

Divine Secrets of the Rah-Rah Brotherhood



Charlie Chaplin as The Lone Prospector in *The Gold Rush*, written by Charlie Chaplin.

by Staton Rabin

(Writing Movie Heroes We'll Root For)

You slave away at writing your screenplay for months. Finally, you finish your first draft, do a rewrite and a polish, and proudly show the results to a script analyst. He tells you your story structure and dialogue are fine but says, “I don’t care about the main character or his plight.” What the heck is this annoying person talking about?

Speaking as that annoying person, I can tell you that if you don’t write a protagonist who is likeable—or at least fascinating in his rottenness and recognizably human—nobody is going to like your script. But, how do you make your hero likeable or fascinating?

You have the perfect answer! Cast Tom Hanks, Jack Nicholson or Julia Roberts in the main role. Sorry, this answer is a cop out; and the chances of your getting stars like this for your movie are about as good as my chances of winning the gold medal in the Women’s Speed Skating competition at the next Olympics. (Note: I don’t know how to skate.)

Yes, it certainly helps to cast a likeable actor in your main role. However, you can’t rely on this to make your protagonist appealing. But, never fear. There are specific techniques you can learn for making your hero engaging.

First, it’s important to figure out what kinds of personality traits will prove appealing to a film audience. Luckily, these qualities are very similar to what people like about others in real life: compassion, humor, expertise, stick-to-itiveness, self-sacrifice, charm, generosity,

empathy, courage, integrity, reliability, honesty, etc. Have you ever noticed that even people who are so different from each other they couldn’t stand to spend five minutes in the same room together tend to agree on which others are likeable? Often, even habitually nasty people (except, perhaps, those afflicted by jealousy) like those who have the good qualities they lack. Human beings may differ somewhat on which personality traits they find most attractive—but, more often than not, there’s general agreement about which qualities others find admirable, which is awfully lucky for screenwriters who have to create likeable characters out of thin air.

GIVING YOUR HERO “THE SILENT TREATMENT”

Perhaps the best movies to watch to get a sense of what makes a character instantly likeable are silent film comedies. Movies by Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd provide a veritable laboratory for studying what makes a hero appealing. In films like Chaplin’s *City Lights* or *The Gold Rush*, Keaton’s *Our Hospitality* or *The General*, and Lloyd’s *The Freshman* or *Safety Last!*, the filmmakers manage to make the audience fall in love with the characters these comedians play—even without using any words (other than the occasional title card, of course). Once these characters’ screen personae have been established (Chaplin’s poignant but plucky Tramp character, Keaton’s acrobatic genius and gentle

impassive face, or Lloyd's intrepid nerd who wears eyeglasses), the audience will tend to carry over their affection for the hero from one film to another.

These classic films provide us with heroes who are underdogs, besieged by troubles (but not wimpy or passive), and triumph over difficult odds. In fact, nearly every successful film fits that description. Audiences tend to root for underdogs who, instead of complaining about their misfortunes, make the best of them and (usually) are victorious in the end. When, in *The Gold Rush*, Charlie Chaplin gets snowed in and stranded in a cabin in the Klondike, does he complain about his situation? No. He cheerfully eats his shoe.

In *Our Hospitality*, Buster Keaton is dating a young woman and gets caught in the crossfire between their two feuding families (similar to the Hatfields and McCoys). When he visits her family's home for dinner, the "Canfields" leave him alone because even these bloodthirsty killers believe it's bad form to shoot a house guest (even if he is a McKay). But, the moment Keaton sets foot outside the door, they'll open fire on

him—so he's trapped. The mild-mannered Keaton, unarmed, is clearly the underdog. But, he's clever and thinks his way out of the situation.

Audiences like disadvantaged characters who find clever ways out of a jam and triumph over their opponents. What these heroes may lack in brawn, they make up in ingenuity. When little Charlie Chaplin faces down an enemy—in the boxing ring or elsewhere—he is always half the size of his opponent. But, he wins by his agility and wits.

