

*SAGA*  
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# SAGA JOURNAL

An academic *Star Wars* fan journal

The Saga Journal is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the Star Wars saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the Saga Journal, we believe Star Wars is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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# The Orphan Strikes Back: The Significance Of Luke Skywalker's Orphan Origin

by Reihla

*"We find them everywhere in fantasy fiction: the 'orphaned heroes,' young men and women whose parents are dead, absent, or unknown, who turn out to be the heirs to the kingdom, the destined pullers of swords from stones, the keys to the riddles, the prophecies' answers, the bearers of powerful magic."*<sup>1</sup>

In folk tales, literature and film there can be no mistaking that the orphan who becomes a hero is a very prominent figure. Books are filled with children who have lost one or both parents. Some have been totally abandoned and left to their own devices. Others are being fostered by aunts, uncles, step-parents or other authority figures that can be either cruel or loving. Moses, Romulus and Remus, Cinderella, Oliver Twist, Mowgli, Peter Parker, Harry Potter, Tarzan, Superman, Annie, King Arthur, Frodo Baggins, and yes, Luke Skywalker. And that list doesn't even scratch the surface.

Throughout the *Star Wars* saga George Lucas seems inordinately fond of orphans (Luke, Leia, Boba Fett) and outcasts (Han, Shmi, Jar-Jar). All of the Jedi, in a sense, are orphans, having been removed from their family environment at a very young age and raised in a temple by foster caregivers.

In general, Jedi children don't engender our sympathy, perhaps because they knew no other life. Or perhaps we perceive them to be answering a "higher calling" to become one of the galaxy's champions of justice. When we see them in the films, there is no sense that they are lost, forlorn or lonely. The exception to this is Anakin Skywalker. He comes closer to falling into the orphan category than most Jedi children because we know that he had a loving parent he was forced to lose for the greater good found in the chance to become a Jedi. Yes, Anakin gets to become a "galactic superhero," but we know he paid a high price—losing contact with the one person in his life that he loved—to do so.

We've also come to realize that Leia Organa was an orphan, but this realization came late in the saga and so little is known of her life with her foster parents that I'm not considering her in this paper. The only point of interest I found about Leia as an orphan while researching this topic was in a paper by Kelly Woods, a student at the University of British Columbia's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. Her research on female orphans in Canadian literature led her to conclude that "Female orphan characters often contrast with traditional views of women; they are strong-willed, they are independent, they are self-possessed."<sup>2</sup> If this is, indeed, typical of the female orphan in literature, Princess Leia certainly falls into that category.

Without a doubt, the most obvious orphan of the *Star Wars* saga is Luke Skywalker. The question, then, as far as *Star Wars* fans are concerned, is why did Lucas choose to make the central hero of his saga an orphan hero?

**There is always an element of loneliness, of isolation to an orphan, an underdog status he has to work to shed.**

The most obvious of reasons is to gain our sympathy. Author Melanie Kimball describes the orphan as "the quintessential outcast who operates in isolation."<sup>3</sup> There is always an element of loneliness, of isolation to an orphan, an underdog status he has to work to shed. Because of the circumstances of his life, the reader wants to cheer for him, wants to see him succeed. "Orphan characters in folktales and literature symbolize our isolation from

one another and from society...They embody the hope that whatever the present situation, it can change for the better.”<sup>4</sup>

We are attracted to orphan as an archetype because they seem to be common people with almost insurmountable obstacles to overcome. Readers find a special sense of camaraderie with such a character that they might not feel with other larger-than-life archetypes. The orphan’s circumstance is often so much more hopeless or dire than our own that we empathize with their journey to overcome. “Orphans symbolize the feeling of abandonment that all humans experience at times. But orphans in literature also give us hope... If a pitiable orphan can succeed against enormous odds, then so can we.”<sup>5</sup> Ms. Kimball also believes that the central plot surrounding orphan stories frequently follows Joseph Campbell’s much-discussed hero’s journey. She goes on to point out several of these similarities by listing story elements that orphan heroes often have in common with Campbellian heroes. “It has been said there are no new stories, just retelling of old ones. A comparison of orphan tales from around the world has shown that, while the details of the stories are not the same, there are some common elements that can be extracted.”<sup>6</sup> Let’s consider these elements with regard to the character of Luke Skywalker.

