

**Everybody Can Change: A Critical Cinematic, Philosophical,
Socio-Political, Theological Literary Analysis
of Sylvester Stallone's Seminal Work, Rocky IV**



A Downloadable White Paper / E-Book Presented Free of Charge by **Gut Check Press™**

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August, 2010



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For Frank Turk, who destroys everything that he hits.



Note: If you enjoy this free e-book, please visit www.gutcheckpress.com in September, 2010 to purchase the audio version of Ted Kluck's critically-acclaimed first book, *Facing Tyson: Fifteen Fighters, Fifteen Stories* (originally published stateside by The Lyons Press, and internationally by Mainstream Publishing).

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Introduction

For Me: A Narrative on Acquiring Rocky IV in a Very Typical Mid-Sized Midwestern Town

So last night, after a [Gut Check Press](#) corporate dinner of epic proportions, prepared by the author of the forthcoming title *Saucy Broad: A Culinary Manifesto of Hope*, Zach and I decided that, as a company, it was important to our mission statement that we own a copy of the film “Rocky IV.”

Fueled by RockStar Energy Drinks, we set off toward the mall. First, we stopped at Best Buy, the giant blue and yellow electronics store that seems to have everything...(pauses to build tension)...except Rocky IV. They had about 25 copies of “Rocky Balboa” (alt title: “Rocky VI”), and you can purchase such classics as “Soul Plane” and “White Chicks,” but no “Rocky IV.” Zach, my business partner, let the teenager behind the desk know that the day Best Buy doesn’t carry “Rocky IV” is the day Best Buy should begin to nail plywood over their doors and windows. She responded by yawning and chewing a hangnail.

Next we went to the mall, where we noticed a couple of things: One, the new “young, aggressive thug” uniform of choice is a pair of sagging blue jeans with a plain white t-shirt (also baggy). We also remarked on the fact that there was a certain teenage guy there whose pants hung so low off his arse that you could almost see the bottom seam on his heart-patterned boxer shorts. Zach observed that this particular cultural phenomenon (sagging pants and visible underwear) was now twenty years old, with no end in sight. We both died a little inside. It was going to be a quick trip to the mall.

What we learned:

1. At Barnes and Noble you can get a boxed set with every recorded episode of “That 70s Show.” I’m not sure who on earth would want this.
2. No Rocky IV at Barnes and Noble or F.Y.E which stands for “For Your Entertainment” and where we had enjoyable chit chat with the clerk, who Zach had convinced that Dolph Lundgren (Drago) once won an Oscar for his work in foreign art films.

Me: “I don’t want to live in an America where you can’t, at any moment, go to a mall and buy a copy of Rocky IV.”

Zach: “This means Drago has won.”

Finally, we went to Family Video and rented a copy for a dollar. Here are some random observations about the film, which I probably watched about a hundred times between 1985 and 1996, but not at all since.

1. The film is comprised, at least 80%, of montage and fight scenes, which means the script for Rocky IV was probably about a page and a half long.
2. At around minute 30 of the film, there’s a montage (the one where Rocky’s driving around town in his Lamborghini, being sad about Apollo’s death) which in addition to recapping the first three Rocky films, also recaps the first 30 minutes of Rocky IV, in case the viewer, for some reason, missed the first 30 minutes of the film¹. To my knowledge it’s the only sports movie that’s ever done this (montaged itself, mid film).

¹ As an added fail safe, the lyrics of the song that follows also re-cap the plot nicely (e.g. “our freedom is up against the ropes”), in case you miss this montage as well.

