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## The Murdering Hero

- A Study of Heroism in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*

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## Abstract

This essay intends to problematize the notion of heroism in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* by contemplating the hero himself as well as his enemies. Particular focus will be placed on the good and evil dichotomy, arguing that it is essential to the heroic tale since the hero is supposed to fight evil and foster good. Seeing that Ender is also a murderer, the matter debated will be that he both is and is not a hero. In order to do this a comparison will be made between Ender and the heroic categories constructed by Orrin E. Klapp, as well as with the mythological journey of the hero described by Joseph Campbell. Further, Ender's three foremost enemies, the Buggers, his human foes and his own mind, will be contrasted with Ender himself in an attempt to collate them as to innate benevolence, valour and morale.

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## Introduction

There is a hero in every kind of story, legend and myth. Mostly these heroes are made up of the same popular ingredients, the heroic qualities everyone hungers for at some point or another. The language of heroism is truly a universal language. Not one hero is alike another; still, they are all recognised and treated as heroes. This applies to Andrew Wiggin, commonly known as Ender, in Orson Scott Card's science-fiction adventure *Ender's Game*. Unlike many heroes, Ender is recruited at the mere age of six for Battle School to learn military strategy and saves the human race before puberty. This prodigy is not only a genius among geniuses but also the hero of an entire planet.

However, Ender is not the innocent boy he seems to be; he murders two other boys in cold blood. Yet, he is celebrated and never has to face the consequences of his actions. The contradiction of a murderous hero raises questions of the nature of heroism. With specific focus on the binary opposition of good and evil, this essay aims to investigate how it is possible to be simultaneously a murderer and a hero. By looking at typical heroic types, the hero's journey and the villains, I intend to study what it is that makes Ender different from his enemies in order to question the definition of a hero. Committing great deeds like Ender does is the foremost characteristic of a hero, while murder is its antithesis. Hence, Ender both is and is not a hero.

Not all heroes wield swords and magic powers but that does not make them less stupendous. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés expresses it in her introduction to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, "the mysterious energy for inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic stories worldwide is also universally found in human beings" (xxv). Being a hero is not exclusively for the potent and celestial. This is proven in *Ender's Game* where the hero is only a small boy. He cannot outdo many in physical fights but yet he is the hero. His mind is not that of a child but his body is. He does not conform to the archetypal concept of a hero. He is an unusual hero, representing all those who cannot stand to fight but still commit deeds worthy of idolisation, and inspiring all human beings to be courageous and find the hero within him- or herself.

The binary opposition of good and evil is fundamental to heroism. The hero's purpose is to fight evil and triumph over his enemies at all costs. Therefore, to recognise what is good and what is evil is essential. Nevertheless, doing so is not always effortless. The ease by which the reader identifies the villain is deceitful. Often the good are beautiful and kind and the bad are atrocious and spiteful. But if it is not so in reality, why should it be in literature? According to Margery Hourihan in *Deconstructing the Hero*, the goodness of the hero is never questioned

because by necessity his enemies are evil (32). That is, since he fights wicked foes he must be benevolent himself. If his enemies are good then consequently he is not the hero but the villain. Hourhan also mentions that evil is often external (34). In other words, the hero fights an outer force that can be conquered and he never has to struggle against inner controversies and predicaments. Thus, the identification of good and evil can have a major impact on the story. In fact, reversing this binary opposition can alter the story beyond recognition.

The relation of myth to literature, and especially science fiction, is entrenched. Gary K. Wolfe argues in *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* that myths relate to literature

not because I suspect similarities of heroic narratives and cosmic imageries, but because I suspect that many who read science fiction ... invest a certain part of their own fate in what it has to say. It provides them with mythic reflections of themselves and of their environments, and shows them what courses of action are possible both on a personal and cosmic scale. (3-4)

Put differently, myths appertain to everyone, everywhere, and literature is one means of being exposed to the morass of personal abilities. Folklore and legends, therefore, investigate, much as fictional literature does, the different aspects of human nature, history and intellect. As a result, they are very personal. Myths penetrate people's innermost wishes and dreams and render them tangible to everyone. Campbell conveys this idea most assuredly by arguing that "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (3).

Science fiction is a very heroic genre. Its boundless qualities make it ideal for creating different kinds of heroes. Telling a science fiction story is like having a clean slate with nothing predetermined but the limits of imagination. Anything is possible. As Thomas M. Disch declares in *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*, science fiction is "the art form best adapted to telling the lies we like to hear and to pretend we believe" (15). From the lies of science fiction, superb stories have emerged. Nevertheless, even though an entire world is at the tip of the writer's pencil, most stories are not able to move beyond their boundaries. These boundaries about the hero himself, his journey and his enemies will be investigated in this essay.

## The Hero

The hero is the heart of all tales. Furthermore, he is not only a hero in his own world but in the reader's world as well. Therefore, it is important that the idolised hero has desirable characteristics that can be emulated favourably. For the hero is a role-model, both in his reader's society and his own. Consequently, the significance of knowing what kind of hero he represents is great. In Card's *Ender's Game*, Ender's actions have ramifications that reverberate throughout the entire universe and someone with so much influence must be capable of constituting a satisfactory exemplar. Thus, the examination of *Ender's Game* will begin with a contemplation of the hero himself.

## *Hero Types*

Even though all heroes are different, it is apparent who the hero in a story is, and who is not. The features all heroes have in common, which in principle make them heroes, are readily recognisable. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell conveys his notion of the hero:

The hero... is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms.... The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected unspecific, universal man – he has been reborn. Such a one's visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. (18)

The paladin, therefore, is not identifiable by some specific deviation from the norm but by his deeds in life, how he has learned from them and if he has acted accordingly. Even though it is not wisdom as such, when the hero perfects the skill at which he is better than anyone else, he possesses insight others do not.