### I. The orphan is somehow mistreated.

Luke isn’t obviously mistreated, as some orphans are. He doesn’t have Cinderella’s wicked stepmother making him into a household servant or *Oliver Twist*’s cruel workhouse overseer. He definitely has better foster parents than Harry Potter’s Dursleys. The mistreatment in Luke’s circumstance takes a gentler view. His foster parents, Owen and Beru, seem to love him, but theirs is a harsh life filled with sacrifices. We get the sense that Luke has worked hard on the farm for many years, often at the expense of normal childhood activities and definitely at the expense of his future plans. Luke is also denied information about his true parentage – Owen told him his father was a navigator on a spice freighter – though the motivation for such an untruth probably served the dual purpose of keeping him bound to life on Tatooine as well as keeping him safe. Either way he is trapped in a hopeless existence that makes him miserable.

### II. The orphan is given a quest or journey.

We can almost sense Luke’s quest when Obi-Wan Kenobi hands him his father’s lightsaber. Anticipation is heightened when Obi-Wan explains his true heritage – that his father was a Jedi knight. It is not surprising that, a few moments later, Leia’s holographic image appears and begs Obi-Wan for assistance. At that point we know that somehow Luke will go with Obi-Wan to Alderaan, despite his claims that he should return to the ritual of life on the moisture farm. In short order we see the brutal murder of Luke’s foster parents, which cements his orphan status even more firmly and propels him along his quest road away from dull life on Tatooine. He is off to find his fortune, rescue a princess and realize his dreams.

### III. The orphan faces obstacles on his/her journey.

Luke faces so many obstacles on his journey that they are difficult to list. His foster parents are the first obstacle, both with their lie about his parentage and their insistence that he not leave Tatooine. Even without their negative reinforcement, though, Luke’s location is so remote that it seems he stands little chance of seeing anyplace in the universe farther from home than Mos Eisley spaceport. When those initial obstacles are eliminated, Luke faces even greater obstacles: joining the rebellion, defeating the Empire, facing Darth Vader, and finally, conquering the darkness within himself.

Interestingly enough, Dennis Leoutsakis writes in his contemplation of orphan stories that “The duality of fictional orphans often represents the struggle between good and evil”<sup>7</sup> Certainly this is true in the case of Luke Skywalker. His most difficult struggle – the hardest obstacle he had to overcome – was the temptation to succumb to rage and hatred. It was through Luke’s internal struggle and his subsequent overcoming of the dark side in himself, that Lucas showed us that the battle between good and evil must often be waged within ourselves. In Luke we see the orphan victorious. In Anakin, we see the other side of the coin – what happens when the dark side wins.

#### IV. The orphan often has outside assistance in overcoming obstacles.

Space pilot Han Solo and Obi-Wan both help Luke overcome the first of his obstacles, namely the remote location of Tatooine. Obi-Wan is determined to take Luke with him, but it is Han’s space ship that provides the vehicle by which both Luke and Obi-Wan are liberated from their remote location: the planet furthest from “the bright center of the universe.”

It is at this point that Obi-Wan steps in and removes Luke’s figurative blinders by introducing him to the mystical power within himself – the ability to use The Force. By using a droid remote and a helmet with a blast shield, he gives Luke the most rudimentary lesson in seeing without his eyes. He awakens Luke’s special power, putting him firmly on the road to his dream of becoming a Jedi. Obi-Wan gives Luke his “first step into a larger world.”

Leia Organa does her part to assist Luke as well. Through her contacts he is able to realize his dream of joining the Rebel Alliance and ultimately even becoming a fighter pilot. Yoda, too, is an essential obstacle remover by teaching Luke that he must avoid “anger, fear, aggression.” This is necessary information if he is to avoid the pitfall of following in his father’s footsteps. Yoda also teaches him the invaluable lesson so many have taken with them from Star Wars: “Do or do not. There is no try.”

#### V. The orphan receives some kind of final reward. For some it may be money, status, marriage, a home...

Luke’s rewards aren’t the typical material rewards so many orphans receive. There is no castle, no beautiful princess on his arm, no piles of gold. When all is said and done, however, Luke has received many rewards from the course of his journey: the love and trust of his friends, the realization of his dream to become one of the galaxy’s best fighter pilots, and finally, the fulfillment of his destiny to become a Jedi Knight. The heart and soul of his reward, though, is found in the return of his father. This, surely, is the best end result any orphan could hope for and one that we seldom see.

#### VI. There is almost always a punishment for those who have mistreated the orphan.

As I mentioned, Luke wasn’t mistreated by his initial caregivers as are most literary orphans. There is no denying, though, that he had enemies who made his journey more difficult.