3. It occurred to us that Paulie, Rocky's derelict brother in law, is the only character in the movie that could actually exist in real life.
4. There's this great part toward the end where Paulie says, "I know I sometimes say stupid things..." and Rocky stops him and replies, "No, Paulie, everything you say is art."
5. I totally made that up.
6. There's something amazing about watching Rocky IV in my basement, which has both a heavy bag and a boxing ring in it.
7. This film is an excellent example of Zach's Good/Bad theory of filmmaking. That is, we know Rocky IV sucks as a film...it's as cheesy and heavy-handed as films get, but yet it's still a Good/Great movie. It's classic storytelling. Stallone gives us a bad guy (see also: Mr. T in Rocky III), and then makes us hate him (Drago...because he ruthlessly killed off Apollo Creed, even though Creed was lippy and arrogant and totally had it coming). Also because he was Russian and this was at the height of the Cold War Movie.
8. The real Drago was actually more ripped than the airbrushed version of Drago that is unfurled on canvas in the arena before the fight.
9. Rocky talks about his feelings a lot in Rocky IV. Like after the fight where he totally wins over a room full of hostile Russians despite the fact that he just beat up their national hero. Rocky is known for his fighting, but he's actually a totally above-average philosopher.
10. This movie features the song "Living in America" by James Brown, played in its entirety. It also features lots of other songs in their entirety (see also: two more training montages) which is why there's a grand total of a page and a half of dialogue in this movie.

Abstract: Why a White Paper on Rocky IV?

This important film is, in our opinion, the most imminently watchable / quotable film in the entire Sylvester Stallone canon. It's not the best, mind you, as both Rocky and Rambo are better, but it is the most watchable and, I daresay, the most important². Our purpose is to garner recognition for this film in academic circles. We would also like to be invited to academic conferences to present this paper, which, we feel, is chock full of Important Discoveries on the enduring impact of Rocky IV. It's also an excuse to watch the movie like six more times.

To invite us to a conference/symposium to speak on Rocky IV, send an email to info@gutcheckpress.com. We'll probably say yes. We're also thinking of hosting our own conference on Rocky IV in 2011. We haven't finalized the speaking arrangements with Mr. Carl Weathers (read: we haven't even tried to call him), but he will almost certainly be there, as we will provide free food (including stew) in the green room, and use our frequent flyer miles to get him to / from Michigan.

² Read: Fun.

1. Burning Heart: Cinematic Implications and Montage Use in Rocky IV

Rocky IV was a groundbreaking Hollywood film in its use of the montage, and should take its rightful place in the AFI Top 100 Films (ahead of Citizen Kane?) for this reason. Rocky IV did what no other film before it had done, by, in effect, montaging itself and then montaging that montage, while also montaging, for the viewer, the first three films in the series (summed up as follows: Rocky punches meat, Rocky dates Adrian, Rocky loses to Apollo but goes the distance, Rocky beats Apollo and in the process somehow becomes friends with Apollo, Mick dies, Rocky loses to Mr. T, Rocky trains in the ghetto and splashes in the surf³ with Apollo, Rocky beats Mr. T, Apollo dies at the hands of the evil Russian, Rocky trains in Siberia, Rocky beats the Russian and ends the Cold War.) The timeline of this montage is completely non-linear, suggesting that Stallone's visionary writing and directing was the main inspiration for a then-22-year-old Quentin Tarantino.

Rocky IV, itself, featured several important montages. After Apollo dies, Rocky gets angry, gets behind the wheel of his Lamborghini⁴ and drives it angrily through the streets of Philadelphia. While driving angrily, he basically views the first three movies in his mind. He then views the current movie, Rocky IV, up to that point, which basically means that he sees Apollo dying a bunch of times, from a bunch of different angles.

Other Montages: Rocky arrives in Siberia to find that he's staying in a wooden shack out in the middle of nowhere, with Paulie, and his adopted Black Father Figure who has about two lines of dialogue in the whole movie. While in Montage/Siberia he: Chops wood, does sit-ups from the rafters, lifts rocks, fixes some guy's horse and buggy, carries logs through the woods, and runs up the side of a mountain away from the KGB officers who are apparently tracking him to make sure he doesn't plant a bomb in the vast Siberian countryside...a bomb that would blow up...well, nothing. This KGB agent is himself the subject of a montage, as we see several different angles / zooms of him putting a pair of binoculars up to his face (a montage that appears immediately after we first see him putting said binoculars up to his face).