There are more explicit traits of a hero, however, that have been compiled into six categories by Orrin E. Klapp in "The Folk Hero." Fairly variegating, these characteristics do not always apply to all heroic types. Some heroes may combine qualities from different classes, while others lack essential attributes required for their group. Throughout myths and stories, these heroes reappear in their specific roles, acting in their unequivocal ways and they are recognised as champions and benefactors, committing deeds appropriate for their purpose. The heroes might differ but their traits reoccur in endless variations. Which, if any, features apply to Ender will be investigated in the rest of this section.

The most unlikely hero category for Ender is the Unpromising Hero or Cinderella. This paladin becomes a hero quite surprisingly, not having appeared to be courageous or prodigious before (Klapp, "The Folk Hero" 20). All the same, since Ender is born for the sole purpose of killing the Buggers, he cannot be the Cinderella. Far from being unexpected as hero, he is *supposed* to be one. Had he failed, it would have been surprising. Success is rather required than hoped for or conjectured. The impossibility of Ender being the Cinderella is mirrored in the opening sentence of Card's novel, where Colonel Graff eliminates all doubt on the subject: "I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one" (1).

Two other of Klapp's hero categories that can be easily repudiated are the altruistic hero types: the Benefactor and the Defender. The Benefactor helps impoverished people, while the Defender saves those in need (Klapp, "The Folk Hero" 21). Ender never chooses to become a hero himself. He is born to be one and has no option. He is manipulated, forced and tricked into becoming one. That is not altruism. Therefore, it is obvious that he cannot be considered one of these hero types. According to Klapp, however, conventionally the function of the Defender is often attributed to military leaders, who "tend to be interpreted in terms of the traditional delivering hero's rôle" ("The Folk Hero" 24). Not volunteering deprives Ender of the classification he otherwise would have been assigned.

The first hero Klapp mentions is the Conquering Hero. This type of hero uses physical strength and predominance in order to achieve his design. He proves his superiority by, for example, winning contests, enduring trials or fulfilling quests (Klapp, "The Folk Hero" 19-20). There are similarities between this type of hero and Ender. By winning every single game in the battle-room, he demonstrates his dominance and strength as a leader. But he lacks the constitution needed to be a Conquering Hero. This type of hero does not use his mind but force and determination to gain his victory. Since Ender does not want resolution and as he lacks the necessary physique, he cannot be the Conquering Hero. He conquers but with the use of the wrong qualities.

That Ender should be the hero type that Klapp calls the Martyr, might seem farfetched since Ender does not die, but it is, in fact, possible to argue that he does. Since Ender is born to be a hero but only remains one as long as he does in the eyes of the people, he can be considered dead when they stop looking upon him as a hero. He lives to be a hero and only lives as long as he is one. He is celebrated for killing the Buggers but when he makes people realise that the Buggers were good, he becomes useless to them. Thus, he dies for the Buggers just as Klapp says the Martyr dies for a cause, either willingly or by betrayal ("The Folk

Hero” 22). Ender dies for the Buggers’ cause. He was given life by them and dies for them. But by being tricked into killing the Buggers, he is betrayed. Had he not killed them, he would not have had to die in the eyes of mankind. But had he not killed them, he would not have lived.

The Clever Hero is Klapp’s second hero type and the one most suitable for Ender. This witty fellow is a borderline malefactor who humiliates his enemies and is liked for it. The hero’s intelligence is more important than his physique and the villain is often beaten “not by another big man, but by a little one who no one would have thought would have the fortune or the temerity to challenge him” (Klapp, “The Clever Hero” 21). Not surprisingly, this is the category most appropriate for Ender. He is superficially inferior to all his enemies but, in fact, he has a great advantage over them due to his superior intellect. He is not such an improbable hero; to the reader he is the best, but to some characters in the novel his excellence comes rather unexpectedly.

Furthermore, the use of humour is very important to the Clever Hero. If he does not use a sense of humour, he is fundamentally equal to his opponent. Since he is on the threshold to criminality, he has to win the people over or he will be the villain (Klapp, “The Clever Hero” 22). On some occasions Ender uses jocosity to humiliate his opponent, thus behaving in accordance with the characteristics of the Clever Hero. For example, when having become friendless at Battle School, Ender degrades Bernard by sending embarrassing computer messages in his name by hacking the school computer.

Marching constantly around every boy’s desk was this message:

I LOVE YOUR BUTT. LET ME KISS IT.

- BERNARD (Card 51)

Naturally, this is not allowed but the Clever Hero balances on a thin line between heroism and immorality. Because Ender uses sense of humour, he gains the respect of the other boys and even the teachers:

“Yesterday someone sent a message that was signed GOD,” Bernard said.

“Really?” said Dap. “I didn’t know he was signed onto the system.” Dap turned and left, and the room filled with laughter. (Card 52)

Ender lacks a very important trait of the Clever Hero, though. According to Klapp, this hero type has a need to prove how superior he is to his enemy (“The Clever Hero” 23). Ender,



however, never admits that it was he who wrote the messages. No matter how many times he is asked, he always denies the truth. The Clever Hero would want to flaunt his capabilities. Therefore, Ender cannot belong to this hero category either. He is too modest to brandish his wit and thus violates one of the most important norms of the Clever Hero.

In short, Ender's disposition corresponds relatively well to that of Klapp's Clever Hero but wants in one very important aspect. Hence, he corresponds to none of Klapp's paladin types. Granted that he can still be a hero, it is possible to question his heroism. Additionally, the category he fits the best into is the one most clearly defined as criminal. Ender is a child supposed to save mankind and yet he is a murderer with little respect for rules and regulations. How much heroism is distinguishable in this boy is disputable. He does not belong to any of Klapp's hero classes and neither does he move within the legal limits of society. It becomes equivocal if he is a hero at all.

The opposition of good and evil is somewhat obscured regarding Klapp's hero types. Obviously, the hero is supposed to be good but his actions do not always seem so. The Clever Hero especially is furtively appearing on both sides of the binary divide. By breaking the law and performing tricks in order to completely humiliate his opponent for his own benefit, the Clever Hero can successfully be considered evil. But the other hero types are not all exemplary either. The Conquering Hero breaks his enemies corporeally. He uses physical force in order to subdue his opponents rather like a tyrant. Further, at the expense of innocent lives, the so called altruistic hero, the Defender, frees his own people. But in a war there must be a losing side and that side most likely does not consider the Defender a hero. Hence, the hero is not good for any other reason than that he *should* be. Whatever type of hero he is, there can be no absolute goodness in him. The only hope is that his enemy is more evil than he is.

