intelligence is the Hollywood protagonist's third defining trait. Among the most intelligent characters are the heroines of melodrama, such as those played by Bette Davis in *The Little Foxes* or *All About Eve*, Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, or Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* or *Dishonoured*. Their sharpness is revealed through their ability to scheme and manipulate other characters, as they aim to achieve their own self-interested goals.

Another intelligent woman is the modern young professional woman played by actresses such as Katherine Hepburn in *Woman of the Year*, *Adam's Rib* and even *The Philadelphia Story*, Rosalind Russel in *His Girl Friday*, or Greta Garbo *Ninotchka*. Also, in comedy, intelligent women manipulate their partners, as they do in the works by Howard Hawks (Pérez Rufi, 2011). The characters played by Hepburn are defined as "courageous, determined, agile and risk-takers, both in their personal and professional lives, an area in which they are also adventurous" (Durán & Cartes, 2017, p. 57).

The intelligent male protagonist is found in film noir and westerns. Among the most brilliant male characters are the tough guys from this genre: detectives, gangsters, criminals, or adventurers who survive in a violent environment and achieve their goals. If the tough guy appears alongside the femme fatale, the narrative results in a confrontation between them, exuding intelligence and wit, as seen in *To have or have not*.

In *Key Largo*, Frank McCloud demonstrates his intellectual superiority through his ability to make logical deductions. On the other hand, a gangster-like Tony Camonte in *Scarface* demonstrates his intellectual abilities by taking over the city. John Ford's westerns (*My Darling Clementine*, *The Searchers*, *The Stagecoach*) show protagonists whose sharpness comes from life experience and knowledge about the antagonist's behavior, as they can anticipate dangerous situations.

The fourth character trait that we highlight is courage. The character's courage coincides with the other qualities mentioned; it helps them achieve a goal at all costs. The characters use their intelligence to overcome obstacles and face them with courage.

The brave protagonist is typical in westerns and adventure films, given the intensity of the story's events, although it is not exclusive to them. Therefore, westerns are action stories in which the hero demonstrates their bravery when faced with an obstacle that stands in the way of achieving their goal. Heroes attain the audacity they initially lacked in the narratives in which a hero comes into being.

We highlight the main characters from Wyler's, Hitchcock's, or Hawk's films due to their importance. Wyler is a paradigmatic director of Hollywood classicism and creates courageous heroes in melodrama (female characters are at the forefront in films such as *The Heiress*, *Mrs. Miniver*, or *Jezabel*) and adventure films (*Ben-Hur*). The classic brave hero is formed in adventure cinema and is also common in Hitchcock's crime suspense.

Although Howard Hawk's protagonists are characterized as courageous in all the genres in which they appear, we highlight the female characters in his comedies Hildy (*His Girl Friday*), Susan (*Bringing Up Baby*), or Sugarpuss (*Ball of Fire*). These women go beyond the social and behavioral norms for the time due to their courage and daring.

Courage is not exclusive to the positive hero: the antagonist is bold in films such as *Little Caesar*. The main character Rico acknowledges his fear of failure as the driving force behind his actions.

Morality, as opposed to immorality, also defines the protagonists. This is due to the hero's unequivocally positive role as an entity in which a series of socially recognized virtues converge. We emphasize the heroines and heroes from Wyler's films (*Mrs. Miniver*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Ben-Hur*), Hawks (*Ball of Fire*, *His Girl Friday*, *Monkey Business*, *Rio Bravo*), and Capra (*It's a Wonderful Life*, *It Happened One Night*), among those whose firm moral conscience, becomes one of the character's most renowned qualities.

Although courteousness is a characteristic trait, it cannot be generalized as defining because arrogance instead of gentleness characterizes the most rebellious types. This is because Hollywood cinema has generated two generic character roles, referred to by Casetti and Di Chio (2017, pp. 180 ff.) as an official hero and outlaw hero.

James Stewart plays characters who are among the heroes defined by their polite nature. Kindness is the dominant trait in all of them, despite moments of angry and out-of-control behavior in *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Man from Laramie*, or *Vertigo*. The outlaw hero is typically arrogant, such as those played by James Dean in *East of Eden* or *Rebel without a cause*, or John Wayne in *The Searchers* or *Stagecoach*. Despite their differences, they share positive values with the official hero, although they show their personal disregard for social norms.