Meanwhile, Ivan Drago is training in his own state of the art facility. I know it's state of the art because it has an indoor running track and lots of machines that light up...making it, essentially a Bally's Total Fitness™ except in Russia. Drago grunts a lot in his montage, and also injects a syringe of what we can only assume is a banned substance, into his bicep. This, of course, makes Drago appear even more dangerous.

Add to these montages the actual fight scenes and you're left with about six lines of actual dialogue in the whole film. This movie watches more like a music video (see: soundtrack, below) than an actual movie.

2. If I Can Change: Racial Implications of Rocky IV

In true action movie fashion, the brother (in this case Apollo Creed, portrayed brilliantly by former Oakland Raider Carl Weathers) dies in the first 30 minutes. In brief, Creed is the lippy but endearing Best Friend to current heavyweight champion Rocky Balboa. They're such good friends, in fact, that at the beginning of the film we see them in an empty gym, sparring—a fight that was the “payoff” for Creed training Balboa to defeat Mr. T (Clubber Lang) in Rocky III. While Creed is at his mansion throwing a tennis ball to his dog in his pool⁵, he sees a television

³ Very gayly, I might add.

⁴ Kids: Never drive angry.

⁵Message: He's very well-off, financially.

news report about a supposedly unbeatable Russian Heavyweight named Ivan Drago. He immediately decides that he needs to un-retire in order to fight and “whup”⁶ this robotic, mechanical but ridiculously strong Russian⁷.

He immediately gets into his car and drives to Balboa’s even bigger, more magnificent mansion⁸, where he is having a very awkward birthday party involving Paulie, Paulie’s Robot, and Balboa’s son, who, despite his Italian American lineage (Rocky and Adrian), doesn’t look the least bit Italian.

It is at this point that Balboa channels his inner Dr. Phil and pleads with Creed not to fight the Russian, explaining that they’re “different people” than they were when they fought each other (which was, most recently, about a week earlier). Balboa then asks Creed to lie down on his chaise lounge, dims the lights, and listens to Creed expound on his feelings, his inadequacies, and his strained relationship with his father⁹ while he (Balboa) takes notes on a stenographer’s pad.

At the end of the scene it’s decided that the fight will happen, Balboa will be Creed’s cornerman, and that the fight will take place in Vegas where there will be a minimum of 500 Showgirls and one Godfather of Soul¹⁰ at ringside.

Creed then embarks on a training regimen for the fight that we can only assume involves doing lots of interviews and looking at himself in the mirror. Behind the façade of ripped, glistening muscles is a shell of the Apollo Creed we saw in *Rocky I* and *II*. Simply put: Creed gets “whupped” (read: killed, literally) by Drago as Stallone watches helplessly at ringside. But was he really helpless? He *could* have thrown in the towel and saved his black friend from certain destruction...but he didn’t. This concept—Guilt—pro-vides the impetus for the rest of Balboa’s personal / athletic / beard-growing journey throughout the balance of the film.

3. The Role of the Spouse-at-Ringside in *Rocky IV*

There is a great deal to learn about Female Interaction in *Rocky IV*. At each fight (Drago vs. Creed, Drago vs. Balboa), the wives of the two combatants greet each other awkwardly at ringside before the fight, saying something along the lines of “I realize our husbands are about to beat each other senseless in a few minutes, but I really hope we can stay friends afterwards. Call me!”

This is insulting both to wives and to the intelligence of the viewer. I mean seriously, would you go shopping, or out to coffee, with the wife of the guy that killed your husband? I doubt it. But perhaps it’s this gesture – call it *hope* – that provides a great deal of the charm behind *Rocky IV*.