Moreover, Hourihan criticises the view Campbell and Klapp have of the hero. She claims that the common denominator of all hero stories is the foundation for their notoriety (9). But because they are recognisable and comfortable, "they present no challenge to the reader's interpretive or critical skills. Further, their series of banal thrills reinforce the standard perceptions and prejudices of our culture, assuring the young Western male reader of his innate superiority" (Hourihan 9). Thus, the uncertainty whether Ender is a hero at all is due to interpretation. He murders two boys and acts ruthlessly and cruelly and yet he is the person deemed worthy of idolisation. Why someone else is not the hero is a question impossible to answer. Considered the only hope of mankind, Ender is excused from many offences. He is accepted as a hero, not because he fits Klapp's heroic models but because his mere existence

excuses his actions. His one major feat vindicates the crimes he commits and makes him a hero. It is not important to the people venerating him that he has not always acted as a hero because his one deed blinds them to his other iniquities. Thence, the only hope of mankind is a murderer, distinguished for his accomplishments to humanity.

### *The Hero's Journey*

*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell 28)*

The journey of a hero is a complex composition of trials and does not only imply performing great deeds. Campbell depicts this conversion from ordinariness to extraordinariness in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. He calls it the *monomyth*, a term borrowed from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (28n). The monomyth encompasses roughly three stages: separation, initiation and return (Campbell 28). The essence of the monomyth is best expressed in the words of Estés when she declares that “the creative and spiritual lives of individuals influence the outer world as much as the mythic world influences the individual” (Campbell xxv). Put differently, we all affect and are affected by myths. Since it permeates everything, the monomyth will be the basis for the analysis in this section.

Even before the hero knows that he is a hero, he is given fantastic characteristics. It is Campbell who claims that “the tendency has always been to endow the hero with extraordinary powers from the moment of birth, or even the moment of conception. The whole hero-life is shown to have been a pageant of marvels with the great central adventure as its culmination” (294). Ender has always been special since he was allowed to be born as a Third; on all other accounts, however, he is not more distinguished than his siblings. They are all gifted and Ender has not been granted any special talent or skill that the others cannot boast. The only reason why he was chosen was that of the three Wiggin children, he had the most appropriate temper. Thus, Ender's heroism does not reflect upon his abilities but on his relative situation among his siblings.

Before being allowed to enter on his journey, the hero has to accept a *call to adventure* (Campbell 46). He has to choose either to heed or to ignore it and stay in his domestic environs. Whichever choice he makes, his life will be transformed and he will behold the world with fresh profundity (Campbell 53). All the same, Ender has no chance to go through

this transformation since he is immediately taken away from home; yet, his new role changes this submissive person into a dominating force, no longer subordinate to Peter. Furthermore, not until the call comes is it certain that Ender is a hero. In fact, either of his siblings could have been accepted to Battle School had he not carried out the tests.

...for years they had expected someone to come and tell them that Ender had passed, that Ender was needed.

“That’s right, look at him,” Peter said. “But it might be me, you know. They might have realized I was the best of the lot after all.” (Card 18)

At Battle School Ender’s life becomes drastically different. He is not only introduced to his future but held back by his past when he is once again bullied by the other boys. What he lacks is the necessary encouragement by a wise man, an element that Campbell sees as a very important component, someone who “provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (63). Ender is introduced to his new life by Colonel Graff who does not impose anything but distress on Ender and cares about his own interests only. Ender is thus forced to become his own aid, guided by experience and instincts, in need of no other talisman than his own mind. He has to err on his own instead of relying on other people’s help and while that makes him autonomous, it also causes much unnecessary suffering, not only on Ender’s behalf.

Further, a key stage in the hero’s journey is the so called crossing of the first threshold (Campbell 71). At this point the hero has to prove that he has indeed the qualities needed for success. The threshold guardian, beyond whom there “is darkness, the unknown and danger”, stands in the hero’s way (Campbell 71). The guardian represents the end of what feels familiar and safe and the beginning of the perilous enterprise. The Giant in the computer game is the first representation of Campbell’s guardian. Impossible to overcome but by Ender, the Giant guards the entry to the legendary Fairyland. The physical rendition of the guardian is Ender’s first victim Stilson. After killing him, Ender is accepted to Battle School and can begin his desolate adventure. The hero thus overcomes his compunction and ventures on the inevitable path to the future.

Hourihan criticises this separation of the adventure into what is known, and what is obscure and savage. She points out that

Precisely which secondary meanings a particular reader will construct from the civilisation/wilderness opposition depends upon his or her own psychological and social

experiences of other texts, but the primary meaning – the valuing of home as the site of order and reason and the perception of what is ‘out there’ as wild and threatening – is imposed by the very shape of the story. (22-23)

This enforces stereotypes where everything encountered by the hero after crossing the threshold seems strange and threatening and everything before appears gratifying and flawless. But there can be many shortcomings and perils in a hero’s life even before he enters on his quest. This separation into what is cultivated and what is feral renders the civil harmless and compels the reader to split the story into black and white, good and evil. Nevertheless, Ender is miserable at home, always tormented by Peter, ruled by his parents and bullied by his peers. There is nothing particularly pleasant about his life before Battle School and going there gives his existence meaning and direction however disagreeable it turns out in the end. Therefore, to separate the tale as Campbell does, is to render the story less complex and more utopian than it really is.

Until the hero reaches the ultimate boon there is no tribulation as challenging as the first (Campbell 160). Here the hero must pass the terminal challenge, the ultimate task, where he is tested for the last time. It is the reason why he went on the quest and, in Ender’s case, the reason why he was born. It does not necessarily take place at the end of the world, as in the computer game, but it is the climax of a lifetime. At the End of the World, Ender has to be reconciled with his brother and learn how to love, as well as hate, his enemy. He masters these conflicting feelings and thus also masters life. In order to conquer his enemy, he has to penetrate all the sentiments of his mind.

