



## THE ORIGINAL STAR WARS TRILOGY & ITS HOPEFUL HERO

Posted by Christina Tucker | Dec 11, 2017 | Features | 0



*Originally published on March 23, 2017. Throughout the month of March, Audiences Everywhere will be sharing appreciation for film trilogies, including personal reflections from our writers on some of their favorites. Today, we're discussing a singular hero's role in perhaps the quintessential movie trilogy: Star Wars' Luke Skywalker...*

**"I'm Never Gonna Get Out of Here"**

### RELEASES

**All the Money in the World Touches Upon Tragedy But Can Resort to Moralizing**

SCORE: 78%

**Bright is a Well-Intentioned Mess**

SCORE: 71%

**With 'The Post', Steven Spielberg Affirms A Key To Democracy**

SCORE: 91%

**Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle Plays on Expectations with Wit and Comedy**

SCORE: 85%

**The Greatest Showman Will Leave You Demanding A Refund**

SCORE:

**Te-Ata Isn't a Good Film, But It Comes from a Good Place**

SCORE:

He's Luke Skywalker, and he's here to rescue you.

Capable but physically unassuming—Obi Wan calls him “little one”—with blond, feathered hair and a too-big tunic. He's a talented pilot, good with droids, and too short to be a stormtrooper. If there's a bright center to the universe, he's on the planet that it's farthest from. All his friends are at the academy or in the rebellion. Luke is a farm boy with small-town responsibilities, chores, and a sense of unresolved potential. He's neither lazy nor complacent. Luke is intelligent and precocious, dissatisfied in a particularly youthful way. He plays with a model T-16 skyhopper, imitating battles and adventures he's never had, and fears he never will.

He's young, and outside of the legacy that precedes him, he's a relatively average young man. He's committed no great crimes. In a deleted scene from Episode IV, we see that he's neither a social outcast nor the leader of his friend group. In the scene, Luke reunites with his friends from the Academy, and is excited to hear about their battles. They call him by a nickname: “Wormy.” He wants to be part of their world and is obsessed with what it represents—an escape from the monotony of his secluded, desert life. In one of the most moving scenes of the trilogy (and to me, of film in general), Luke looks into the sunset and sees a world beyond himself and a life of adventure that eludes him. Every fresh high school graduate or 20-something stuck in their hometown, who feels held back either by their own capacity or their circumstances, understands this longing for a different version of themselves.



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### The Shape of Water Shows the Beauty in Our Differences

SCORE: 94%

### The Last Jedi is a Mostly-Successful Exploration of Morality and Legacy

SCORE: 88%

### I, Tonya is Fourth Wall-Breaking, Genre-Defying Fun

SCORE: 94%

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Luke is criticized as being a weak character for various reasons, including his affinity for complaining, wallowing, and whining that, for some, grows tiring. He's criticized for having neither enough flaws nor having endured any true struggle, and whose success is unearned by his arc. It's true in the beginning he dreams of participating in a rebellion without any grasp of the reality and danger of that commitment. He wants to be a hero and to go on adventures, to be among his friends, with no sense of the nature of the larger world. He is naïve, and he does whine, and he does fall into early success almost by accident. But his hero's journey, while it may not be marked by success in trials of brawn, is better characterized by and appreciated for its emotional and mental trials. The stakes of *Star Wars* are galaxy-wide, and have an impact on the entire canon's universe. Yet Luke's character and growth are not built around a development of physical strength, but rather centered around his ability to maintain his stability and kindness as stakes mount and danger surrounds him; Luke's is a story rooted in Luke's emotional well-being as much as it is his impact on the galaxy. What is remarkable about Luke is that even once he learns the truth, and sees the darkness of the world, and as his successes become a series of tragedies and defeats, he maintains his hope.

Luke's awakening lacks many of the traditionally masculine trappings of the coming-of-age story, and the tired plot points that can plague a hero's journey. His story comes with no romantic or sexual development. At no point does he overcome any shyness or inexperience to woo or impress a woman. Luke's physical transformation is never the primary marker of his narrative maturation, and his story makes no attempt to equate physical strength with mental acuity or emotional strength. Luke trains with Obi-Wan and Yoda, yes, but his physical strength is not what saves him in the end (in fact, he is remarkably good at being defeated in physical trials.) At no point does he emerge, muscle-bound and



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triumphant, battle-hardened and stronger than ever, prepared to display what he has learned. If anything, his body is damaged and decays throughout the trilogy, a product of what he has experienced, displaying the literally destructive trauma of both body and mind. It is this mental strength, sensitivity, and his overwhelming belief in others despite this that makes him a hero.