For the record, Mrs. Balboa and Mrs. Drago *did* go shopping after their husbands fought, but found the process largely awkward and forced-feeling. They couldn’t really decide on where to go, and once they got there Adrian felt that she was asking all of the questions but really failed to get the conversation going. She then went home and told Rocky that she was, quote, “Doing all the work” in the relationship, and wondered if being friends with Mrs. Drago was more trouble than it was worth. Rocky grunted in response leaving the viewer, and Adrian, to wonder what he really felt.

⁶ His words, not mine.

⁷ We know he’s ridiculously strong because when he hits the padded square mechanism with lots of lights and buttons on it, it registers that he generates like sixteen tons of brute force. Also: “Whatever he hits...he destroys.”

⁸ Sub(?)text: They both have a lot to lose.

⁹ Not really.

¹⁰ For white people: This is another moniker for James Brown.

4. Things I Learned From the Rocky IV Soundtrack

1. A Burning Heart (just about to burst...a quest for answers, an unquenchable thirst) is different than a Heart On Fire (a strong desire, which rages deep within.)
2. There's no easy way out, and no shortcut home. Also, sometimes, giving in can't be wrong.
3. While listening to "Living in America" by James Brown, my co-author Zach informed me that it's illegal for Balboa to drape himself in the American flag in the center of the ring, post-fight, as per American flag regulations. It's also, probably, safe to assume that it's illegal for him to wear a version of it on his crotch during the fight (boxing trunks). It occurs to me that it's amazing the things you learn while watching Rocky IV.
4. I run the mile an average of 14 seconds faster if I do so while listening to track number 10 (Training Montage) and track number 5 (War, by Vince DiCola) than if I don't listen to anything at all.

5. What the (expletive) is Wrong With Paulie

Paulie is Rocky's brother in law, and Adrian's brother. He's a generally dour, slovenly Philadelphian who initially tried to drive Rocky away (see: throwing the Thanksgiving turkey out the door in Rocky I), but has instead become a real part of the Balboa family and a fixture in the Rocky films, even though he doesn't really do anything besides complain and occasionally provide comic relief (see: falling in the snowdrift, Rocky IV).

Paulie is generally what I would call "down" in Rocky IV. He seems to be living only for a semi-platonic relationship with a female robot, and his pornographic comic books, as evidenced by his behavior in the birthday party scene at the beginning of the film. It's our feeling that Paulie may be suffering from the early stages of Bipolar disorder, as he is generally either really high or really low.

Paulie's difficulties stem from the fact that he's always been a bit of a hanger-on in Rocky's high profile athletic life. Though his brother in law has always been cordial, allowing Paulie to sit in on his corner during fights even though he doesn't know anything about boxing or anything else for that matter, Paulie has always felt a certain degree of distance from the rest of the family. I attribute this to two factors. One, he's never found love¹¹. Throughout the series Paulie has remained steadfastly single, while the people around him have married. Two, he doesn't have a job. Three, he's overweight and disheveled looking, and not in an endearing way.

Because of this, Paulie is dealing with some pretty significant jealousy issues vis-à-vis Rocky. This results in a lot of yelling, and also the occasional hurled object (see: Turkey, Rocky I, beer bottle, Rocky II). It's so obvious that Paulie is jealous. I mean, seriously, why hasn't he dealt with this? He's only hurting himself.

But Rocky IV provides hope for Paulie. He gets out of his proverbial comfort zone by accompanying Rocky to Siberia, and bringing his Chipmunks Christmas album. He falls in a snowdrift, and everybody laughs, including Rocky, who at this point is really upset because, hello, he's in ----ing Siberia! And later, on the way to the ring to fight Drago, Paulie verbalizes what everyone has known for years, which is that if he could be someone else in life, it would be Rocky. Rocky wipes away a tear and they embrace¹². Actually, Rocky just says "Thanks Paulie," awkwardly, because who has

¹¹ His proclaimed love for his sensual-sounding female robot notwithstanding.