...In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it’s impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not *love* them the way they love themselves. And then, in that very moment when I love them—”

“You beat them.” For a moment she was not afraid of his understanding.

“No, you don’t understand. I *destroy* them. I make it impossible for them to ever hurt me again. I grind them and grind them until they don’t *exist*.” (Card 238)

Ender’s ultimate battle, however, is when he fights the Buggers. Strangely enough, he does not even know that he is fighting them. Yet, this battle is not only for the liberty of mankind but to justify his whole existence. He is blind to his enemy’s strengths and weaknesses as well as their true identity. His ignorance does not weaken his triumph but his sapience. He is only

able to consider the battle in retrospect. The sense of magnitude is lost both on Ender and the reader. The significance of the event, which is supposed to rationalise Ender's less morally acceptable actions, is reduced considerably. Its splendour is not revelled in and Ender does not come across as so prodigious and endowed as may have been expected. As a result, both his mission and his success become less valuable thus undermining the notion that the hero is to be singled out as the most precious persona.

Even though the hero has fulfilled his destiny, this does not mean that the adventure is over. The object might have been attained, the Buggers might have been extirpated, but there is still life that must be endured. That is what the paladin has struggled for.

“So what do we do now?” asked Alai. “The bugger war's over, and so's the war down there on Earth, and even the war here. What do we do now?”

“We're kids,” said Petra. “They'll probably make us go to school. It's a law. You have to go to school till you're seventeen.”

They all laughed at that. Laughed until tears streamed down their faces. (Card 303-4)

At this point Campbell sees that the story can develop along two axes: one at the end of which the hero returns to his people and one where he refuses to return (Campbell 179). Seemingly, Ender belongs to the second category since he rejects revisiting Earth and his former life. Nevertheless, he continues to make his voice heard and he simply changes one society for another and toils to influence and develop the colony. He becomes the first Speaker for the Dead, virtually creating a new religion. He also labours to exonerate the Buggers. Consequently, he does not withdraw but actually strives to impress the community that took advantage of him. He who was the exploited has now become the exploiter.

The returning hero meets with other problems than adoring mobs and laudation. He has to find a method to make people comprehend what he has realised and disclosed during his enterprise (Campbell 202). As Campbell explains, “he has yet to re-enter with his boon the long forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete” (201). He who possesses so much knowledge and sagaciousness is obliged to translate this into a language comprehensible to those who were not present and cannot possibly understand him. Ender decides to do this by writing a book. His motive is not to educate, however, but to absolve himself. His selfish reason for telling the Buggers' story is not to focus on their rectitude but to make people hate him as much as he does himself. He wants to be condoned for genocide and can only achieve this if people love the Buggers as much as he does.

Being a hero is thus not only a matter of committing good deeds or rescuing people in need but a way of renouncing oneself in order to serve others:

The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. (Campbell 220)

Ender does not exist but for the use of others. They are at liberty to revoke his valour and when he writes the book about the Buggers, they do. Thus, Ender begins his life as a hero and ends adolescence as nothing. As soon as he has fulfilled his destiny, he becomes useless; he becomes a military leader in a world of peace. He brings about his own demise, can do nothing to impede it and, by writing about the Buggers, he further intensifies it. Throughout his journey he disintegrates himself into small pieces. Ultimately, he utterly and completely destroys himself.

In the end, good always prevails and “evil is banished from the land, and the ‘good’ can return to their home in peace” (Hourihan 53). But is this really the case in *Ender’s Game*? Ender causes inexcusable cruelty to his enemies and, when he can, acts only out of self-interest. As indicated by James Bonnet in “Exploring the Dark Side: The Anti-Hero’s Journey,” the villain manifests egoism. When released from the shackles of military training and no longer forced to act for the benefit of mankind, Ender grows selfish.

“Let somebody else be famous. Peter wants to be famous. Let him save the world.”

“I’m not talking about fame, Ender. I’m not talking about power, either. I’m talking about accidents, just like the accident that Mazer Rackham happened to be the one who was there when somebody had to stop the buggers.”

“If I’m here,” said Ender, “then I won’t be there. Somebody else will. Let them have the accident.”

His tone of weary unconcern infuriated her. “I’m talking about *my* life, you self-centered little bastard.” (Card 240)

Likewise, “The misery the anti-hero creates finally becomes unbearable, and he/she has to be destroyed” (Bonnet). Therefore, Ender demolishes himself. He shatters the image of himself

as a hero by writing about the Buggers. He is oversupplied with wretchedness and has to destroy the anti-hero he has become. He has not been good, he has not substantiated morality like a hero ought. He has murdered and abolished and is rather a villain than a hero. Thus, he proves without a doubt that, while he cannot undo what he has done, there will at least be vindication for the Buggers. He makes certain that others see him as the iniquity he is. He has completed the journey of a hero but by doing so, he has become a villain.

### The Enemies

A hero cannot be a hero without people worshipping him. Further, a hero cannot be a hero without an adversary, an opposite of himself who makes his own goodness stand out. In other words, to understand the good one has to comprehend the bad. If there is no clear binary opposite to goodness, it is impossible to appreciate fully the virtue of the hero. Therefore, in order to understand Ender himself, I intend to look at Ender's enemies. If he is as benevolent as he claims to be, this is how it can be validated.

Essentially, Ender has three kinds of enemies. First, there are the Buggers, the most obvious antagonist. They are extraterrestrials who have invaded Earth twice and incite fear upon the people. To destroy them is the goal of Ender's education. Second, we have some people in proximity to Ender, who in various ways try to hurt or hinder him, and whom he has to struggle against. Some of these people are barely older than Ender himself. Third, Ender has to fight his own mental ghosts. He has to wrestle with his own fears and doubts that take form in his dreams and a computer game he plays.

