
“ENEMIES, BUT COMPLICATED ENEMIES”

Rey and Kylo Ren’s Relationship

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1. Introduction

The popular view of *The Last Jedi* is that it is a divisive film, and time spent on various message boards and pop culture sites on the web will do little to convince anyone otherwise. The box office, however, tells a different story. *The Last Jedi* was met with critical acclaim and made \$1.3 billion worldwide.¹ Far from being turned off by the film’s humor or message, it appears the majority of fans liked the film well enough. While a segment of angry male fans are vocal online (and, as one study concludes, are in some cases actually Russian bots²), they are not the majority. Their behavior, involving harassment campaigns against director Rian Johnson and the cast (which drove Kelly Marie Tran from social media³), is enough to dismiss their views. Theirs is not legitimate criticism.

On the other hand, there is important criticism of the film coming from feminist fans. While social media sites like Tumblr are full of “Reylo” shippers (fans who want Rey and Kylo to end up in a romantic relationship), there are equally vocal fans who register their disgust with *The Last Jedi*’s focus on Kylo Ren’s backstory and the Force bond he shares with Rey. Their concern is with the way the film positions Kylo Ren as a sympathetic villain. They see *The Last Jedi* as telling us we need to understand him, in the same way we are told to sympathize in real life with mass shooters and neo-Nazis. Reporting on the recent attack on a New Zealand mosque included headlines telling us that the shooter was bullied for being overweight,⁴ and even as I edit this, yet another young man on trial for rape is being shown leniency because he “comes from a good family.”⁵ This is what Kate Manne has labeled *himpathy* - “the flow of sympathy up the social hierarchy, away from the female victims of misogyny toward its... male perpetrators.”⁶ We are told to excuse the violent behavior of young white men because of perceived sympathetic qualities and achievements, while ignoring the women harmed by their actions.



Were *The Last Jedi* telling us to have this response to a fictionalized neo-Nazi, it would be perpetuating real harms. *The Force Awakens* is not subtle about positioning Kylo Ren as the fictional equivalent to the alt-right and “men’s rights activists.” Seemingly prescient regarding how certain fans would react to having Rey as the protagonist, the filmmakers can be seen as writing those fans into the film, as the villain. Rather than catering to the view of reactionary fans, *The Force Awakens* discredits them from the beginning of the sequel trilogy. I do not claim that all these fans have the self-awareness to recognize themselves in Kylo Ren. Yet, that should not stop us from viewing *The Force Awakens* as rejecting toxic masculinity and violence, connecting them with the Dark Side. Given this understanding of *The Force Awakens*, were *The Last Jedi* presenting Kylo as simply a misunderstood guy, it would be both morally bad and a break with the previous film’s narrative.

However, I don’t think this is what *The Last Jedi* is really doing. While the film does ask us to pay attention to Kylo Ren’s sympathetic qualities, it is doing so to make us aware of what is actually going on when media coverage presents Kylo Ren’s real-life equivalents as “good people” who have made mistakes. Through Rey’s journey in the film, we come to sympathize with Kylo. Yet, given where Rey ends up, the film is not telling us to excuse Kylo’s actions. What we’re actually being told in real life, after all, isn’t just that these men are sympathetic. When we’re told that mass shooters and neo-Nazis have sympathetic qualities, we are really being told that their (ostensibly) sympathetic qualities *excuse* their behavior and crimes. What *The Last Jedi* is doing, in contrast, is recognizing the ways Kylo Ren might garner our sympathy, but reminding us that he is still blameworthy for what he’s done. The film is an extended discussion of heroism, meaning no one character embodies the film’s “correct” view. Instead, the characters are in dialogue with one another. In analyzing the film’s character work, I develop a reading of the film on which it distinguishes selfish stories we tell ourselves from true heroic acts performed out of love. With this distinction in mind, we can see how Kylo Ren’s personal story is a self-interested lie, and one which Rey learns to reject

2. Rey’s Journey

Alongside Rey, we learn what has happened between Kylo and Luke in the years before *The Force Awakens*. Luke, having set up a new Jedi temple, discovered that Snoke had begun turning Ben Solo to the Dark Side. Afraid, Luke briefly thinks of killing his nephew. At first, we are shown the scene from Kylo’s perspective, with horror-movie style lighting, as Luke angrily attacks him. But Kylo is an unreliable narrator. Though he presents this scene as justification for what he’s done, the audience knows this is a lie. From *The Force Awakens*, we know he responds by gathering friends (the Knights of Ren, apparently to be seen in *The Rise of Skywalker*) and destroying what Luke has built. That kind of planned attack is not the overreaction of a frightened young man, but the action of someone radicalized into violence. Luke’s actions merely offer Ben Solo a way out, giving him the ability to justify to himself what he wants to do already. The story that Kylo tells Rey is self-serving. He might believe it himself, but it is also designed to reinforce Rey’s disappointment with Luke.