¹² Not really.

a conversation like that on the way to the ring? I mean, seriously, all those long, boring nights in the Siberian gulag would have been a natural time to do some serious mutual sharing of feelings. Don't you think?

6. You Can Change: Political Progressivism and Rocky IV

Without delving too deeply into the inner-workings of Rocky Balboa, I'm pretty sure he's a small government capitalist and fiscal conservative. I mean, seriously, what's more capitalistic than professional boxing where you are literally fighting other people for money. Rocky can be seen driving exotic motorcycles and cars, doing television commercials (Rocky II), flaunting his wealth and fame (Rocky III), but he is never shown doing charitable work. A bleeding heart liberal he is not.

Interesting, then, that Rocky ends the Cold War in one fell swoop with his decisive victory over Ivan Drago on Christmas day in Moscow. As Rocky explains in his post-fight speech, the crowd, initially, was hostile. He fought Drago in an arena that featured a chain link fence around the tunnel leading from the locker room (cultural difference? I mean seriously, who has these?), and several larger-than-life-sized artist's renderings of Drago which incredibly (the renderings) looked less impressive and ripped than the real Drago looked. Drago truly looks like the kind of guy who could grab you around the neck with his boxing glove and lift you up off the ground with one hand¹³. Anyway.

An Aside on Physics/Physiology in Rocky IV

In the first two rounds of his fight with Drago, Rocky gets hit repeatedly with the kinds of punches that routinely end real heavyweight fights¹⁴ and, I daresay, if strung together in succession would kill an actual person (see: Apollo Creed). But, as Drago explains in his corner during the fight, Balboa is "like a piece of iron." Indeed. A piece of iron is harder than a boxing glove. Therein lies the genius of Rocky Balboa. I don't care how many designer Russian steroids you inject into your bicep during training, you're not going to hurt a piece of iron.

Other physical impossibilities: At one point in the fight, as the tide has turned and the crowd, according to Stu Nahan, has "suddenly become Pro Rocky," the Mikhael Gorbachev figure¹⁵ can be seen getting up from his seat in a luxury¹⁶ skybox¹⁷ and sending one of his minions to go down and yell at Drago, figuring the yelling will improve his performance in the ring. Drago gets up from his stool, grabs the minion, who has left his skybox, taken the stairs to the concourse, and walked to ringside, all in the span on a one-minute break between rounds, and lifts him off the ground with one boxing-gloved hand. This is so, totally impossible. It's hard to grab a can of Coke whilst wearing a boxing glove...much less a real person's neck¹⁸. This is perhaps the least realistic happening in any Sylvester Stallone movie, with the possible exception of John Lithgow playing an evil tough guy in "Cliff Hanger."

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¹³ He does this, in Rocky IV.

¹⁴ Remember, the same machine with all the switches that blew Marty McFly across the laboratory here tells us that Drago's punches pack 2000+ psi.

¹⁵ They don't come right out and say that he's Gorbachev, but he's balding with a birthmark on his forehead.

¹⁶ You're allowed to smoke cigarettes in there, if you're Gorbachev.

¹⁷ See: All men being created equal, some being more equal than others.

¹⁸ Although we find holding a pipe to be quite comfortable

Needless to say, there were some insurmountable odds facing Rocky Balboa. He not only defeated the Russian, he ended the Cold War in the aforementioned post-fight speech. I've covered a lot of boxing, and I've never seen a fighter take the microphone after a fight to address the crowd, all of whom have, inexplicably, stayed put despite seeing their national hero carved up like a turkey.

But Rocky had a greater mission – a mission to do what presidents and diplomats before him had failed to do: End the Cold War and liberate the Russian people, who were laboring under communism. Rocky, though he didn't even finish high school, knew intuitively what the Russian people needed. They needed boxing. But beyond that, they needed freedom.