### *The Buggers*

The Buggers are the monsters under children's beds, the bogeymen in fairytales and the monsters in mythology. They are superior to humans in strength and technology. The only person ever to beat them was Mazer Rackham, who did it by pure chance. Still, Ender is supposed to do the impossible; he is supposed to attack and conquer the Buggers at their home planet where they are at their strongest. Their demise is the fulfilment of his quest, the actual foundation for his existence. In fact, the Buggers are the reason why Ender is alive. Had there not been a need for someone like Ender, the government would never have let his parents have a third child.

Hourihan points out in *Deconstructing the Hero*, that the monster is always threatening the hero and thus he is justified in his effort to eradicate it (107). Put differently, if someone is trying to kill you, you can kill him. Campbell agrees with Hourihan when claiming that "the

shining hero going against the dragon has been the great device of self-justification for all crusades” (315). This is true in *Ender’s Game* as well. Here the dragon is the Buggers and Ender is celebrated for destroying them. In essence, the planned invasion on the Buggers is a retaliation. However, the humans are doing to the Buggers exactly what the Buggers did to them. How can they condemn the Buggers for their invasion when they do the same thing? The difference is that the humans are fully aware of the consequences of their actions while the Buggers believe they are exterminating a species of mindless creatures. Still, the invasion and eventual eradication of the Buggers is praised because they are monsters and as long as your opponents are murderous beasts, you are allowed to kill them without repercussions.

Furthermore, Hourihan criticises this general rationalisation of violence in heroic literature, arguing that “it justifies wars, pogroms and oppression” (107). She also argues that “At the level of professional and personal relationships it offers a model of confrontation and dominance” (107), which amounts to saying that this pattern of acceptable dominance translates to the individual sphere as well. This is obvious in *Ender’s Game*, where success is measured in how many Buggers one has killed or how many games one has won in Battle School and thus automatically in how well one can dominate one’s fellow students. Ender is superior in these fields but in others he is not the oppressor but the oppressed. Colonel Graff and Anderson, the leaders of Battle School, are able to manipulate Ender for their own needs. Since they do not have Ender’s best at heart but care more about winning the war against the Buggers, they force him to do things he feels are morally wrong. They can do this because Ender cannot fail. Whatever they make him do, he has to go through with it because if he fails, his whole existence is useless and devoid of meaning. If he fails, he should never have been born and, in theory, they should be at liberty to obliterate him. Hence, because of the Buggers, Ender exists but his existence is not unconditional.

To Ender, the Buggers do not only signify life and death but in their actions they reflect his mistakes. The greatest error the Buggers make is to attack Earth. They do not believe humans are beings of substance and that their deaths matter. In other words, they do not know they are killing individuals. Ender does not know that either. He is tricked into annihilating the Buggers, believing that it is a game among many others. That is where his mistake lies, in not recognising that behind the façade of the game there are living creatures. The Buggers cannot excuse themselves for what they have done and as a result, accept their deaths. However, they ask forgiveness of the human race by contacting Ender and simultaneously grant him forgiveness for killing them. Like the Buggers, Ender cannot condone his own actions. Nonetheless, when concurrently forgiving each other, they also forgive themselves.



The Buggers live on a distant planet. Yet, they are very much present in life on Earth. They instigate terror, not because they are hideous monsters, but because, as Wolfe points out,

The barrier separating known and unknown ... is penetrated not necessarily by human beings, but often by the invading aliens, who cross the unknown into mankind's awareness and thus circumscribe its rational universe. The unknown becomes the more fearsome through the knowledge that it contains an intelligence other than our own, and that to that intelligence, *we* are part of the unknown that remains to be appropriated. (205)

They penetrate not only people's minds but the entire social structure. Due to the Bugger wars, there is world peace. It might appear strange that war can lead to peace since this idea contradicts the common notion that peace will only prevail if all warmongering ceases. According to Card's *Ender's Game*, all that is needed is a common enemy to focus on and it proves how futile the disputes that lead to war are. However, even stranger than war leading to peace is the fact that the humans are so intent on destroying this peace by removing the threat of the Buggers. There no longer being a mutual enemy provides leeway for these useless quarrels to merge yet again.

"You're finished with me," Ender said. "Now leave me alone."

"That's why we're here," Mazer said. "We're trying to tell you. They're not through with you, not at all. It's crazy down there. They're going to start a war. Americans claiming the Warsaw Pact is about to attack, and the Russians are saying the same thing about the Hegemon. The bugger war isn't twenty-four hours dead and the world down there is back to fighting again, as bad as ever. All of them are worried about you. All of them want you. The greatest military leader in history, they want you to lead their armies. The Americans. The Hegemony. Everybody but the Warsaw Pact, and they want you dead." (Card 299)

To conclude, in the early parts of Card's novel the opposition between good and evil is very evident; the Buggers are evil and mankind has suffered at their hands. This view gives Ender's life a morally defensible purpose. He is, after all, born to commit genocide. In order to justify his own existence, he has to believe that the Buggers are evil and deserve death. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the Buggers are not as bad as they are made out to be to the public. In essence, their invasion is due to a misunderstanding. This obviously causes problems for Ender's perspective on life. He realises that the Buggers are not unlike humans; unfortunately, it is already too late. But if there never was an enemy,

Ender cannot be a hero. This essential element that is so fundamental to the hero's existence is lacking. When Ender publishes his book on the Buggers, he makes people aware of these circumstances. But if he is not a hero in the eyes of the people, he has to be something else. As Klapp points out in "Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control," "The need for culprits may be so great as to provoke outright scapegoating" (60). Thus Ender must become the villain, blamed for doing what he was born to do.

### *The Humans*

Notwithstanding that Ender's primary enemies are the Buggers, they are not alone in constituting a threat to his existence. Twice Ender has to use physical force to retain his life. Noticeably, on both occasions his opponents are not much older than him. But there are adults too who have the power to harm him. The most prominent of these, Colonel Graff, has unlimited influence over Ender's life. With a single word he can terminate Ender's training and thus his future. Nevertheless, it is not an outsider who is Ender's primary enemy but his own brother Peter.

