

Sacrifices Must Be Made: A Review of Sacrificial Figures and Power
in *Captain America* and *Pan's Labyrinth*

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In both Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and Joe Johnston's *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), fascist, military dictators rise to power during World War II. The good people of the world suffer under their tyranny until the evil people can be overthrown. In reaction to that evil, each culture creates its own heroes. "Heroes frolic and fight and heroize across our cinema and TV screens in prodigious numbers. It's all about strength, courage, and action. In many cases it's about self-sacrifice" (Roberts, 2023, p. 33). The values and perspectives of the different cultures drive the execution of those heroic plans, but both ultimately require the execution of a noble figure as the price of victory.

In evaluating these films, it is helpful to acknowledge a shift in understanding terminology. The hero is the noble character in the story who does daring deeds and opposes the villain. The protagonist is the character or force that propels the sequence of events that makes the story. It is often the hero who is the protagonist, but not always. In both *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Captain America*, it is the villains who are the protagonists. This is the case for pretty much every movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe as well. If the villains were to quit their evil plans, the heroes could stay home and eat shawarma.

The Heroism of *Captain America*

Captain America is a film with two protagonists, only one of whom appears on screen. The first is Adolf Hitler himself. It is his acts of genocide against the Jewish people and desire for global domination that inspire the anemic Steve Rogers to repeatedly try to join the army. This is the low-hanging fruit of ideology and villainy; no good Scotsman must be convinced of Hitler's evil. With the agreed ideas that humanity in general and peaceful living are sacred, Hitler violates both on an international scale.

Thwarting Hitler is the inspiration behind Steve Rogers' first sacrifice. When a novel scientific process allows him to join the army and be transformed into the world's first Super Soldier, the frail Steve Rogers lays his under-developed, child-like body to rest in a steel casket. He is resurrected as an agile, muscular Adonis with the mission of "personally escort[ing] Adolf Hitler to the gates of Hell." When a subset of the Nazi military called Hydra launches focused attacks on the Super Soldier program and the people behind it, the focus shifts from Hitler to the second protagonist: Johann Schmidt, the head of Hydra.

While Hitler is the evil known to the world at large, Schmidt must be established to the audience as a greater threat to peace and sacred humanity than even Hitler. This is first done through his appearance. Many theists argue that humanity is sacred because Man is made in the likeness of God. Bush (2014) explains this is the common root of widespread abhorrence of murder and torture, though, he admits, "for all but the pacifist, there are occasions when it is acceptable, perhaps even morally obligatory, to attack and even destroy a sacred person" (Bush, 2014, p. 83). Johann Schmidt was the first to take the experimental Super Soldier serum and was transformed into a red-skinned distortion of Man derisively called the Red Skull. His demonic physical appearance separates him from sacred humanity.

While war is widely understood to be destructive and Hitler's concentration camps killed millions of people, the viewing audience is blissfully distant both geographically and temporally from such death. Schmidt brings his evil to the forefront by wantonly killing his enemies – be they Nazi officers who get in his way or Allied forces striking his secret bases – before the audience's eyes. The horror of so much death is softened by the comic book-level technology Hydra developed in its weaponry that bloodlessly vaporizes its victims, avoiding even the suggestion of so many corpses hitting the ground. Such violence and grotesquerie – including

human experimentation and body modification – may seem hyperbolic, but that is the unexpected twist of warfare Roberts discussed. Quoting Paul Fussell, “Every war is ironic...because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends” (Roberts, 2023, p. 44). This end, of course, is Steve Rogers’ second sacrifice.

Schmidt realizes his plan of launching an enormous aircraft carrying suicide bomb mini-planes with the aim of wiping out every major city in New England. After hand-to-hand combat with Steve Rogers aboard the plane, Schmidt unwittingly defeats himself by grabbing the mystical energy source that powered his weaponry and giant plane. With both the villain and the MacGuffin gone, there is no one left for Steve to fight. His physical might and prowess are now useless. The plane is on a crash course to America, and Steve sacrifices himself by crashing it into the Arctic Circle.

This is the ultimate message of *Captain America*’s brand of moralistic heroism. “Wars aren’t won with niceness,” Tommy Lee Jones quips as Colonel Phillips, “They’re won with guts.” When evil rises, America (at least, 1940s America) will sacrifice her sons to fight it, creating a Super Soldier if needed. When abnormal evil manifests, a hero must step forward to counter it, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

The Heroism of *Pan’s Labyrinth*

When *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018) ended, many in the audience shrieked in surprise at Thanos’ victory over the heroes. The knife was turned with the onscreen statement, “Thanos will return.” People cried, fans were outraged, and few realized they weren’t

watching an Avengers movie, but a Thanos movie. Thanos was the protagonist and the hero of his own story; the Avengers were the antagonists trying to keep him from achieving his goals.