PATting THE PIT BULL

Kindheartedness is another quality that makes a film hero attractive. This is why Chaplin is always adopting dogs, waifs or other misfits of society in his movies (*The Kid*, for example). In the trade, we call these "pat the dog" scenes. This doesn't mean your hero must literally pat a dog. In *City Lights*, Chaplin, in his ragged clothes as the Tramp, befriends a blind flower girl—someone who is even worse off than he. She wrongly assumes he's a wealthy man.

Even when a character may be gruff on

the surface and occasionally cruel (like Humphrey Bogart's Rick in *Casablanca*), if we understand the source of his pain and know he's a good guy at heart, we will still like and admire him. In *Casablanca*, Rick seems like a sourpuss who claims to "stick his neck out for nobody." But, the clever Vichy French police prefect, Captain Renault (Claude Rains)—who has access to Rick's records—speculates aloud about his mysterious past and uncovers evidence that Rick is really a self-sacrificing good guy who became embittered somewhere along the way. Eventually, we learn the cause of his bitterness: He was jilted by his great love, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), when they were in Paris. But, even before Ilsa shows up unexpectedly at Rick's in *Casablanca*, we already know he remains capable of kindness despite his unhappy history. His bitter words say one thing, but his actions say another—and actions speak louder than words. After refusing to help a young newlywed who is desperate to escape from *Casablanca* with her husband, Rick orders an employee to rig his club's roulette wheel so that she (who will have to have sex with Renault in order to get

"Where else, without an agent, can you get your script read by people who have the power to make the big decisions and get a project made?"
- Matthew Flynn, 2003 Winner

**4th Annual
Hollywood Gateway Screenwriting Contest**

\$5000 Cash Prize, Meetings with Agents & Managers and more...
Final Deadline June 30th, 2005 - HollywoodGateway.com
Sponsored By: *Final Draft, Scr(i)pt Magazine and Writers Boot Camp*


Hollywood Gateway
A division of the Writers Store

Present your protagonist with a painfully difficult choice between two options: one which will result in selfish gain for him, the other being more altruistic or noble.

her exit papers if Rick doesn't help her) can win the money to afford to buy her and her husband's escape.

Here are the *Casablanca* scenes in which Captain Renault questions Rick about his past. What we learn about Rick—and even his resistance to admitting to his past heroism—makes him more likeable. Notice how adroitly this exposition is handled: with humor and over conflict. The information is pulled out of him—Rick himself never tells us about his history of altruistic nor his broken romance.

At first, Rick successfully evades any questions about his mysterious past:

RENAULT

I have often speculated on why you don't return to America. Did you abscond with the church funds? Did you run off with a senator's wife? I like to think you killed a man. It's the romantic in me.

RICK

It was a combination of all three.

RENAULT

And what in heaven's name brought you to Casablanca?

RICK

My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters.

RENAULT

Waters? What waters? We're in the desert.

RICK

I was misinformed.

But, later, Renault pries more successfully—though Rick still tries to deny his good-guy past:

RICK

Louis, whatever gave you the impression that I might be interested in helping Laszlo escape?

RENAULT

Because, my dear Ricky, I suspect that under that cynical shell you're at heart a sentimentalist.

Rick makes a face.

RENAULT

Oh, laugh if you will, but I happen to be familiar with your record. Let me point out just two items. In 1935, you ran guns to Ethiopia. In 1936, you fought in Spain on the loyalist side.

RICK

And got well paid for it on both occasions.

RENAULT

The winning side would have paid you much better.

RICK

Maybe. Well, it seems you are determined to keep Laszlo here.

Notice the way Rick immediately changes the subject once Renault uncovers something important about his past. But not before we understand that Rick has a history of self-sacrifice and bravery—despite his denials.