Rey, hearing both men’s stories, is able to understand how Luke failed Kylo, but also that (as she tells Luke) Kylo failed him. Hearing the truth from Luke does not, however, make her reconsider her plan to go to Kylo. Rey believes Luke is wrong to think Kylo is beyond saving. She goes to Kylo because she thinks (in part because of his manipulation, as well as Snoke’s

manipulating them both) that he can be saved. All the main characters in the film have incorrect beliefs, preconceptions about their situations which are challenged by the events of the film (I discuss the other characters in the next section). Particular to Rey's journey, however, is the way *The Last Jedi* uses scenes similar to other *Star Wars* films to distinguish Ben Solo from Anakin Skywalker.

The Last Jedi's departures from the expected *Star Wars* narrative have been remarked on by both the film's fans and its detractors. However, *The Last Jedi* is no less engaged in nostalgia than *The Force Awakens*. Instead of repeating plot devices or discarding them completely, it offers a reworking of the previous films. *The Last Jedi's* throne room scene uses dialogue and themes from both *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. Rey's experience is meant to parallel Luke's, but how events transpire here differently from those films shows us (and Rey) that Kylo is unlike his grandfather in important ways.

Because she believes Kylo to be the same as Vader, Rey believes Kylo will change if given the opportunity. Before leaving Ahch-To, Rey tells Luke that she is going to Kylo to bring him back to the Light, as Luke did for Anakin. Rey believes herself to be playing out the events of *Return of the Jedi*, when in fact she is in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Rey's vision that Kylo Ren will destroy Snoke comes true in the worst way. What she interprets as his coming back to the Light is in reality only his taking control of the First Order. With Snoke dead, she finds not a reformed Ben Solo, but Kylo asking her to join him in ruling the galaxy. When he refuses to help the remaining Resistance, Rey recognizes how she has misjudged him, and moves to fight him. Seeing his manipulation for what it has been all along, she is not tempted to join him.

Throughout, Rey does not believe Kylo is anything but blameworthy for what he has done. She does sympathize with him, sharing his lack of belonging, and frustration with Luke. However, at no point does she excuse his murderous actions by reference to his past. It has only been a few days, after all, since she saw him murder his father after destroying the New Republic's capital system. She begins the film by hating him, and though her feelings are complicated by learning more about Kylo's history, she always views him as having fallen to the Dark Side. She does not treat Luke's attack on Kylo as an excuse for what he's done, though she does think it shows he can come back to the Light. Rey believes that what is sympathetic about Kylo provides an opening for him to change, but this possibility is not presented as an excusing condition for his actions. While it is accurate to say *The Last Jedi* presents us with a more sympathetic Kylo Ren than *The Force Awakens* does, *The Last Jedi* is not telling us to ignore or excuse Kylo because we can sympathize with him.

I will return to the film's comparison of Anakin and Kylo in discussing Luke's arc, as he is the character who understands why the two are different. First, however, it is worth comparing what Rey learns to what the other characters learn.

3. Heroes and Villains

The main characters in *The Last Jedi* are all wrong about the kind of adventure they are in. These characters have all grown up with stories of the rebellion. They know what a *Star Wars* story looks like as much as we do. Thinking themselves to be heroes, they expect their actions to lead to saving the day, but their expectations are overturned by the reality of their situations. Acting on stories of heroes, in the film's view, cannot save us from fascists like the First Order.

The film is not against heroism, however. Rather, the film's careful position is one in which

stories of heroes (like the ones the characters act on) are distinguished from heroic actions done for selfless reasons. In understanding themselves as heroes, the characters center themselves in their understanding of their situations. True heroism, however, lies in centering others rather than ourselves. As we have seen, Rey thinks her story is similar to Luke's. The other characters act on stories of heroes too, and likewise fail in their objectives because of it.