The first time Ender fears for his life is when he and Peter play together. On one occasion Peter does not only threaten to kill him but stands on his abdomen in an attempt to suffocate him (Card 12). Peter uses terror to dominate his siblings and Ender is unable to stand up to him, being smaller and more benign. Yet, had Peter been accepted to Battle School, Ender would never have been born. Ironically, those people Ender has to thank for his life are his main enemies, the Buggers and Peter. Ender is not grateful, however. Because of Peter, to be at home is a torment, not only physically, but mentally as well. Ender has to be constantly alert in case Peter should assault him. In all likelihood, this quality helps him survive Battle School and is of main importance in conquering the Buggers. Therefore, Ender is much indebted to Peter.

Peter does not only affect Ender during the years they live together but he is present in Ender's mind throughout. Ender finds his identity on being as different from Peter as possible.

Ender grabbed Mazer's uniform and hung onto it, pulling him down so they were face to face. "I didn't want to kill them all. I didn't want to kill anybody! I'm not a killer! You didn't want me, you bastards, you wanted Peter, but you made me do it, you tricked me into it!" He was crying. He was out of control. (Card 297-8)

Even so, they are not as different as it may seem. Peter is not accepted to Battle School because he lacks empathy but it is Ender who murders two boys. Peter is the sadist but it is Ender who viciously digs out the Giant's eye. It becomes increasingly difficult to discern who is the worse of the two.

“I'm crazy,” said Ender. “But I think I'm OK.”

“When did you decide that?” asked Alai.

“When I thought you were about to kill me, and I decided to kill you first. I guess I'm just a killer to the core. But I'd rather be alive than dead.” (Card 303)

Ender's identity is thus built on nothing. Their dissimilarity is in his fancy only, derived not from reality but from his wishes alone.

Even though Ender and Peter sleep in the same bedroom for six years, Ender ends up knowing less about him than about the Buggers. To Ender, Peter is the brother who enjoys cruelty and tries to kill him. He denies Peter the benefit of the doubt which he so avidly asks for himself. Hypocritically he begs the reader for forgiveness but refuses to listen to Valentine's pleas on Peter's behalf. Probably Ender unconsciously recognises himself in Peter and since he cannot forgive himself, he cannot forgive Peter either. But Peter's anger is rationalised by his jealousy. He was the esteemed boy once but now his younger brother is better than him. He takes out his anger on Ender in the only way he knows how. Ender, being so similar to his brother, should realise this and make some allowances for his behaviour. As Hourihan points out, in typical hero stories “The circumstances which have made the criminals what they are, or the values which label and reward the hero, are not examined” (144). Had Ender been placed in Peter's position, it is very possible that he would have reacted in the same way.

Furthermore, Ender being blind regarding Peter prevents him from acknowledging the change Peter undergoes. Since Peter embraces his dark sides, he can identify them and rid them from his character. Ender, on the other hand, denies his faults and therefore never manages to eliminate them. Consequently, because he is unable to change, he believes that Peter is as well. Not even as an adolescent can Ender admit that he is similar to Peter, who is actually more benevolent than Ender himself. He can only deal with the ambivalence by accepting the new Peter. Yet, he is unwilling to do so until they live thousands of miles from each other on different planets and Peter cannot hurt him anymore.

Thus, the binary opposition of good and evil is emphasised and maintained.. Ender, who is the hero, is naturally good and Peter, as Ender's enemy, represents evil. Still, this distribution of roles can be doubted. In fact, I would argue that the opposite is more accurate. Peter expresses sadistic wishes but these never escalate beyond torturing squirrels. Ender, though claiming to be kind-hearted, murders two boys in cold blood and annihilates an entire race. Moreover, Peter uses the Internet for political propaganda and eventually negotiates peace on Earth. As a result, he saves hundreds of thousands of lives. Accordingly, Peter achieves more good than Ender despite his innate disposition. There is definitely kindness in Peter; he only chooses not to express it and consequently, when he does, it feels sincere.

He thinks I'm asleep. He's going to kill me.

Peter walked to the bed, and sure enough, he did not lift himself up to his bed. Instead he came and stood by Ender's head.

But he did not reach for a pillow to smother Ender. He did not have a weapon.

He whispered, "Ender, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know how it feels, I'm sorry, I'm your brother, I love you." (Card 15)

Committing good acts does not make an altruistic person but in Peter's case there is no evidence to the contrary. Even though the reader is supposed to sympathise with Ender, he can be equated with evil and Peter with good.

Since Peter and Ender are brothers, they contradict Hourihan's claim that the hero's enemy presents a moral and emotional opposite of the hero (17, 31). There is no reason why Peter should not be preferred over Ender, other than Ender being the chosen protagonist. Typically, heroes "have the right, and the duty, to kill those who are 'evil,' and it encourages demonizing and stereotyping... suggesting that violence is natural for boys" (Hourihan 100-101). But killing Peter is not a possibility for Ender and his death could never be justified. Even though he might seem evil, Peter is Ender's brother and warranting his death would imply breaking every family connection and fraternal bond they have. Killing Peter would mean killing a part of himself. As Valentine concludes, "Peter has mellowed, but you, they've made you into a killer. Two sides of the same coin, but which side is which?" (Card 238).

The second time Ender fears for his life is when the bully Stilson corners him at school. Unaware that he has been accepted to Battle School, Ender makes sure Stilson will never bother him again. At the age of six, Ender thus commits his first murder. For the first time the reader is exposed to his ominous side when he proves that he would go even further than

necessary in order to survive. Merely winning is not enough; he needs to triumph over his enemies. As Campbell explains, the hero “brings a knowledge of the secret of the tyrant’s doom. With a gesture as simple as pressing a button, he annihilates the impressive configuration” (311). In other words, the hero knows what necessity is required for the enemy to succumb and thus victory is easily attained. Rather, it is absolute defeat that bestows pride. Not only is Ender later exonerated from his crime but Colonel Graff is accused of it instead. Ender’s reward for killing Stilson is being admitted to Battle School. The moral is questionable but the reader accepts it, which proves the manipulative mastery Ender possesses. Because Stilson is a character many readers recognise, his death might not only seem justified, but may actually be rejoiced in.