Sensitivity is a quality that shapes the character's personality. By sensitivity, we mean a character's responsiveness to the affections of compassion, humanity, and tenderness. The heroines of melodrama respond to such sensitivity. The sensitive male characters recognized as such are played by actors whose physical appearance differs from the usual Hollywood leading men such as Humphrey Bogart, James Stewart, or Edward G. Robinson. The young men played by James Dean in *Rebel without a cause* and *East of Eden* are also very sensitive, and Marlon Brando's characterization in *On the Waterfront* is also highly sensitive. The hero's necessary humanity symbolizes the liberation of a community in adventure films; such is the case of Fletcher Christian (Clark Gable) in *Munity on the Bounty*, Moises in *The Ten Commandments*, or *Ben-Hur*.

The classic hero also has an air of mystery as they make it known that they are hiding information that defines them. Therefore, they are complex constructions that conceal the driving force behind their actions and the plans that influence their behavior. Their goals are hidden from the spectator and from the other actors with whom they interact.

In this sense, *Femme Fatales*, played by Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg's American films, are also representative. The lack of information about her character adds to the air of mystery surrounding her, as does the actress's sophisticated attitude and glamour.

On the other hand, John Huston's films have a similar coherence, surprising as his works comprise different genres. The heroes of his films can all be defined by their enigmatic attitude, whether they are found in his noir films played by Bogart (*Maltese Falcon* or *Key Largo*) or Hayden (*The Asphalt Jungle*) or his adventure films (with Bogart in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* or Peck in *Moby Dick*).

Western is the genre that most commonly features mysterious protagonists. The stories conceal the basic facts about the character's past life and their goals and motivations, which are progressively revealed. In *Winchester 73*, the affiliation between protagonist and antagonist is revealed at the end of the second act. Similarly, in *The Man from Laramie*, we are unaware of Stewart's military background for most of the story. Likewise, the character played by Wayne in *The Searchers* and *Stagecoach* (also in *The Quiet Man*, though it is not specifically a western) does not reveal all the information that would justify their actions.

Nobility is also a dominant quality linked to loyalty. The protagonist's often moral superiority defines their noble nature. Westerns articulate noble protagonists regardless of their personal and autonomous sense of justice: Ringo (John Wayne) in *Stagecoach* was not going to run away despite being an outlaw; Will Lockhart (James Stewart) in *The Man from Laramie* would hire his employees, although his business fails.



The genre in which nobility appears less frequently is in film noir. Despite this, it is possible to find marginal heroes in this genre who maintain an unalterable and incorruptible noble spirit, as opposed to the moral rottenness and human misery that usually shape such stories, as in the case of Sergeant Dave Bannio (Glenn Ford) in *The Big Heat*.

Extravagance, as opposed to restraint, often defines the hero's character in classic cinema. The character is said to be extravagant when the parameters of their construction differ from the standardized patterns of appearance or behavior, which are often also present in the discourse. Thus, this characteristic is considered from two perspectives: physical appearance or a common way of behaving.

The characters that stand out for their extravagance within the sample are played by heroines in melodrama and the most over-the-top characters in comedy. In the former, we point out the women played by Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, Elizabeth Taylor in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, Greta Garbo in *Queen Cristina*, and *Camille*, and those played by Bette Davis in *All About Eve* and *Jezebel*.

The other model of an extravagant character appears in comedy (Charles Chaplin, the Marx brothers, etc.). Together with these, we highlight the characters from slapsticks and light-hearted and fast-paced comedies by Howard Hawks. In *Bringing Up Baby* and *Ball of Fire*, the heroine is an impulsive character who will drag the male protagonist into her wild plans (Pérez-Ruffi, 2011). In *Monkey Business*, all the characters who ingest the chemical compound play this role.

The characters played by Katherine Hepburn tend to be singular and original, whether it be in Hawks, Cukor's, Steven's, or Huston's comedies. Even a morally upright and firm character, such as Rose's in *The African Queen*, is unusual for the story's setting and genre, as she is a remarkable lady residing in a threatening context far removed from civilization.

However, the protagonist's unusual appearance and performance are accepted within the musical genre's parameters of normality. The characters possess this attribute.

Skill is another trait that defines the protagonist's character. We understand skill as the ability to solve physical actions, as opposed to clumsiness. This characteristic can be considered a superior ability that distinguishes the hero from the rest as it is needed to carry out actions. Due to this, heroes of westerns are usually particularly skillful (their dexterity in handling weapons gives them almost superhuman qualities), and skill is generally needed in adventure films.