Like the other characters, Finn misunderstands his place in the galaxy. Finn starts the film wanting to run, having gone to Starkiller Base to rescue Rey rather than because he wants to join the Resistance in fighting the First Order. When the immediate battle is over, he prioritizes his friendship with Rey. In seeing the Resistance through Rose's eyes, he learns how to be a rebel. Despite proudly declaring himself "Rebel scum" to Phasma, his reaction to the battle on Crait shows he still misunderstands what he needs to do. He sees the rebellion as the soldier he was raised to be, ready to sacrifice himself unnecessarily. But the Resistance does not need dead heroes, as Leia tells Poe. It needs leaders who understand when *not* to fight, in order to survive.

Unlike Finn, Rose understands that the Resistance needs people willing to live and build a future rather than merely destroying their enemies. Nevertheless, she gets caught up in the excitement of finding the master codebreaker alongside Finn. Both of them believe DJ can help them, despite him not being the man they were sent to find. Viewers, like the characters, think this scoundrel will turn out to have a heart of gold and help Finn and Rose stop the bad guys. That's what scoundrels in *Star Wars* do, after all. But Rose and Finn are not Resistance heroes finding a reluctant smuggler or card shark to help them out. Real life intrudes, and their new friend betrays them. DJ does not join in with the Resistance, but repeats what he has already told Finn - the First Order and the Resistance are equally bad. The character is *Star Wars*'s version of a centrist, ignoring the reasons for the conflict, convinced that he does not need to take a side. The film's critique goes further, however, since even the master codebreaker is shown to lack interest in the world outside Canto Bight's gambling. Rose presses Finn on the importance of paying attention to cruelty hidden underneath glamor, but both DJ and the master codebreaker care only about themselves. For this reason, the Resistance does not need either of them.

Kylo Ren also conceives of things in terms of a narrative centered on himself, straightforwardly telling Rey "You have no place in this story." For him, what matters is the story of the Skywalker bloodline, and his presumed place in the galaxy because of it. He cannot fathom that Rey would matter, because her parents were (assuming he is telling the truth) junk traders who sold their daughter for money. Like the real life fans of Skywalkers from which Kylo is drawn, the idea that a young woman could have her own story, and that it could be centrally important to the galaxy, is beyond his comprehension. Throughout, he remains unable to conceive of people's behavior as anything other than reactions to his own actions. In his own mind, Kylo Ren is the center of the galaxy.

His idolization of his grandfather as Darth Vader parallels real life as much as his reaction to Rey's use of the Force. *Star Wars* iconography heavily focuses on Vader, despite his actions seen in the films. Darth Vader is the face of the franchise, and for Kylo Ren he is an aspirational figure. Pathetic as Snoke and Hux think he is for creating a costume, Kylo wants to *be* Darth Vader, feared and in command. Kylo Ren is wrong, of course, because he is not the hero of a story about the Dark Side triumphant, but the antagonist in Rey's story.

Interestingly, it is not Rey, but Poe, whose arc presents the most direct comparison with Kylo Ren. While Finn, Rose, and Rey all misinterpret their circumstances by understanding

recent galactic history as cliché, Poe and Kylo Ren do this by making themselves the center of the narrative. Poe is, therefore, the protagonist closest to Kylo's toxic masculinity. If Kylo Ren is a stand-in for misogynistic fans and their desire to see themselves as heroes, Poe is our stand-in for straight male allies in the film.

Like Kylo, Poe spends much of the film convinced those around him are personally against him. Unable to see beyond his own perspective to the Resistance's shared goal and survival, Poe cannot understand Holdo's indifference to one pilot's opinion about her strategy. Poe's refusal to listen to the Resistance bridge officers (predominantly women) nearly leads to the whole Resistance being destroyed. Having grown up with stories of the rebellion, Poe thinks the Resistance needs hotshot pilots dramatically blowing up Star Destroyers. Unlike Kylo Ren, however, Poe is able to recognize and learn from his mistakes.