The third time Ender fears for his life is when Bonzo Madrid confronts him in the bathroom. Bonzo is the ideal villain of Klapp’s *Clever Hero* discussed above. This villain embodies “complacency and pride, together with strength and cruelty” (Klapp, “The Clever Hero” 27). Bonzo, being bigger and stronger, is ostensibly superior to Ender. Yet, in comparison to Ender, he appears slow and sluggish. Because Bonzo is so superior, his motive for attacking Ender is detested and his popularity abates. Consequently, when Ender uses his wit to beat him, he is distinguished as the boy who beat the bully, because “there is a universal sympathy for anyone who overthrows a persecutor” (Klapp, “The Clever Hero” 28). Still, Bonzo was never superior to Ender, whose intellect and strategic capabilities surpass those of even Mazer Rackham’s. Even if Bonzo had had the entire Battle School behind him, he would have lost.

Lastly, Colonel Graff is the person who places Ender in these hazardous situations. Graff is the head of Battle School and thus has Ender’s life in his hands. He manipulates Ender, who has no choice but to do what he wants. He is the person justifying Ender’s existence. Even so, Graff is dependant on Ender as well. He has worked towards the attack on the Buggers his entire life and without Ender he is nothing. In fact, he needs Ender more than Ender needs him. Ender has the choice to quit, if he can face the consequences. Yet, if Ender were to leave, the ramifications would be greater for Graff than for Ender himself. Hence, they reciprocally provide meaning for each other’s lives.

In conclusion, it is obvious that the only reason Ender is considered different from his enemies is that he is designated to be the hero. His actions are despicable and he and Peter are so alike that they are blind to the likeness themselves. The partiality for Ender provokes envy in even the kindest human in his vicinity. Villains do not necessarily have to be evil to be the hero’s foes. Actually, Ender’s enemies seem safe in comparison to him. Not only are his

actions equivocal but he is excused for them without any kind of punishment. Our hero, the mass murderer, is, in fact, altogether as evil as his enemies.

### *The Mental Ghosts*

Ender's most immediate enemy is his own mind. His fears, wishes and instincts are assembled in a computer game he plays at Battle School. This mind game is, in the words of Major Imbu, "a relationship between the child and the computer. Together they create stories. The stories are true in the sense that they reflect the reality of the child's life" (Card 121). In other words, it is like a conscious dream and like most dreams it can be both pleasant and nightmarish. To Ender it is an exceedingly hazardous journey where he confronts not only powerful illusions but genuine horrors. As Hourihan puts it, "the struggle against the monsters resonates with personal meaning" (107). Thus, as he encounters creatures of more or less hostile nature, he also confronts the enemy with the greatest chances of conquering him: himself.

The figments of Ender's mind are not arbitrary imageries but significant symbols relating to real life. Campbell maintains that dreams are an outlet for heroic wishes and claims that "The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors and deluding images up into the mind – whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity..." (7). In Ender's case, the first of these entities is the Giant whose riddle has no solution. By killing the Giant, Ender does the impossible and is allowed to enter the inner depths of the game and thus of his mind. The Giant can be said to represent a physical embodiment of the magnitude of Ender's mission. By killing the Giant, who is a part of himself, he overcomes his trepidation of embracing such a considerable task. But defeating the Giant is, in fact, not impossible, only answering his riddle is. By using instinct rather than intellect, Ender has little trouble conquering the Giant. Coming to terms with his destiny, not choosing the right drink, is the test of the Giant.

The Giant is the first character in the mind game that Ender kills. By being taken to Fairyland he rewards himself but for the first time his violence is abhorred by a Battle School official because of its sadistic nature: "I've always thought the Giant's Drink was the most perverted part of the whole mind game, but going for the eye like that – this is the one we want to put in command of our fleet?" (Card 66). Strangely enough, killing the Giant is less accepted than killing Stilson, who is human, even though by killing the Giant Ender reached Fairyland, which was an unprecedented accomplishment. The Giant is actually of little importance to the mind game, being merely a guardian of Fairyland. Still, this is one of very few occasions when Ender's suitability is questioned. Since it is an unpopular part of the

game, this strange reaction is therefore not due to the specific object of Ender's wrath. Apparently, as long as Ender does not plague his victims he can kill whoever he wants to.

Like an explorer in an unknown country, Ender probes further into his inner senses in Fairyland. Early on he encounters a dozen children who turn into wolves that kill him. Normally, children are seen as innocent and pure and wolves as ferocious beasts. Therefore, in themselves they represent the binary opposition good and evil. As Ender kills the wolves, he does not only kill evil creatures, but also good ones. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the wolves actually belong to the category of good creatures. According to Hourihan, "Murderous aggression, greed and lust are routinely attributed to wolves during the Middle Ages and beyond" (119). But in fact, wolves are "extremely social animals who rarely kill human beings..." (Hourihan 120). Wolves appear to be more benign than humans and actually the children taunt Ender, laugh at him and follow him for no reason.

And the other children: their laughter was raucous, offensive. They circled around him and pointed and laughed for many seconds before they went back to their play.

Ender wanted to hit them, to throw them in the brook. Instead he walked into the forest. (Card 71)

Their actions are openly threatening and not characteristic of innocent children. Thus, the binary opposition can be reversed.

Furthermore, Hourihan points out that "One of the things that hero stories do is to define animals as legitimate and appropriate targets for human violence" (129). When the Giant is killed, there is scepticism about Ender's actions but when he kills a dozen wolves the response is minimal. Had he drowned them while they still were embodied in children, the reactions would have been strong because murdering children is abominated. The abuse of the Giant is abhorred because of its sadistic nature but all violence against children is specifically reprobate. Making the children turn into wolves is a way for Ender to justify the murders to himself. In his mind these murders are acceptable. But the creatures never cease to be children, so Ender kills twelve children without repercussions or regret. The wolves were only costumes to vindicate murder.