We must look outside Luke’s storyline for a moment to see the punishment received by those who had a hand in his initial miserable situation. His father’s betrayal of both his mother and the Jedi order were the primary acts responsible for Luke’s orphan status. Though we do not see Darth Vader punished in the typical sense of the word, we know that he suffered because we saw the physical scars. Likewise, we saw the remorse when, just prior to his death, he spoke to his son. On a slightly different note, we also saw the downfall of the mastermind behind his father’s betrayal when Palpatine was thrown into the abyss in the Death Star throne room.

Now that we've seen how Luke fits into the mold of literary orphan hero, we're free to look for the lessons this hero archetype can teach us. The most succinct synopsis I've seen came from Terry Windling, an editor, artist, essayist, and the author of books for both children and adults. She wrote: "The heroism of fairy tale orphans lies in their ability to survive and transform their fate, and to outwit those who would do them harm without losing their lives, their souls, or their humanity in the process."<sup>8</sup> Although Luke's situation was rare in that he ended up in a relatively normal, loving foster family we find ourselves present when that comfort is taken from him brutally and abruptly. He was, for the first time in his life, truly without the security of his home and family. This is, in fact, the point behind the use of the orphan as a literary device – to remove the limits placed on a young person because of parental restriction. "This condition is the struggle for the orphan as literary archetype."<sup>9</sup> Because they do not have a parent to provide security and care, the orphan must become both a seeker and a fighter.

This is, in fact, the point behind the use of the orphan as a literary device – to remove the limits placed on a young person because of parental restriction.

Author Carol S. Pearson has studied the orphan as an archetype. She feels the orphan has many gifts to offer as a result of their upbringing and experiences. According to her, someone might become an orphan figuratively any time they are "disappointed, abandoned, betrayed by life—and especially by the people who were supposed to care for (them)."<sup>10</sup> The essential lesson of the orphan, however, is something she sums up as this: "The gift of the orphan archetype is a freedom from dependence, a form of interdependent self-reliance. We no longer rely on external authority figures, but rather learn to help ourselves and each other...The orphan calls us to wake up, let go of our illusions, and face painful realities."<sup>11</sup>

Luke Skywalker's popularity as a hero is at least in part due to his orphan beginnings. Nothing could have been more difficult for Luke to accept than the truth that his father was not an idyllic Jedi Knight, or even an average guy working on a spice freighter. He was forced to shed these illusions in the face of the reality that his father was one of the galaxy's most hated men.

Accept the truth he does, though, and he becomes stronger for it. By the final chapter in the *Star Wars* saga, *Return of the Jedi*, Luke is far more than just an orphan farmboy from Tatooine. He beat the odds of his uncertain origins and became a confident pilot and wise Jedi Knight. The audience—whether invested in his journey by sympathy or empathy—share in his victory.

*"Because orphans represent the feelings and pain that all humans experience, the character still resonates with audiences of adults and children alike. And until the day when no one feels the pain of isolation, orphan characters will continue to symbolize it for us."*<sup>12</sup>

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# Recommendation

## Movie Messiah

Title: *Star Wars Jesus: A Spiritual Commentary On The Reality Of The Force*

Author: Caleb Grimes

ISBN: 1579218849

Publisher: Winepress Publishing

Copyright: 2006

*Reviewed by lazypadawan.*

The book is another in a long line of Christian analyses of the *Star Wars* films and perhaps one of the best to date. Each “chapter” is about each of the films, featuring a series of short essays about various scenes. Most of the essays are written as though Grimes is just sitting there in the room with you talking about the movie while you’re watching it. His point overall is that despite much being made of *Star Wars*’ Eastern influences, there are a lot of Christian influences as well. Not only was the book an engaging discussion about faith, it was also a very engaging discussion about *Star Wars*. He brings up points rarely considered before, taking on things from a fresh perspective. He really does understand the films and while you may not agree with every point he makes, it’s nice to see someone who’s a genuine fan dissect it all. All six movies are covered, with the classic trilogy taking up about half of the book, and with *Revenge of the Sith* taking up quite a bit of the prequel trilogy section. Grimes’s denomination—if he belongs to one—is never mentioned. Some of his essays and observations don’t involve religion at all. For that reason, it may be hard for some readers to fully understand where Grimes is coming from when it comes to religion or the times when he discusses other topics. Still, he refrains from shoehorning themes in *Star Wars* into his worldview and vice versa. Even if you are not religious or a Christian, you might enjoy reading *Star Wars Jesus*.

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