His story is not one of redemption, but of redeeming. Luke is not tied to a dark past that exists before the narrative but is entirely tied to the ideas of potential and the future. He encompasses the hope of youth, and its openness to reach out and help, ignorant of the dark realities of the past, moving toward the potential of the future. Luke repeatedly attempts to improve upon and change the people and communities he touches: the rebellion, Han Solo, his father, the Empire. Luke brings out the humanity in others, and in finding his own potential unlocks that of others.

### **“I’m Not Such a Bad Pilot Myself”**

Comparisons between Luke and Han Solo, among fans, are interesting for a number of reasons. Han’s popularity, often placing him as the most popular of the original trilogy, is telling in terms of the way a character archetype has become the go-to in modern blockbuster storytelling (Han’s upcoming standalone film is sure to be lucrative, at the very least). The rivalry between these characters, often posed in rapid-fire interview questioning of “Luke or Han?” is rooted not in a strong in-canon enmity but in the appeal of different character archetypes in a meta sense. A sense of rivalry is not unfounded; the two reflect different archetypes and appeal to a different concept of heroism, of manhood, of what a protagonist is.

Han Solo, as a type, is an anti-hero in need of redemption. He’s not a young man coming of age but rather a man who is already developed, entrenched in a

selfish way of life who distrusts the nature of the world. His original amorality, along with a lack of belief in others, is a defining characteristic, and what puts him in contrast to Luke. He has no interest in the rebellion, no interest in the force (a concept with which Luke is immediately on board) and no interests in general life outside of his own livelihood. A smuggler, a scoundrel with a checkered past, Han is ultimately humanized by his love and sense of camaraderie. Han's character arc follows that of so many anti-heroes in today's media, and not without reason. Han's story is predictable but entertaining, and due to his position as a side character rather than the main lead, is allowed more simplification than the emotional trials of Luke. He becomes one of the good guys, gets the girl, and comes out the other end of the original trilogy with his peace of mind and overall personality and sensibility largely the same. Attractive, flirtatious, sarcastic, opportunistic, and mysterious, Han is sometimes outright rude but always entertaining.

This is a type of male lead to which we in the 21st century have grown accustomed, particularly in blockbuster films. Not as goofy as Chris Pratt's Star-Lord, not quite as womanizing as Chris Pine's Captain Kirk, not quite as self-centered as Robert Downey, Jr.'s Tony Stark, but nonetheless a kind of amalgamation of this character type, whose self-centered nature is ultimately undermined by a call to leadership, friendship, and love. Just as some audiences find Superman bland or even hokey in relation to a darker and supposedly more complex character like Batman, many fans have been drawn to Han Solo's moral ambiguity over Luke's wide-eyed innocence. Han learns to trust, to believe in a greater cause, and is a hero in his own right. But he's not the only type of hero, and is no more interesting or complex than Luke. A good character doesn't have to be a good person. Many of the best ones, even protagonists, aren't. Han, along with being undeniably entertaining, is not a weak character by any

estimation. But neither is Luke, who is neither as simplistic nor as bland as many believe him to be.

### ***A New Hope, "I'm Ready for Anything"***

When Obi-Wan tells Luke a half-lie about his father, that he was a Jedi Knight killed by Darth Vader, Luke's reaction is absolutely characteristic of who he is. Luke is not shown to be constantly haunted by the past, the death of the father he never knew, he is not a troubled, angry child who is desperate to avenge him. Revenge would have been an effective motivation for Luke's joining the rebellion or going after Vader as a misplaced emotional outlet for his frustration. It's easy to imagine a film in which Luke is given a light saber and a tragic story and, in response, immediately seeks revenge, avenging his fallen father and using a new power to bring death and destruction to the evil Empire. It would have been an understandable narrative choice. But the past is not Luke's primary concern.

After Obi-Wan tells Luke about Darth Vader, Obi-Wan asks Luke to accompany him to save Leia, and Luke declines; he has chores. He has responsibilities, regardless of how much he resents them. He is pushed forward only after his remaining family is taken from him, locked into the cosmic war only after he has no other choice. Even after seeing the destruction the Empire causes, rather than expressing a desire to kill Vader and to destroy what has caused him so much pain, he moves forward in a way that is constructive rather than destructive, and agrees to accompany Obi-Wan and save Leia, a princess whom he doesn't know.