Apparently he had arranged a translator, for just such a post-fight occasion. Rocky then told the crowd that "If I can change¹⁹, and you can change...EVERYBODY CAN CHANGE!" Drago slunk up next to Rocky, handed him the trophy, and declared, "You're all right, Balboa!" The crowd then erupted in cheers, despite the fact that they were all being filmed by the Gorbachev figure and would all be mysteriously executed over the course of the following week.

7. I Wish I Wasn't In This Nightmare: Theological Imagery in Rocky IV

Not only does Rocky IV (alt. title "Rocky III") "speak truth to power" in a big way, politically; we must not overlook its religious / theological significance. This film is bursting with bold spiritual claims, which, in their sophistication, make Kierkegaard look like Brian McLaren.

The viewer instinctively knows from the outset that he is in for a roller-coaster of reader-hermeneutic-style symbolism—as nuanced and subtle as anything the medium of film has offered before or since. The first images we see on the screen are of two boxing gloves—one bearing American symbols and one Soviet—colliding, causing the latter to explode. As to what this means, we can only offer pure conjecture. The viewer is left with no answers, only questions: who will fight in this film? What will be their nationalities? Who will win? *Whos* can change? And what will be the spiritual arc of this story?

The last question is perhaps the most complex, and must be approached with a spirit of humility and caution. Analyzing the theological in Rocky IV must not be approached like your average English Lit 101 class, wherein every major character is declared a Christ figure.²⁰ No, nothing so clumsy or monolithic rolls off Mr. Stallone's pen or onto his celluloid. Rather, Rocky IV is a veritable web of inter-religious references, transcending time, traditions, and cultures. Let us take some time to explore these many-layered, multi-dimensional characters and themes.

Ivan Drago

Most religions have an evil, malevolent anti-god figure; even polytheistic or non-theistic religions usually give some sort of name / personality / symbol to the evil we see in the world. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity call this figure

¹⁹ It's unclear just how Rocky, himself, changed during the fight. It seemed to me that he went into the fight wanting to beat Drago, and finished the fight in much the same fashion.

²⁰ For example, the "Old Man" of *Old Man and the Sea* fame, who cuts his hands on fishing line and is, therefore, a Christ figure. Even though there is no record anywhere of Christ ever having cut his hands on fishing line.

Satan, and he is pictured in the Jewish *Nevi'im* and the Christian New Testament as a dragon.²¹ Clearly, then, Rocky IV wants there to be no question about who Drago²² represents, even so as to lay aside the film's usual subtlety to make the point.

Drago does things that we would expect the devil to do, like take drugs, wear spandex, hang out with butch women, sport a blonde spike, and punch machines. He says things that we would expect the devil to say, like, "I fight to win. For me! For me!" (a clear reference to the sense of rebellion and sinful autonomy that caused Satan to be cast from heaven), and, "I cannot be defeated!" Drago does not care if he kills innocent men ("If he dies, he dies.") And, perhaps most tellingly, he wears a yellow robe into the ring, with two red stripes running down the sleeves, representing his cowardice (yellow) and two bloody strategies (devouring and seducing²³).

Drago's character represents all that is evil and really, really bad in the world and is, therefore, not tied to one religious system. However, Rocky IV contains other archetypal characters that are more specific in their antecedents.

Apollo Creed

Some would be tempted to play the Christ-figure card with Apollo Creed. After all, he is the "good guy" who is essentially murdered by agents of an evil empire before being vindicated. And who can miss the obvious reference to the Pietà as Rocky cradles his dead friend's head in his arms?

But there are many reasons why Apollo is decidedly *not* a Christ figure²⁴. First of all, there's his name. "Creed" (from the Latin *credo*, meaning "I believe") and the Greek "Apollo" (a pagan deity). His very identity points away from sinless perfection and faithfulness (suggesting struggles of faith and idolatry), as does his attitude (glory-chasing) and impetuous actions.

