Classical Heroes in Modern Movies: Mythological Patterns of the Superhero

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As the central figure in the film experience, the hero is the integral archetype in the collective unconscious of American culture. He is at once a collective and personal encounter, as each individual in the audience identifies personally with the hero’s story, while the hero simultaneously embodies the collective hopes and ideals of the culture that creates him. It is this compound phenomenon – the personal identification with the collective hero – that makes the hero archetype so psychologically powerful. This compound identification with the hero fulfills what Carl Jung called the “transcendent function” of myth and dreams.

In Jungian psychology, myths are collective dreams, the communal expression of a culture’s goals, wishes, anxieties and fears. Dreams, on the other hand, are personal myths. They are the individual expression of personal unconscious issues, amplified into visions and projected onto a screen in the “theater of the mind,” in the form of a personalized movie. Experiencing a modern myth in the form of a film is, in a Jungian sense, a transcendent experience, because when we identify with the hero and vicariously experience his journey, we transcend our own private conscious existence and integrate a collective cultural archetype. Furthermore, as a function of the film-going experience, we transcend our own individual neuroses, allowing ourselves to commune with the rest of the audience through a shared understanding, integrating the collective encounter on a personal level.

The genre of superhero movies, (which is currently at its zenith of popularity), seems to impart the most direct embodiment of the archetypal hero that Jung delineated. The modern superhero, derived primarily from comic books, combines characteristics of the classical heroes of Greco-Roman hero traditions with the more humble and god-fearing heroes of the Judeo-Christian traditions. While superheroes generally have superpowers – traits analogous to the
semi-divine status of Greco-Roman heroes, who were typically the sons of gods – they also tend to have human frailties and weaknesses more indicative of normal people. The modern superhero must not only face powerful super-villains and incredible odds, he must also overcome his personal doubts, fears and anxieties about himself and his atypical identity. Incorporating both the grand and mundane in his character, the superhero allows viewers to enjoy his colossal struggle on a mythological level, while also identifying with his personal anxieties on an individual level.

Though there have been many studies of the hero archetype, ranging from philosophical to psychological, sociological and anthropological, the most seminal theories on the subject remain the original models of Otto Rank, Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell. Each one of these theorists delineated a pattern of the mythological hero’s structure in distinctive yet complimentary ways. Otto Rank’s model, influenced principally by Freudian theory, focuses primarily on the birth of the hero – represented in movies as the superhero’s “backstory.” Lord Raglan’s model was influenced primarily by Sir James Frazer’s view of myth as a “script” for religious ritual, [see Frazer’s decisive opus on myth and ritual – The Golden Bough (1922)]. In this sense, Raglan’s model focuses more intently on the latter stages of the hero’s saga, the downfall and death of the hero, in which the hero becomes ritualistically transformed from a living person into an immortal legend. Joseph Campbell’s model, while influenced heavily by Freud, Rank and Frazer alike, is most clearly structured around Jung’s model of the hero archetype. In keeping with Jungian psychology, Campbell saw the primary role of the hero as a symbol of the self, and his adventure as the symbol of life. Therefore, Campbell’s model focuses entirely on the hero’s journey, the events occurring subsequent to the hero’s birth and childhood, and prior to his downfall and death. Hence, the three seminal studies of the hero – Rank’s, Raglan’s and Campbell’s – while overlapping considerably, are also perfectly complimentary, as they focus on, respectively, the beginning, end and middle of the hero’s life story.

**Joseph Campbell: The Hero’s Journey**

Campbell’s model of the mythological hero, from his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), is by far the most influential, especially in the field of screenwriting, for several
reasons. First, Campbell himself delineated clear stages of the hero’s journey, providing a
distinct structure for screenwriters to follow when devising their plots and character
development. Secondly, Campbell’s model is the most eclectic of the major studies, integrating
Freudian, Rankian, Jungian and Frazerian theory into a cohesive pattern of heroic elements. And
finally, Campbell arranged his model in three broad units, (“the nuclear unit of the monomyth”),
which corresponds quite nicely with the three-act structure that most screenplays follow.