At first, Poe is unable to see beyond his own heroics as a pilot. With Holdo's sacrifice, he is shaken out of his self-centeredness. Poe recognizes in Holdo's actions the same desire to protect the galaxy that drives him. Were he only after his own glory or power, like Kylo Ren, Holdo's sacrifice would have no effect on him. As Susan Wolf argues, loving others motivates us in ways self-interest cannot.⁷ It is because Poe actually cares about others that he can recognize a shared motivation in Holdo's selfless actions. Unlike the egotism of Kylo Ren's desire to destroy his enemies, the desire to save others and sacrifice for them depends on us loving something outside ourselves. Moreover, if we take seriously the comparison between Poe and Kylo Ren, the ability to put others' stories above one's own is the only way for men (represented by Poe in the film) to avoid toxic masculinity. Saving what we love, in the film's parlance, requires us to love people outside ourselves, and to put their needs first.

Listening to and working with others is also the only way to achieve a shared goal. Kylo Ren, Snoke, and Hux all want the same things, but the First Order as presented in *The Last Jedi* is a group of petty soldiers and black comedy. Their antagonism, stemming from an egocentric view of power, dooms them to death or failure. Consistent with the way *Star Wars* portrays the Dark Side, neither Kylo Ren nor Snoke is willing to consider interpretations other than their own. For Snoke, this proves fatal. For Kylo, his unwillingness to listen to others and put their needs before his own may not lead to his death (in this film, at least). But it does lead to his failing to destroy the Resistance. In *The Last Jedi*, then, even egotistic goals cannot succeed without the help of others.

All the stories the characters know tell them what to expect. Unlike the younger generation, however, Luke understands why thinking oneself to be a hero in a story will lead to failure. Luke's arc in the film is a journey towards being comfortable with heroic deeds and stories, while not seeing himself as a hero. In Luke's actions on Crait, we can see the film's most concrete statement about how we should respond to men like Kylo Ren. To understand this, we have to first understand where Luke goes wrong before he ends his exile in the final act.

4. Not a great warrior, but a great Jedi

Unlike the other characters, Luke does not see himself as being in a heroic narrative. Luke has already rejected the story of the hero. As Luke knows from personal experience, acting because you see yourself as a hero dooms you to failure. Luke starts the film, then, agreeing with what his nephew says later, that the past needs to die. Since the film ends with the Canto Bight

stable kids telling Luke's story, I do not think we are to read Kylo Ren's position as the correct one.

At first, Luke rejects not only the selfish view of heroism seen in Poe's storyline, but hero narratives altogether. I read Luke's ambivalence (wanting the Jedi to end, yet wanting to save their sacred relics) as reflecting an unconscious recognition that his desire for the Jedi Order to die out is the wrong response to galactic history. Despite rejecting the naïve heroism of the younger protagonists, until the film's climax Luke cannot see another path for himself. Even though he has grown to distrust the Jedi Order, he still sees himself as a Jedi, and sees self-centered heroism as part of that identity. Exile is therefore Luke's way of escaping, trapped as a Jedi by his own history, but not wanting to play the role of galaxy-saving hero. Finally, however, Luke realizes that there is another way out of this dilemma.

As Luke finally recognizes, the galaxy needs the story of heroic Jedi, and the Resistance *does* need him as a symbol. That symbol, of "Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master" standing against the might of the whole First Order, is what lives on after he becomes one with the Force. Luke's journey is one of making peace with the popular image others have of him, without believing in that image himself. Luke is able to end his exile because he finally understands why the galaxy needs the Jedi, and therefore, how he can contribute to the fight without chasing after glory. Thus, while *The Last Jedi* insists we not view the past as a collection of heroic narratives that recapitulate with ourselves as the heroes, it recognizes the need for stories of heroes to motivate us.

The distance from which Luke views his own heroic deeds allows him to correctly judge Kylo Ren, in contrast to Rey's overly optimistic view. Rey, as we have seen, is wrong to think that she can convince Kylo to turn from the Dark Side. The story she is acting on is Luke's, the young Jedi who brought his father back to the Light. In believing she can change Kylo Ren, Rey's error is not about her inflated sense of self-importance (as is Poe's error). Rather, it is that she misunderstands the lesson to draw from the Battle of Endor. Luke did not go to his father to save Anakin, only to give him the chance to change. What Luke cannot make Rey understand is that he was not a great Jedi who knew he would succeed in bringing Darth Vader back to the Light. He knew he might not survive the encounter. But Luke's lack of certainty in his own success is absent in Rey's understanding of the story. She believes Kylo Ren *will* reject the Dark Side, if only she goes to him.