No, Apollo is rather a type of one of the most famous martyrs to ever live—St. Peter. Observe the similarities: Peter was always quick to strike back and defeat the enemy by force. Likewise, Apollo declares to Rocky, that he was "born with a killer instinct that can't be turned off and on like a robot!"²⁵

Like Peter, who arrogantly proclaimed that he would never leave his master's side no matter what, Apollo continually spouts off prideful proclamations: "You will lose and lose royally," "I've retired more men than social security," "I'm in the best shape of my life. I'm stronger, quicker!" And you know what pride comes before, right? Yes sir, destruction, and a haughty spirit before the fall.

Apollo is internally tortured, as Rocky points out when he says, "Hey, uh, Apollo, uh, you ever think that maybe this fight ain't against him? Like, uh, maybe it's, uh, actually against *you*?" Apollo doesn't want to hear it. He declares

²¹ See: Isa 27:1; 51:9, Rev. 12-13.

²² You may not have noticed this, but the word "Drago" looks an awful lot like the word "dragon." It's just missing the last N, really. It also means "dragon" in French, Slovenian, and a bunch of other languages.

²³ Along the lines of the latter strategy, Drago wears very short, (like Daisy-Duke-short) tight shorts during the film, causing every female watching (all six of them) to stumble, spiritually.

²⁴ For starters: both Carl Weathers and Sylvester Stallone are still alive. Can you imagine God *not* smiting someone who portrayed a Christ figure awkwardly bouncing around to the beat of a James Brown song whilst wearing a sparkly American flag-themed top hat? Me neither.

²⁵ Actually, he says "like a radio," but there was a robot standing right there, so it would have probably been a better analogy.

that his desire to fight has “never been more right.” And, of course, he pays the price. There are hints that he has experienced some sort of spiritual awakening in the process, though. After initially declaring, “We sure as hell can’t be born again!” to Rocky, he then declares, “God, I feel born again!” before his ring-walk. It seems that even Apollo can change. (Everybody can change).

Rocky Balboa

It has also been (seriously) suggested by some that Rocky is a Christ figure.²⁶ But he’s not. If we only look at the obvious surface imagery, sure, we might come to that conclusion. After all, Rocky gives up his title and belt²⁷ in order to go to his enemy’s home turf and defeat him (on Christmas Day, no less!). And, yes, we hear his mentor tell him, “You’re the One! You’ll have to go through hell.” And we see him praying fervently before heading out to the ring.

All the same, Rocky Balboa is actually a Wōden-figure (referring to the pagan god once worshipped by North Germanic peoples). He just is. Trust me.

Paulie

Of course, no one would accuse Paulie of being a Christ figure. On the contrary, like the character of Cypher in *The Matrix*, Paulie appears at first blush to be symbolic of Judas. He kisses Rocky on the cheek and causes him to lose everything he has.²⁸ But again, we must look deeper.

Paulie, perhaps the most richly layered character in the history of story-telling, is best understood as symbolizing the Greek god Pan. Think about it: he looks like Pan from the waste up (albeit an older Pan who has let himself go considerably). And how often do you see Paulie’s legs? Almost never, right? Almost like he’s hiding something. That’s because he totally is.²⁹

More similarities: Pan is famous for his sexual prowess.³⁰ Paulie enjoys his “comics” and reprograms his robot to speak with a decidedly sultry voice and demeanor. Pan was known for hanging around in a wife-beater, mooching off his in-laws, toasting marshmallows over the flame of a single candle. And for throwing turkeys. The connection with Paulie need not be explained.

Original Sin

Beyond the characters themselves, several spiritual themes are woven through the film, like so many beautiful threads through a rich, complex tapestry. Apart from the obvious theme of perseverance (Rocky tells his insufferable kid, “Goin’ that one more round when you don’t think you can, that’s what makes all the difference in life.”), there is a strong narrative thread of human depravity.

²⁶ <http://ezinearticles.com/?From-Rocky-to-Rocky-Balboa&id=4063171>

²⁷ This plot element is so quickly skimmed over via a newspaper montage that I didn’t know it was happening until my 18th viewing, some 25 years after first watching the film.