Luke volunteers to help destroy the Death Star, because, despite the odds, he knows he can. Because he has bull's-eye womp rats in his T-16. Because he knows he should, after seeing the injustice and feeling so wholly the fear, sadness, and grief that can be caused by the Empire. At no point does visceral anger or revenge seem to drive

him. Luke, as he is wont to do after the death of his family and Obi-Wan, wallows in his feelings rather than lashing out. He then allows pragmatism and hope to drive him, not only to destroy a weapon, but to convince Han to come back. Luke succeeds not through his superior individual athleticism, but because he took the guidance given to him, believed in his potential, and volunteered.

Episode IV ends on arguably the brightest note of any of the films. Like an ancient Greek hero or victorious Olympic athlete, he receives his laurel in the form of applause, gratitude, and a medal given by Leia. Luke has succeeded in what he set out to do, his hope in the agency of good gratified and his own heroism affirmed. Episode IV is the most cohesive and complete of the trilogy, but is without the character development of the second and third films. For Luke to simply fall into success, struggle to believe in himself, receive a medal, and live the rest of his life heralded as a hero, while uplifting, would make Luke's story nowhere near as compelling. Episode IV introduces the audience to a young man whose positivity and hope is as integral to his character as his connection to the force, and proceeds to test these characteristics through mental and physical trials set up to break him.

### ***The Empire Strikes Back*, “You Want the Impossible”**

For a fan-favorite film, Episode V is especially unkind to its protagonist. *Empire* is the true test of Luke's goodness in opposition to darkness, hopelessness, and defeat. Beyond what he experienced in Episode IV, Luke's contact with the complexities of the real world tests his outlook. This test—which takes its toll on Luke mentally and physically—demands that Luke question his values.

In *Empire*, Luke is rarely allowed a moment of triumph.



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He is often passive, driven by his circumstance, and when active, he is often defeated. Luke suffers physical and mental trauma, and his agency and sense of identity is challenged. Yoda tells him he is angry, reckless, and too old to be trained. He is told his mission to save his friends is futile. He goes, unable to stand by, even at the cost of his future as a Jedi. He then experiences the darkness of Darth Vader up close, is defeated, and only then is told that this is the legacy from which he descends. The trauma from Luke's proximity to darkness is one that irreparably changes him, but one from which he nonetheless aims to recover.

Luke's training in swampy, treacherous Dagobah and in the aesthetic choices of the setting and the scenes' psychological focus, bears some resemblance to a jungle war sequence. His Bespin fatigues, in particular, are similar to modern military uniforms. To assume a connection or visual allusion to the Vietnam War seems less than far-fetched; when the film was released in 1980, the war and its effects still permeated public consciousness. Dagobah is Luke's war experience, in which he grows closer and closer to the heart of darkness, exploring the depths of his psyche. These are trials could have been an emotionally effective and poignant method to force Luke's abandoning of sensitivity as he grows into adulthood, in which the weakness of childhood is abandoned for a more realistic (more traditionally "masculine") cynicism, and in which Luke grows physically stronger yet more emotionally

closed off from childish, blind hope. *Empire*, rather, puts Luke through the trials of adulthood and allows him to emerge with his hope challenged but intact, his body damaged beyond repair. Sensitivity, in this case, is not a weakness to be abandoned by a boy as he becomes a man, but a strength that allows Luke to connect with the force and its capacity for good.

### **Return of the Jedi, “I Warn You Not to Underestimate My Power”**

Luke returns after an indeterminate amount of time to rescue Han from Jabba. There is an indication that time has passed; his clothes are tailored, all-black, a far cry from the tan, dusty tunic he wore on Tatooine or even his Bespin fatigues. Someone has cut his hair and presumably taught him to do back flips. Luke shows both leadership and physical capability as he coordinates a rescue mission with Leia and Lando. He invokes his own reputation and his own power as a Jedi Knight to Jabba. He is more physically active, more capable and more confident, cocky, even. But still, it is in service to his friends.

Yoda, on his deathbed, proclaims Luke to be the last Jedi, and warns him that his anger, fear, and aggression could be his undoing. This revelation gives new weight to all the scenes leading to it, scenes in which Luke is overtly confident and capable. This retroactive narrative turn isn't earned by Luke's new actions or his development, but rather, by a new light pointed with foreboding at what we have already witnessed. His former success becomes a reflection of an overconfidence with the force, an assurance that is (and has always been) on the verge of becoming unhinged aggression.