Luke knows his nephew is not like Vader, however. Anakin turned to the Dark Side in an attempt to save Padmé and their unborn child. When he finally recognizes the Dark Side will destroy Luke, he chooses to save his son and kill Palpatine. Anakin is able to change because he chooses to save his son instead of letting the Jedi be destroyed. "Saving what we love" brings Anakin back to the Light. Kylo Ren, on the other hand, has not succumbed to the Dark Side out of misguided notions of love, but because he feels a need to prove himself. While Kylo might one day reject the Dark Side, Luke knows that neither Rey nor the Resistance provide Kylo Ren with the motivation to do so at present.

For this reason, Luke does not meet Kylo Ren on Crait in an attempt to save Kylo from himself. Luke is there for the Resistance. He is there, in other words, to save the people *he* loves. Luke's actions - heroic though they are - are not the actions of a self-described hero, but a man doing what he can to help. His motivation is not to show off (like Poe) or to hurt people (like Kylo Ren), but to save his family and friends. This is not the story of a man who is right to reject

his powers (as some angry fans understand the film), but the story of a man who shows up to help despite overwhelming odds, and succeeds.

In facing Kylo Ren, Luke both apologizes for his own actions, and holds Kylo accountable for his. This too, can be understood as an expression of love. Rather than fighting against Kylo Ren, that Luke's motivation is to save the people Kylo wants to kill allows Luke to show his nephew a kind of mercy. Luke does not pretend that Kylo is innocent, but he recognizes that apologizing for trying to kill a young man in his care might be what Kylo needs to hear. After this moment passes, Luke refuses to meet Kylo's views halfway. Luke's position of power in this showdown (he cannot be killed, and is successful as a distraction) allows him to treat Kylo with pity, yet stand firm in his judgment of Kylo's deeds.

5. Conclusion

As Luke knows, and the film shows Rey learning, Kylo may not be beyond saving, but this fact is immaterial when he will not take steps to change. The lesson Rey learns is not that Kylo is blameless, but that she shouldn't expend effort to help a violent man. She should not work on him at the expense of her friends or herself. She therefore ends the film by closing the Falcon's door in his face, refusing to continue their conversations.

It is true that this centers Kylo Ren in the narrative. Yet, he is centered as the antagonist, not a character our sympathies are with. If someone is concerned that stories should not present characters like Kylo Ren as sympathetic, then *The Last Jedi* will be problematic. But *The Last Jedi* is not alone in presenting Kylo Ren in this way. *The Force Awakens* deliberately presents Kylo Ren's evil to us as a human evil. Lor San Tekka appeals to his family, Kylo removes his mask before torturing Rey, and he spends the final act without his mask. Unlike Darth Vader in *A New Hope*, who is at first ambiguously presented without background, Kylo Ren is always understood as a man in a mask rather than a robot. It is his humanity that makes him truly awful. But as a human, Kylo Ren will have sympathetic qualities. What makes him so terrible is that he isn't solely made up of bad qualities, but that he chooses to act on them. Kylo Ren may have good qualities, but *The Last Jedi* is telling us not to focus on them at the expense of joining with and helping others to survive.

I've argued that the film's position is, while not uncritical of nostalgia, ultimately not in favor of killing the past, either. On the other hand, *The Last Jedi* is a film about moving forward. Rey is not (as of this writing, anyway) a Skywalker, and with Luke's death onscreen and Carrie Fisher's passing, the new generation are the stars now. As *The Last Jedi* moves the story forward, it also speaks to real life, telling us how to fight real-life fascists: not by working to save them from the Dark Side, nor merely by fighting against them, but by building (to quote Sabina Lovibond) "a home where [our] words can represent deeds [we] can perform without shame."⁸ If the film is to be believed, working towards shared goals, avoiding egotism in the stories we tell ourselves, and trusting and listening to others, give us everything we need to build the future. If this sounds overly optimistic, it shouldn't be. The Resistance in *The Last Jedi* is shown to be few in number, and not always lucky enough to have the help they desperately need. If fans see *Star Wars*'s language of rebellion and resistance paralleling the present,⁹ we need to remember how desperate rebels in *Star Wars* often are. *The Last Jedi* ends with the whole of the Resistance able to fit on to the Falcon. But, as Holdo quotes from Leia, "Hope is like the sun. If you only believe in it when you see it you'll never make it through the night."

Notes

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