THE ROLE OF "THUNDERCATS" AS
A PRO-SOCIAL PROGRAM
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The role of television in modern American society is considerable. As summarized in the 1982 report of the National Institute of Mental Health, Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties (Washington, DC), its influence is pervasive. The report characterizes television as an educator whose effect on the aculturation process of children and adults is as powerful as the family, schools, churches, and other institutions. Its influence is both positive and negative, and a critical task for parents and teachers is to monitor and balance what is learned by children so that the positive effects outweigh the negative. Unfortunately, parents and educators have little input into planning what shows are created, produced, and programmed. Their input, then, is limited to regulating what TV shows children watch and to helping the young viewers reflect on and comprehend in discussion the content of the shows. In carrying out such an educative

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task, supplementary materials can prove to be an essential aid. The morals in the "Synopses and Morals" book have been assembled to help in this teaching endeavor for the "ThunderCats" show.

The episode synopses and morals, provide the means to help children understand the content of the show. The morals, which are addressed to the adult mediator, develop the theme of each episode. What can be learned from this show? The themes relate to various tasks of development for children in the cognitive, emotional, social, and moral realms. In the cognitive domain, themes involve children's understanding of various kinds of cognitions, such as social groups, friendships, success and failure, concern for the environment, problem-solving, and self-deliberation before acting. In the emotional domain, themes include the recognition of affect, impulse-management, self-control, and self-esteem. Social development themes cover topics like responsibility, friendly peer interaction, social sensitivity, caution in dealing with strangers, and prosocial behaviors like altruism and honesty. Finally, in the area of moral development, episodes stress the right judgment of good and evil, the development of conscience and levels of morality, and the value of social responsibility.

In commenting on the show as a whole, the link between its storyline and the development of identity is

to be acknowledged. Overall, the show is a fantasy tale with heroes, villains, and characters of mythic proportion. As fantasy, it is a morality play in which the forces of good battle the forces of evil. As myth, it provides a means for children to engage in an essential task, the development of personal identity.

Modern man has been characterized as secular man, who is without soul, in that he does not share in a universally shared meaning system that traditional primitive man enjoyed. In earlier eras, myth and ritual provided to man the functions of presenting to him the wonders of the universe, of explaining the forces of nature and ways of containing inner impulses, of validating a specific social and moral order for social communions, and of providing pathways through the stages of life. For Jerome Bruner, the cognitive and developmental psychologist and educator, the loss of myth in society has consequences of the development of personal identity. For him, myth is an externalization of what he calls the vicissitudes of personality and is a way of dealing with our inner impulses. Our discordant impulses are bound and ordered in a set of identities. And myth, in presenting mythic figures to us, is a tutor, a shaper of identities. Bruner cites Joseph Campbell, the chronicler and commentator of myth, who reminds us that individual man is only a fraction of the total image of man, and only in society as a whole can the fullness of the totality be able to be

seen. The full picture is seen in a "mythologically instructed community," which offers a corpus of images, models, and identities to which growth may aspire. Such a community provides its members with a library of scripts upon which the individual may judge the play of his multiple identites. Myth, then, is a criterion for the self-critic in the play of life (Bruner, 1968).

Joseph Campbell, in his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York, 1956), traced the universally accepted myth of the hero in its independent presence in all cultures. He saw in this myth a single human quest for identity. But modern man, lacking the guidance of a shared meaning system, must seek individually for identity and choose among a repertoire of identites. Among the sources and repositories of modern mythic identities in our electronic age are films and television in the representations of heroes and the social reality presented there. "ThunderCats" can be viewed as one representation of the hero myth. The ThunderCats, heroes all, have been separated from their home by a catastrophic occurrence and have entered a realm of wonder where they encounter fabulous forces of danger and helping spirits. They penetrate to a source of power, the Eye of ThunDERa. They do battle with the epitome of evil and its variants. In the midst of their struggle they encounter initiation trials and rites of passage, and they are called upon to maintain a moral code of Truth, Justice, Honor, and Loyalty. And ultimately

they hope to persist triumphant and attain a boon for mankind, a peaceful, orderly, and happy existence. In sum, the show, as a representation of the myth of the hero, may serve a purpose which goes beyond the entertainment of an action-adventure cartoon. For in presenting its viewers with a mythic morality play of good vs. evil, it exposes them to a set of heroic identities, the identification of which may provide valuable lessons towards the necessary achievement of a personal identity.

It is hoped that these remarks have served to introduce the pro-social aspect of this series to you. If viewed constructively, "ThunderCats" will be not only a popular form of entertainment, but a positive force in the development of its young viewers as well.

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References

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