²⁸ Wait, that’s in Rocky V, which we (America) like to pretend doesn’t exist.

²⁹ Have you ever tried to walk in the snow, while wearing boots over behoved feet? You’d trip and fall too.

³⁰ I try to be religiously tolerant, but seriously—how did people worship those dirty, pervy gods with a straight face?

First of all, the very existence of the synth-driven score of this film is irrefutable evidence that human beings are stained by sin. James Brown also explores this theme in his song, as he refers to his “bad (read: sinful) self,” even while declaring that he “feel[s] good!”³¹ The ever-presence of mullets and ‘80s pube-staches in America and Soviet Russia alike are a further reminder that human depravity is a mankind problem, not a problem of one nation in particular.

The character of Adrian is also a symbol of the human propensity for evil and the curse that sin brought upon the earth. First of all, in Rocky IV we see this usually supportive woman going all Job’s Wife³² on Rocky, saying, “You can’t win” and telling Rocky that he should “change his thinking” because “everyone else has.” Her very appearance is also a reminder of the effects of sin on the earth and its inhabitants. Adrian, who, in the first movie (at 30 years old), was ridiculously hot in her little hat and horn-rimmed glasses (we are reminded of this several times in a montage) is here (not yet 40 years old) looking *rough*. None of us, reminds Stallone, not even Hollywood celebrities or the trophy wives of prize-fighters, shall escape the ravages of time and entropy.³³

The Kingdom of God in Rocky IV

USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA!
USA! USA!

Conclusion: You're Not a Machine, You're a Man: The Message and Application of Rocky IV

Rocky IV was all of 91 minutes; a tidy length usually reserved for comedies of the Pauly Shore-variety. No matter. The sum total of the human experience (love, losing your Black Friend at the hands of an Evil Russian, life, death, driving your Lamborghini angrily through the streets of Philadelphia, James Brown, theology, Russians) is encompassed in these 91 minutes, making it the most important film of our generation, and maybe ever. This film needs to accompany The Big Lebowski at the table of Worthless Academic Pursuits That Are Actually, for Some Reason, Taken Seriously. I mean, come on, there's no deep symbolism in a movie that is about both bowling and marijuana. Rocky IV endures because it has neither bowling nor recreational drug use. Lebowski also suffers because of its lack of Sylvester Stallone or Dolph Lundgren. Rocky has both. We could go on and on.

³¹ Is there any symbolism to the fact that James Brown had the exact same hairstyle that Michelle Obama has? Probably not, since the First Lady was a 21-year-old unknown at the time, but who can say how deep Rocky IV really goes? Is it tied to space and time like a regular movie?

³² Job 2:8-10

³³ The Rev. Dr. Michael E. Wittmer actually did his doctoral dissertation on this topic, entitled, “Curse God and Die: Adrian Balboa as a Type of Fallen Eve Insofar as She Says Mean Stuff to Rocky in Rocky IV and Goes From Looking All *Hot for Teacher* / Naughty Librarian to Looking Like an Elder Kennedy on a Really Bad Day.”

We'll leave you with a challenge, because people like Rocky Balboa are big on challenges: What does the montage of your life, up to this point, look like? I mean really, if someone were to commission Survivor to fashion a theme song that would accompany the montage of your life,³⁴ what would it look like? Would you be happy with the montage, or upon viewing would you want to take off your motorcycle helmet and sling it up at the statue of yourself that rests on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum?³⁵

And that, friends, is really what this film is about. It's about change. It's about healing and reconciliation (see: Rocky VII where Rocky and Drago open a small but revolutionary publishing company together). So immerse yourself in Rocky IV. Breathe deeply of its enduring wisdom, and allow it to change you and transform you. We did, and we'll never be the same.

³⁴ And, let's face it, that would probably cost all of about forty bucks today.

³⁵ Also, would your montage include previous montages?