Campbell’s term “monomyth” is a reference to a term originally created by James Joyce
in *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939). It refers to the basic elements of myth, the archetypal qualities of all
legends and heroes, that transcend individual cultures and specific periods of time. The
monomyth is universal and timeless. Hence, the hero that Campbell explains is not one particular
hero from one particular myth, but the universal qualities of all heroes from all myths… the
“hero with a thousand faces.” The monomyth is universal and timeless because its basic form
fulfills a psychological function for both the mythmakers and their audiences. Campbell
explained it as follows:

“The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of
the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which
might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.”

The formula of the monomyth is then summarized as follows:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of
supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won:
the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on
his fellow man.”

And the specific actions within the three parts of the formula are explained as follows:

“The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle is
lured… to the threshold of adventure… then the hero journeys through a world of
unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests),
some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of his mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero’s sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), or his own divination (apotheosis)... The final work is that of the return... At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread... The boon he brings restores the world.”

Campbell went even further in his account, breaking this three-part, (or three-act), formula down into seventeen specific stages, each of which he explains in detail. The stages of the hero’s journey are as follows:

**Act One: Departure**

1. *The Call to Adventure*
2. *Refusal of the Call*
3. *Supernatural Aid*
4. *The Crossing of the First Threshold*
5. *The Belly of the Whale*

**Act Two: Initiation**

6. *The Road of Trials*
7. *The Meeting with the Goddess*
8. *Woman as the Temptress*
9. *Atonement with the Father*
10. *Apotheosis*
11. *The Ultimate Boon*
Act III: Return

12. Refusal of the Return
13. The Magic Flight
14. Rescue from Without
15. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
16. Master of the Two Worlds
17. Freedom to Live

A thorough explanation of each of these stages is beyond the scope of this article; however, by analyzing the film-stories of the most popular superhero at this time, Spider-Man (2002) and Spider-Man 2 (2004), the essence of Campbell’s pattern should ring clear.

Act I: Departure (Stages One – Five)

As with nearly all heroes, especially of the “super” variety, Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) is an orphan, raised by surrogate parents – in this case, his aunt May (Rosemarie Harris) and uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson). In his commonday world, Peter is a geeky weakling, bullied by his classmates and ignored by his dream girl Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst). But after being bitten by a genetically engineered mutant spider at a Columbia University lab, Peter gains superpowers. (In superhero movies, science fiction typically takes the place of divinity in bestowing supernatural aid to heroes, taking the form of superpowers). All of a sudden, Mary Jane notices Peter, and he is the one beating up the bullies. But Peter is not aware that his newfound powers have not only changed his abilities – they have changed his identity. Initially, he uses his powers selfishly.

Peter’s call to adventure comes when he has the opportunity to stop a thief, but doesn’t. His refusal of the call leads to an ironic tragedy, when the thief kills Peter’s uncle. In a sequence eerily reminiscent of the first act of Superman, Peter feels guilty that, for all of his superpowers, he could not save his own uncle. He is finally inspired to accept his call to
adventure by his uncle’s last fateful words: “With great power comes great responsibility.” Peter crosses the first threshold into the realm of heroism, when he dons his Spider-Man costume and hunts down his uncle’s murderer. As Campbell would say, the hero is now “in full career of his adventure” – immersed within the “sphere of rebirth... symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale.”

**Act II: Initiation (Stages Six – Eleven)**

In the middle stages of his journey, the hero encounters and integrates all of the significant archetypes that aid him in achieving the mythic identity that he is destined for. First, Peter has a meeting with a goddess... the wise and loving Aunt May, who gives him the last bit of inspiration he needs, telling him: “You were meant for great things.” He immediately embarks on his road of trials, fighting crime and foiling villains in New York City. Next, Peter has an encounter with a temptress, the beautiful Mary Jane. Like a siren, the danger of the temptress is her ability to lure the hero away from his road of trials. The hero would like nothing better than to settle down with a beautiful woman and lead a peaceful, quiet life of domestic bliss. But, alas, the hero’s destiny is to live a solitary life of battle against dark forces, a life dedicated to others rather than to himself.