Finding himself at the End of the World after killing the wolves, Ender sees a picture of Peter in a mirror (Card 117). This is unusual since mirrors reflect images and thus the picture shocks Ender. But indeed it is his reflection. Ender and Peter are the same and unconsciously Ender knows this. He cannot obliterate this realisation and breaking the mirror releases more

snakes that attack him. He is forced to confront his resemblance to his brother in order to finish the game. When he kisses the snake, Ender performs his only loving deed in the entire novel. Having killed it so many times and equated it to Peter, he succumbs to the demands of his instincts and condones his enemy. But the snake turns into Valentine, yet another disguise of Ender's to vindicate his actions. He cannot accept Peter, so he converts the snake into his sister instead. By doing so, however, Valentine also becomes his enemy.

Except for Ender himself, Valentine is the only one who has the power to make him leave Battle School and so forfeit his life. When Ender is first admitted to Battle School, it is not his parents that he laments, but Valentine (Card 21). She is the only person he is close to and had she asked him to stay at home he would have. Therefore, she is his enemy and he assimilates her with the snake and consequently also with Peter. The consequences of Ender leaving Battle School would be as severe as death. Thus, Valentine is more dangerous to Ender than most of his enemies. She could jeopardise the future of mankind only by loving her brother.

By being his own worst enemy, Ender is concurrently the saviour as well as the enemy of mankind. Since he is so important to the furthering of human life, his enemies automatically become the enemies of humanity. As a result, he is also one himself. In fact, he has most power over himself, being able to terminate both his training and his life if he wants to, and thus is the most powerful enemy of Earth. Strangely enough, his death would even be justified because the deaths of his other enemies are. In *Ender's Game* it is acceptable for the hero to kill his enemies if need be, as it typically is in hero stories (Hourihan 58). Thus, committing suicide would be vindicated too. Nevertheless, as he is both enemy and hero, he would simultaneously kill the hero and that would not be tolerable. Hence, it is still impossible for him to terminate his life. As a consequence, he has an enemy he is unable to kill, himself.

In the mind game the good and evil opposition falls apart. Because everything is created by Ender's mind it cannot be evil without him being evil as well. All the characters mirror some of his own characteristics; they are what he is. Nevertheless, the reader is supposed to feel that the beings attacking him are evil and that he is right in killing them. But that is impossible because they cannot be better or worse than he is. When he murders in the mind game, his actions are directed both externally at what his victims render and internally at himself who created them. There is no discerning what originates from the outside and what emanates from the inside of the game because it is all derived from Ender. Therefore he epitomises everything. He is both murderer and victim, evil and good, villain and hero.



## Conclusion

Heroes are expected to be flawless. By nature they are supposed to be good, to be so superior to others that they merit reverence. Hence it is material to recognise when a hero diverts from the righteous path. Not criticising such an influential personage is essentially to acquiesce to his behaviour. Ender is condoned of murder not only once, but twice. For more than one reason it is thus of consequence to inquire into the morality of the hero. If he cannot but swerve from rectitude then there is little hope for the rest of humanity.

If there is want of an enemy no hero is required. Likewise, the villain must be more detrimental than the hero or it is he who will be the scoundrel. Ender desperately endeavours to deem his enemies beneath him but at times fails despicably. He cannot overlook his own offences and neither can the reader. The hero only has a purport in relation to other people. To equate Ender with his enemies is to remove his heroism. By turning him into a murderer Card obfuscates the distinction between hero and villain. Ender's actions are no longer tenable and he is obliged to depend on the hope that his heroism obstructs notice.

Throughout the analysis it has been inferred that Ender is as bad as, or even worse than, his enemies. The concept of the hero crumbles under this deduction. A hero is leastwise expected to be preferable to his foes. In *Ender's Game*, Ender's enemies are judged more severely than him; he is permitted to err repeatedly while his nemeses are not. Even his principal enemies, the Buggers, forgive him. Yet, he never condones anyone himself and the reader is expected to concur. But his foes do not have the luxury of explaining themselves. However unbiased the reader feels, one has solely access to Ender's ruminations. All the same, there can be no apology for murder. Accordingly, Ender cannot possibly be considered a hero notwithstanding that he is regarded as one.

Ender does not adhere to any of Klapp's heroic categories, nor does he complete the hero's journey like a hero. Nevertheless, he is obliged to be a hero since he was singled out and chose to accept the call. Had he not been selected he would not have become a hero. What makes him different from other people is consequently that he was chosen, nothing else. Hence, it can be concluded that heroism is something given, not something earned. Ender was a hero before he was even born and had the chance to commit either good or bad deeds. It is unthinkable that he would not be a hero. As a result, Ender both is and is not a hero.

The good and evil duality focused on throughout this essay has proven indispensable to the matter of heroism. The hero is supposed to represent the good and the villain the evil. There can be no definite resolution as to whether this is indeed the case in *Ender's Game*. Still, Ender is presumed to be a hero but has proven that he deviates from the good side. He does

not really fit any one of Klapp's hero types entirely but has characteristics found in all the categories. Unfortunately, he possesses the less preferable characteristics of these heroes rather than the congenial ones. One may thus doubt whether good truly triumphs. Again, the notion of heroism comes into question. What is the purport of having a hero if he only generates more piquancy and if his enemies are less reprobate than him? Ender lives for heroism and his life is worthless if he has no foes. Thence, it is of utmost importance for him to be a hero and fulfil his destiny. If he does not, he has no reason to be alive and no justification for his killings.

There cannot be unadulterated righteousness in a hero because nothing is unequivocal. Only other people's beliefs that hold significance; it is they who determine who is the hero and a mob can easily be blinded regarding its subject. Ender constantly vacillates across the dichotomy and there is no fundamental solution as to which side he belongs to. Ultimately, however, this is not of consequence because he is a hero nonetheless. He was chosen to be one and can do more or less whatever he desires provided that the public opinion is in his favour. The good and evil opposition breaks heroism down to its core. It has been established that neither hero nor enemy is more than what they are believed to be; in other words, both hero and enemy could be deemed good or evil but for the conviction of others. Ender is neither more nor less eminent, heroic or benevolent than his foes. He is what he has become, what he was opted to be. In short, he is both hero and scoundrel. He is both everything and nothing.

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