By the way, the same “actions speak louder than words” writing philosophy applies to crafting villains as well as heroes. In *The Magnificent Seven*, villain Calvera, played by veteran character actor Eli Wallach, says lots of “nice” things but commits unjustified acts of brutal violence. So, despite his polite way of expressing himself verbally, the audience is left with no doubt that he is the villain of the piece. What does all this mean for you as a screenwriter? That both your heroes’ and your villains’ words needn’t echo their behavior, and they can and should have many facets to their personalities. Creating a contrast between their words and behavior will not leave the audience confused about which category (good person or “rotter”) they fall into—as long as the preponderance of their *behavior* is in line with one designation or the other.

Is it possible to come up with a “laundry list” of qualities that will make your protagonist more likeable?—a sort of Chinese menu for screenwriters from which you can mix and match appealing personality traits? Absolutely, and I’m about to give it to you. But, first, I must address the issue of anti-heroes who serve as a screenplay’s protagonist.

BREWING UP THE ANTI-HERO

Why is it that characters like the Godfather, Hannibal Lecter or Macbeth can serve as the “hero” of a film? Because even villains have some admirable traits. Sometimes, we like these characters—or, at least are fascinated by them—because, as rotten as they are, they are better than their enemies. Sometimes, it is their ingenuity, persistence, family loyalty, courage or expertise that impresses us. Or, we may secretly wish that we could dispose of our enemies with the same guiltless aplomb as these characters. But, most importantly, almost any villain or anti-hero is inherently sympathetic as long as the character is presented as recognizably human with all the complexities that entails. There’s probably no one on earth so evil that, if we knew the whole story of how they came to be what they are, wouldn’t engender some sort of understanding on our part, if not sympathy.

Even if your main character or characters are criminals (Butch and Sundance or Bonnie and Clyde), keep in mind that there are many things you can do to make sure that the film audience will like your heroes. Here are some of them:

1) Though there are valid exceptions to this rule, it’s preferable that if your hero or anti-hero commits a murder, it is not “in cold blood.” (Ideally, it should be only in self-defense or justified in some way.) If he kills, it should not be gratuitously brutal. He should not enjoy it, and killing or maiming should be used only as his last resort. Notice that in *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*, the two heroes, played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford, are extremely reluctant to do anyone physical harm. When they rob the safe on the Union Pacific Railroad train, they beg the man guarding it to open the lock and get out of the way before he gets hurt. When the man (Woodcock) stubbornly refuses to budge, and they are forced to blow the safe—knocking him down—they check on him to make sure he’s all right before leaving.

2) Make sure your protagonist is an underdog and, preferably, outgunned and outnumbered by those pursuing him. In *Butch Cassidy*, the two outlaws are chased by a relentless super posse (“Who *are* those guys?”); and it takes the entire Bolivian army to gun them down. They are ridiculously overmatched, which gives the lawmen an unfair advantage—and this only

increases our sympathy for our anti-heroes. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, the G-Men riddle the small, Robin Hood-like Barrow gang with enough bullets to wipe out an entire army regiment, resulting in a terrible, bloody death for our protagonists. It all seems so unfair. Americans have a sense of fair play. Make the most of it.

3) Sometimes, we like our main characters simply because their enemies are even worse than they are. Also, a protagonist's sense of humor can help endear him to us. In *Butch Cassidy*, we like these guys partly because they are so funny; and their enemies definitely aren't. Of course, having Redford and Newman play these roles doesn't hurt.

4) If you can't make your hero likeable, at least give him a challenging goal. Make him fascinatingly evil and very good at what he does. Hannibal Lecter may not be someone you'd like to invite for dinner (at least not if you don't want to donate your liver to accompany his fava beans and a nice chianti), but he'd certainly be an interesting dinner guest.

5) Present your protagonist with a painfully difficult choice between two options: one which will result in selfish gain for him, the other being more altruistic or noble. When your hero makes the right choice even at the cost of his own comfort or safety, we will admire him all the more. *A Man For All Seasons*, in which Sir Thomas More refuses to sign his name to a document that violates his God and conscience (even though he knows he will be beheaded by his friend and monarch, Henry VIII, if he doesn't), is a good example of a movie about a hero faced with a difficult choice who rises even higher in our esteem when he does the right thing.