Though the superhero can never settle down with the temptress, she is a constant source of inspiration, as the superhero’s nemesis knows that he need only abduct the superhero’s love interest in order to find him. (In this sense, the temptress also plays the traditional feminine role of the “maiden in distress”). Mary Jane is abducted by the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), and Spider-Man must battle him in order to save her. Though we know nothing, (as yet), of Peter’s real father, Green Goblin plays the role of Peter’s dark, menacing father figure. Green Goblin is the father of Peter’s best friend, Harry Osborn (James Franco), who is “like a brother” to him. Peter undergoes his apotheosis, (his symbolic death and spiritual rebirth), in a tremendous battle scene with Green Goblin, in which he nearly dies. As with all hero myths, the core of Peter’s story is his relationship with his father. In this case, Peter must
atone with his positive father figure, (Uncle Ben); and he must also destroy his negative father figure, (Green Goblin). He does both simultaneously, at the climax of the battle scene. When Green Goblin tells Spider-Man: “I’ve been like a father to you,” Spider-Man replies: “I have a father. His name is Ben Parker.” Green Goblin is then destroyed, ironically, by his own killing device.

In the final scene of Spider-Man, (the denouement), Peter experiences an epiphany, which is in essence what Campbell refers to as “the ultimate boon.” Even though Mary Jane tells Peter that she loves him, he knows that he must decline her love, because he has now fully accepted his identity as a superhero. His epiphany, his boon, is his realization that his powers, whether a “gift” or a “curse,” are meant to help the world, and that he must dedicate his life to this cause. For Spider-Man, the “magic elixir” or “boon” that “restores the world,” is himself.

Act III: Return (Stages Twelve – Seventeen)

The latter stages of Campbell’s model can be seen more clearly in the sequel film, Spider-Man 2 (2004). In stories of mortal heroes, the “refusal of the return” typically represents the hero’s reluctance to return from the land of adventure to his commonday world of ordinary people. However, since the superhero’s transformation from mortal to demi-god is permanent, Peter’s refusal represents a reluctance to return to his role as Spider-Man. Reasons for his reluctance are manifold. Peter’s duties as Spider-Man preclude him from studying at school, making enough money to live, and – most importantly – inhibit him from forming an intimate relationship with Mary Jane. There is even an interesting psychological twist, as Peter begins to lose his superpowers... a psychosomatic symptom of his unconscious conflict with his super alter ego. Peter returns in his mind to the moment in which he initially accepted his call to adventure, remembering his fateful last conversation with Uncle Ben, and imagining himself refusing to take on the “great responsibility” that comes with “great power.” Now he can love Mary Jane and dedicate his passion to her. (This refusal theme is extremely reminiscent of Superman II (1980), in which Superman goes back to his fortress of solitude and gives up his
superpowers to be with Lois Lane). But in due time, Peter accepts the inevitable and returns to his role as superhero, his “magic flight” fueled by a resurgence of his superpowers, and a redoubled dedication to his cause, illustrated visually when Spider-Man flies triumphantly over the streets of Manhattan on his web vines.