The tendency to be confused and lack of control, as a trait opposed to clarity, is usually the female characters' dominant quality in melodrama; ultimately, these characters are dimensionally and psychologically complex constructions. Among these, we can highlight the heroines from melodramas directed by Wyler and Mankiewicz. Among Wyler's films, Catherine Sloper's (Olivia de Havilland) defining qualities for most of the story in *The Heiress* are doubt, insecurity, and confusion. In another sense, Julie in *Jezebel* hides indecisiveness behind apparent security and determination, which comes to light after acting impulsively.

The three protagonists analyzed by Mankiewicz can be described based on their ambiguous and unstable nature: María Vargas (*The Barefoot Contessa*) is constantly unsatisfied, causing her to act in contradictory ways; Catherine (*Suddenly, Last Summer*) is continuously anxious, which is brought about by a traumatic experience; Margo (*All About Eve*) combines perplexity and uncertainty among her characterizing attributes, resulting in a confused character that remains until the last act.

Insecure and hesitant male characters feature in film noir, as they are usually dismayed by their relationship with a femme fatale, as in the case of the main characters from *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street*, *Gilda*, or *Double Indemnity*. The femme fatale would thus be responsible for the loss of the qualities considered inherent in a male hero and ultimately the loss of his masculinity. Sensitivity and doubtfulness are female characteristics in classic cinema.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The film narrative analysis applied to the main characters of a sample of 64 films from six major genres from Hollywood produced by the essential studios between 1930 and 1960 leads us to conclude that the hero in classic cinema is defined by a series of psychological traits that make up their character. However, it is impossible to mention a character type by synthesizing all the main characters. In any case, this does not prevent us from finding factors that influence the construction of the characters, which are mainly conditioned by the film's genre. In general terms, we can highlight that the characters in genres such as melodrama or film noir, who generally have a more complex psychological construction given the personal nature of their conflicts, can be defined by a more significant number of adjectives than the more linear types. In genres such as comedy, western, or the broad category that we have called adventure/historical/action, the main characters are defined by fewer adjectives, mainly because they are constructions with less dimensionality and are even characterized as flat or stereotypical. Although it is impossible to establish the prototypical character of the Hollywood hero, it is possible to outline those qualities that most frequently form part of the protagonist's personality.

We did not base our observation of character on evaluating it in positive or negative terms but on categorizing it in order to find dominant tendencies. The analysis was based on classifying character in concrete and opposing terms, whereby the analysis categories became more complex as the characters' depth increased.

In such cases, evaluating the subject in one way or another is ambiguous because a psychologically complex entity is inherently contradictory. Thus, we can conclude that the characters in stories in which the action revolves around aspects related to their personal life will have more traits that define their character. This is due to the main focus of showing the characteristics that define them and a simulation of the real person. Although our objective has not been to evaluate the intricacies of the character's dimensionality or complexity, we consider that those characters with better-defined personalities will consequently be more complex and rounded. There tends to be more information about the character, allowing for constructing characters with realistic intentions who are complex and rounded.

We find a positive hero with values we understand to be socially acceptable in the case of Hollywood Golden Age cinema, which is conditioned by the dramatic needs of the plot. The agent must be driven by a goal that motivates their actions. We can observe their determination to achieve their goal, just as they must overcome the obstacles they encounter on their journey through sheer courageousness and intelligence.

We are faced with the dilemma of whether the construction of the main character's personality is dependent on the action and their functionality within the story or rather a dissonant factor intended to contrast with the character's function within the story. We conclude that the Hollywood protagonist's personality is constructed upon their functionality within the film genre's categories and serves the narrative needs of the story. Thus, this work confirms its initial hypothesis. The protagonist's character in classic films is conditioned and shaped by their adaptation to the film genre they appear in, above any other conditioning factor. We believe that there are also a series of traits, which, despite the breadth of the sample and its diversity, shape the protagonist's positive character in Hollywood classic cinema. The characters are ready for the action that will take place in the story, conditioned by the objectives of the dramatic action and thus constructed to overcome challenges in the story.

This work calls for a new study from a gender, sexuality, and identity perspective. Although there is an abundance of research that has analyzed classic cinema through the lens of feminist film theory (Haskell, 2016), it remains a subject of study open to new methodological approaches and more extensive and precise questions.

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