A SCREENWRITER'S HEROIC BAG OF TRICKS

Here are a few more tricks for making your protagonist appealing to an audience. Keep in mind that heroes are never perfect (in fact, your hero should probably have at least one personality flaw that he can overcome through growing and changing during the course of the story), and villains are never irredeemably evil. Remember, too, that an audience's affection for your hero will depend not only on what they think of him but also on whether the stakes are high enough and we care about the outcome. If your hero's goal is not a consequential and

worthy one which is difficult to accomplish, we usually will not care about him nor what happens to him.

THE "LIKEABILITY" LAUNDRY LIST

- Give your main character a love interest who sees potential in the hero or starts out underwhelmed by him but gradually grows in appreciation. As the love interest evolves in his admiration of the protagonist, so will the audience. Jean Arthur played a cynical reporter in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* who shows idealistic country bumpkin and novice senator Mr. Smith (Jimmy Stewart) the ropes in corrupt Washington and gradually falls in love with him when she realizes he's not a naive fool but rather a principled and courageous man. As her opinion of him rises, so does ours.

- As stated earlier, present your hero as noble, self-sacrificing and brave (i.e., somebody who risks or gives up his life for others, rather than merely pursuing self-fulfillment). Many screen legends of yesteryear played this kind of role, especially Ronald Colman in films like *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Lost Horizon*.

- Create a hero who is striving to become a better person.

- Give your hero fears or vulnerabilities, and show him struggling to overcome them. Harrison Ford in *Indiana Jones* is terrified of snakes, yet he's willing to cross a snake pit in order to accomplish his goal.

- Endow your hero with a special talent or expertise, which he uses in pursuit of his dream even when the deck is stacked against him (*Saturday Night Fever*, *Rocky*, etc.). Keep in mind that in terms of film hero potential, the ability to write does not qualify as a special talent. Which would you rather do: watch me write or watch Fred Astaire dance?

- Show that the hero fights bigotry or learns to overcome his prejudices—without preaching. Gregory Peck excelled at roles like this, especially in *To Kill A Mockingbird* (in which he plays a Southern lawyer who bravely defends an African-American client falsely accused of rape) and *Gentleman's Agreement*, where Peck was a magazine writer (Oops! All right, so there is at least one good movie about a writer. But, he doesn't sit around writing. He takes an active role in pursuit of a goal) who pretends to be Jewish in order to bear witness to anti-Semitic reactions this might stir up

If you can't make your hero likeable, at least give him a challenging goal. Make him fascinatingly evil and very good at what he does.

in friends, new acquaintances and strangers. His goal is to write an exposé about his experiences.

(Note: *All The President's Men* is another successful movie about writers. But, Woodward and Bernstein don't just stay home and tap out words on a typewriter—they are reporters who go out and investigate a mystery.)

- Remember that a hero must be active in pursuit of his goal. Even if a film character is depressed, make sure that he is actively depressed, not simply passively sitting around in his robe watching television. An example of an actively despondent character is Jimmy Stewart as the momentarily suicidal George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. When he's at the breaking point, he gets ready to jump off a bridge—when Clarence the Angel jumps off instead, knowing that George will jump in and save him.

Of course, you needn't use all these techniques in one script—nor should you. Just use the ones that make sense for your character. If you follow my advice, one day your script's hero will be able to say (in the immortal words of Sally Field): "You like me! You really like me!"

CREDITS: *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, screenplay by Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Koch, based upon the play *Everybody Comes to Rick's* by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison. (i)

STATON RABIN is a screenwriter and veteran script analyst for screenwriters, major agencies, film studios and *scr(i)pt* magazine. Her novel *Betsy and The Emperor* is in development as a film with Al Pacino attached to star, followed by publication of her second novel from Simon & Schuster, *Black Powder* (fall of 2005).