The opening scene of *Pan's Labyrinth* shows 10-year-old Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) bleeding, breathing her last breaths on the ground. This moment illustrates one of the primary themes of the film: bad things happen, and then you die. Juxtaposed with the opening sequence of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the contrast is even starker. In *Captain America*, a fallen hero is recovered, and hope is restored to a new generation. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, a child dies a violent death to set the fatalistic tone. "Of course, self-sacrifice is the key; for all of its pagan ingredients, del Toro's film has the stark structure of a saintly passion" (Atkinson, 2007, p. 53). As the blood recedes into her nose and time turns back, the viewing audience happily shucks Ofelia's dying visage from their minds and watches her live out her life on screen. This is the Thanos moment.

del Toro allows the audience to watch the movie believing Ofelia is the protagonist, or at least the hero, but she is neither. In this film, Ofelia's mother, Carmen (Ariadna Gil) is the new wife of the vicious Captain Vidal (Sergi Lopez). Together, they join him at his homestead in the Spanish mountains where he leads an outpost of fascist soldiers hunting political dissidents and separatists. To escape the misery of her new life, Ofelia escapes to a fantasy world in the forest and nearby ruins where she is a faerie princess reborn as a human girl who needs to accomplish three quests to attain her divine birthright. In the meantime, her mother is on the verge of a fatal miscarriage and her stepfather torments and tortures his enemies, both real and imagined. At no point is Ofelia in charge of the story or leading the action. Captain Vidal is the Red Skull, the Thanos, the protagonist of this story. Ofelia isn't even the hero.

The hero is Mercedes (Maribel Verdu), the head housekeeper in Vidal's estate who is also a separatist. She sneaks supplies to the rebels in the mountains, relays their mail, and informs on the captain's plans against them. This is the brand of heroism in *Pan's Labyrinth*. With full awareness that life is a series of unfortunate events before one's death, Mercedes exerts heroism where she can. The allegory is emphasized in the naming of the captain; "vidal" is related to life and vitality, revealing that life itself is humanity's oppressor and tormentor. To put a point on the brutality of both the man and the metaphor, Vidal viciously tortures a captured rebel until the man begs for death. "War attacks a person's will by eliminating it altogether when the soldier dies. But torture bends the will against itself, and perhaps that is a worse thing" (Bush, 2014, p84). If there were any concerns about the sanctity of Vidal the man or hope for receiving mercy from life, the film lays them all to rest.

Pan's Labyrinth continues to use Vidal as the embodiment of cruel life through his patriarchal abuse of the women and children around him. He dismisses his wife's narrative of how they met as a silly story of no interest to anyone, though it was other dinner party guests who asked. When chastising Mercedes for allowing the coffee to be burnt, he squeezes her shoulder in a subtle show of force and intimidation. This is the great role an unrighteous patriarchy plays in the lives of women. It diminishes, intimidates, and subjugates them in exchange for harsh dominance, stemming from adolescence all the way into adulthood. In comparing patriarchal and more egalitarian tribal societies, Spector observed, "Tribal initiation rituals symbolically killed boys to turn them into men. Patriarchy, however, conducts *pseudo-initiations*, which always include both a threat and a deal: *Submit to our authority or else. Sacrifice your individuality and your emotions. In exchange you may dominate your women and children*" (Spector, 2009, p. 82). Vidal/Life is cruel, but it is especially cruel to women.

With Vidal as the evil protagonist and Mercedes as the heroic antagonist, what role is left for little Ofelia? Naturally, she is the sacrifice that must be made to overcome the evil of the world. Her mother dies in childbirth, and the separatists attack Vidal's compound. Ofelia flees with her baby brother into the labyrinthine ruins near their home, luring Vidal to chase her. Isolated, she discovers her fantasies cannot help her escape the brutal reality of her stepfather catching her and shooting her dead. "Ofelia may be escaping an unbearable reality, drawing her own doorways with chalk, and the mossy realm into which she plunges may play like the movie she prefers to life in a killing field, but her salvation lies in active resistance" (Atkinson, 2007, p. 53). By bravely luring Vidal outside his compound, Ofelia has rendered her stepfather vulnerable to the rebels. Mercedes takes his baby from him, and Vidal is not allowed even a last word. One might argue that Ofelia was not a heroic sacrifice in that she did not volunteer or offer herself for the role, but the sacrificial lamb probably isn't considered a volunteer, either. It is the sacrifice, nonetheless.

Conclusion

Whether American or Spanish, the overarching theme is that sacrifices must be made to overcome the evil of the world. The American audience demands a strong Christ figure to nobly offer himself. The Spanish spectator recognizes that, while everyone suffers under dictators, women and children suffer more, and life will select a sacrifice from among the suffering masses. Passive observance is never an option, however, and it is through volunteering to resist evil according to one's capacity and opportunity that makes heroes of us all.

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