Perfect balance is demanded of him; he can neither be too aggressive nor too afraid, but is still told, by the force ghost of Obi-Wan, that it is his responsibility to kill

Vader. Luke refuses. "There is still good in him." Obi-Wan tells him, again, that he once thought the same, but that Vader is "more machine now than man, twisted and evil." And again Luke insists upon his humanity. No one, from Palpatine to Obi-Wan, sees any remaining humanity in Vader. But Luke, who knows that Vader is an extension of himself, has to. Luke has lost his aunt and uncle. He has lost Yoda and Obi-Wan. The Empire has recovered from its defeat and has arisen with another Death Star. He has learned that he comes from a line of both unbelievable power and true darkness. Without his belief that people are worth trying to help and to save, Luke is left with nearly nothing.

When Luke confronts Vader, they speak as two men conflicted, yet both Luke and Vader refuse to give in. Palpatine pushes Luke, who eventually fights his father. And we see, heartbreakingly acted out, the pain and aggression Luke has harbored. Luke swings wildly during their duel, and we see his ruthless intent to kill, disarming his father and cutting off his hand. This scene is compelling not only for its visual beauty and [amazing score](#), but also because it marks a new emotional display for Luke. This darkness, which Palpatine longs to cultivate in Luke, is not a remnant of Luke's troubled past. On the contrary, it is new, a culmination of a darkness that has developed as a result of his experiences. He has achieved the agency, the adventure, and the power that he dreamt of, and it has come at a great cost.

Disturbed by his own descent into darkness and the similarities between himself and Vader, Luke gives up his light saber. He gives up all the aforementioned achievements and is brought down to absolute weakness as he calls out desperately to Darth Vader. He is saved by what seemed impossible, the remnants of his father's love and light. The most pivotal choice Luke makes, and what is indicative of Luke's value as a hero, is his refusal to believe that darkness is all-powerful. Luke, in the end, is

saved not by his training as a Jedi or his connection to the force, but by his ability to see the potential for goodness—in his father and in himself. Vader saves Luke at the cost of his own life and Luke sees the withered, exhausted old man Vader had become under the mask. Luke has been shown that not only is the grip of the dark side powerful, but it can prey on anyone’s fear.

### **The Last Jedi, “You Were Our Only Hope”**

The celebration at the end of *Return of the Jedi* is a triumphant one, and wraps up the trilogy on a positive note. Despite the festivities, there is still an ambiguity in terms of Luke’s mental state. As everyone across the galaxy celebrates (even Leia, whose tragedies are unfortunately largely ignored by the narrative) Luke cremates his father alone. Luke’s expression is complex, exhausted and contemplative. A once-young man who wished to be a part of a larger world, has experienced both its joys and heartbreaking darkness, has survived as a remnant of the Jedi order, and who bears this responsibility on his shoulders. Although he smiles as he rejoins his friends, there is a bitter honesty in terms of all he’s lost.



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It was [reported](#) that one of the proposed endings discussed between George Lucas and *Empire Strikes Back* producer Gary Kurtz for Episode VI involved Luke disappearing into the wilderness alone. Although scrapped as the ending for Episode VI, this idea was in some ways incorporated into the new trilogy. *The Force*

*Awakens* builds on this idea, as Luke, who now exists as a mythic remnant of the past, has abandoned the world in which he once believed so strongly. *The Last Jedi* promises to deliver on this story, exploring the reality of Luke's state as a man past his prime, devoid of innocence, dealing with the things that he's experienced.

What makes Luke Skywalker unique is that he is hopeful despite insurmountable odds and continues to try for the sake of others, despite heartbreaking defeat and tragedy. There have always been and always will be heroes like Han Solo, who begin as jaded and apathetic but are made to empathize and connect with something greater. But Luke's youthful beginning, his hopeful love, and his desire to fulfill his own potential, each existing separately and tested independently in reckoning with the complex reality of his boundless world, make him a cinematic hero whose substance only proves to be more and more exceptional and unique. Luke is, at his core, a positive force that radiates to those around him. Despite his current state within the universe of the new Star Wars trilogy, as an isolated and broken man, he's the kind of hero who is sorely needed. I can only hope that *The Last Jedi* builds on what we've seen of Luke's nature rather than denying it, and that Luke, as he has done time and time again, will defy darkness and reconnect with the hope and forthright sensitivity that defines him.

*Featured Image: 20th Century Fox*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Christina is formerly an art history student, currently an aspiring film critic, screenwriter, and/or starving artist. Born and raised in Michigan, she is currently based in New York City.

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