The archetypal plot element of being captured by an enemy, only to be aided by him, is seen in the third act. This theme, which Campbell named the “rescue from without,” is played out when Peter, on the one hand, is captured and delivered to Spider-Man’s sworn enemy, Harry Osborn, who despises Spider-Man for killing his father. The theme is fulfilled when Harry lets Peter go, and tells him where the current supervillain, Doc Ock (Alfred Molina), is holding Mary Jane captive. An excellent example of the “crossing of the return threshold” is also seen in the third act, when Spider-Man returns to his role as superhero and surrenders his own body to stop a runaway subway train. In this supreme act of suffering, Spider-Man is a “willing sacrifice” to the people of the city, his crucifixion pose a clear symbol of his role as a semi-divine hero. Subsequent to this nearly ritualistic act of sacrifice, Spider-Man is temporarily powerless – thus fulfilling Campbell’s mandate that “the transcendental powers must remain behind” at the return crossing – but more importantly, Spider-Man is unmasked, revealing his true identity as just a regular human boy. This unmasking, rather than weakening Spider-Man, only endears him more to his public, who accept him outright as their hero and savior. When he is unmasked once more in the climactic battle scene, his dual identity is revealed to Mary Jane, who now loves him doubly as both a courageous superhero and an intimate best friend. Hence, Peter/Spider-Man becomes “master of the two worlds.” He is a great and victorious superhero, finally appreciated and loved by his public. And he is also Peter Parker, finally free of the burden of a secret identity, and free to love the girl of his dreams. In the end, the “freedom to live” represents the freedom of the people of New York to live without the fear of terrorizing supervillains, (because Spider-Man will always be there to save them); and it also represents Peter’s freedom to love, the freedom to be with Mary Jane, and to have mortal happiness along with his heroic responsibilities.
Maureen Murdock: The Heroine’s Journey

In The Heroine’s Journey (1990), Maureen Murdock reconfigures Joseph Campbell’s traditionally “androcentric” structure of the male hero’s myth, creating a mythic structure for heroines that addresses the particular needs, struggles and desires of modern women in a modern age.

“The heroine must become a spiritual warrior. This demands that she learn the art of balance and have the patience for the slow, subtle integration of the feminine and the masculine aspects of herself. She first hungers to lose her feminine self and to merge with the masculine, and once she has done this, she begins to realize that this is neither the answer nor the end. She must not discard nor give up what she has learned throughout her heroic quest, but learn to view her hard-earned skills and successes not so much as the goal but as one part of the entire journey. She will then begin to use these skills to work toward the larger quest of bringing people together, rather than for her own individual gain. This is the sacred marriage of the feminine and masculine – when a woman can truly serve not only the needs of others but can value and be responsive to her own needs as well.”

Murdock’s stages of the heroine’s journey are as follows:

1. Separation from the feminine
2. Identification with the masculine
3. The Road of trials
4. The Illusory boon of success
5. Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity
6. Initiation and descent to the goddess
7. Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine
8. Healing the mother/daughter split
9. Healing the wounded masculine
10. Integration of masculine and feminine
By applying Murdock’s model to one of the few existent female superhero movie characters, Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie), we will see how Murdock’s model is in some ways appropriate and in other ways inappropriate as a means of establishing the relatively new phenomenon of a female superhero archetype. To begin with, it should be made clear that the films, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) and its sequel Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003), were chosen as subjects for analysis, not because they are particularly illustrative of Murdock’s model, but because they represent the only serialized film version of a female superhero in existence. (The reason why this is so is a subject for a different article). Furthermore, the stories of these films are relatively “plot light,” representing Croft’s genesis from the world of videogames rather than comic books, hence the focus on action rather than story and character. And finally, these films tend to focus more on the visual element of Croft’s character, indulging in drawn out shower scenes, skimpy skin tight outfits and revealing bikinis, rather than character development or backstory. Hence, the analysis is constricted by a lack of material, despite the fact that it is based on two feature length films.

**Stages One – Three: Separation, Identification and the Road of Trials**

The heroine’s journey begins with a rejection of traditional feminine values. The feminine stereotypes of dependence, sensitivity and emotionality are perceived as being retrograde and demeaning, hence the superheroine experiences a “separation from the feminine,” represented in Croft’s backstory by an early death of her mother, with whom she has virtually no connection. After separating from the feminine, the superheroine must find a new mentor, typically a man, to guide her in the male dominated realm of adventure and world saving. Croft’s “identification with the masculine” also takes place in her backstory, when she completely identifies with her father (Jon Voigt) and follows in his footsteps by becoming a “tomb raider.” This identification is revisited in the first act of Tomb Raider, when Croft accepts a call to adventure, posthumously left to her by her deceased father. Once initiated into the realm of adventure, the superheroine embarks on a “road of trials” identical in theme to the male superhero’s.

