

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

adapted from Walter Wink

Popeye is a long-running US cartoon which clearly depicts the idea of redemptive violence. The hero is Popeye (a man dressed in a sailor suit, with light-coloured skin); the villain is Bluto (also a man, dressed in a more ragtag style, darker and and bearded). Olive Oyl is Popeye's girlfriend and central to the conflict.

In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye then tries to rescue her, and the massive Bluto beats Popeye to a pulp, all the while Olive Oyl looks on helplessly wringing her hands. At the last minute, as Bluto is trying, in effect to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this infusion of power, Popeye easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved.

The format never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns anything from these encounters. Violence does not teach Bluto to honour Olive Oyl humanity; repeated beatings do not teach Popeye to swallow his spinach before the fight; nor does Olive Oyl learn to stay out of Bluto's way or fight back herself.

The structure of this combat myth is thus faithfully repeated with every viewing: a superior force representing chaos attaches aggressively; the champion fights back, defensively, only to be humiliated in apparent defeat; the evil power satisfies its lust while the hero is incapacitated; the hero escapes, defeats, the evil power decisively and reaffirms order over chaos.

The psychodynamics are marvellously simple: children identify with the good guy so that they can think of themselves as good. This enables them to project on to the bad guy their won repressed anger, violence, rebelliousness, or lust and then vicariously to enjoy their own evil by watching the bad guy initially prevail. When the good guy finally wins, viewers are then able to reassert control over their own inner tendencies, repress them, and re-establish a sense of good.

The structure cannot be altered. Bluto does not simply lose more often – he must always lose. Otherwise this entire view of reality would collapse. The good guys must always win. In order to suppress the fear of erupting chaos the same mythic pattern must be endlessly repeated in a myriad of variations that never in any way alter the basic structure. No premium is put on reasoning, persuasion, negotiation, or diplomacy. There can be no compromise with an absolute evil.

Questions for discussion

Can you think of movies or stories that follow this structure?

Can you think of situations—personal, historical, or contemporary—which follow this pattern?

What is the impact or consequences of this pattern on our lives?