**Stages Four – Eight: Awakening, the Goddess, Yearning and Healing**
Since the hero archetype is traditionally masculine, when a female is cast as the superhero in a film, she is usually imbued with the masculine qualities of strength, determination and superpowers that are normally required of male heroes. Consequently, male love interests in female hero movies often take on the functions normally required of the maiden, and are typically rescued by superheroines, as seen when Croft goes back in time to rescue her love interest, Alex (Daniel Craig). In risking her mission and quest to save her love interest, Croft displays that the masculine goals of fighting and world saving must be complemented with the more feminine goals of love and devotion. In other words, merely saving the world is an “illusory boon of success.” In terms of the superheroine’s character development, this boon leads her to an “awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity,” as she discovers that her super-identity is empty without love and companionship.

Though subtle, Murdock’s central thesis of spiritual balance between the sexual archetypes, otherwise known as psychological androgyny, is seen in the climax of Croft’s story. After saving the world and her love interest, Croft ventures back into the “belly of the beast,” at great peril, to rescue a locket left to her by her father. The locket contains a picture of her mother, thus representing her connection to both her mother and father. In this sense, Croft’s return to rescue the locket symbolizes her “initiation and descent to the goddess,” (the goddess representing the archetypal mother-goddess). As such, the act simultaneously indicates an “urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine,” and an act of “healing the mother/daughter split.” Nevertheless, all of this symbolic imagery goes absolutely nowhere in the film, as the denouement directly following the climax shows Croft back in her castle, engaged in her ultra-masculine training with killer robots, with her love-interest and mother reintegration conspicuously absent from her character. Despite the locket, Croft is clearly just a sexy woman in a male superhero’s role, without any recognition of the different needs and desires inherent to femininity that Murdock delineated.

Stages Nine – Ten: Healing the Wounded Masculine and Integration

Though the sequel film focuses more intensely on the integration of a love interest, ultimately, The Cradle of Life does little to develop Croft’s character. According to Jung, the mythological figure that represents psychological androgyny is the “Hermaphrodite” – a
common figure in myth and dreams that represents a “divine child” – a complete human being, born of the sacred marriage of the masculine and feminine archetypes, (the “hieros gamos” or holy coupling). The first step for the superheroine is to overcome her aversion to the traditionally feminine traits of love, devotion and vulnerability, by allowing herself to become intimate with a man. Croft accomplishes this, to a degree, through her relationship with her former lover and current ally, Terry Sheridan (Gerard Butler). But at each moment of critical choice, she moves away from intimacy by mistrusting Terry and pushing him away.

For Croft, the “healing of the wounded masculine” does not take place, and she never accomplishes a complete “integration of the masculine and feminine.” In fact, in a complete renunciation of her feminine side, Croft winds up killing Terry in the end, proving that – psychologically and spiritually – she is one hundred percent masculine and zero percent feminine. Croft’s role is so clearly a male hero in a female’s costume, that she could not even integrate love into her character, a compromise towards psychological balance that even Spider-Man – a male superhero – could eventually undertake. Perhaps the writers of the series will allow Croft to get in touch with her feminine side in the next sequel. I won’t hold my breath.

**Conclusion**

In the dreams of contemporary individuals and in the scenes of a modern Hollywood superhero movie, we can identify the ancient archetypes that were first expressed in the stories of our ancient ancestors. While science has replaced divinity and the superhero has replaced the demi-god in the expression of the hero myth, the basic archetypal structure of the hero pattern has not changed – and probably will never change, as the hero character serves the same function today as he did thousands of years ago. Heroes are simply ourselves projected outwardly. Their stories are our stories, and their adventures are meaningful only to the degree that we can identify with the heroes’ struggles and anxieties.
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