

Heroic archetypes in film: symbolism and adaption



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Carl Jung (1939) described the *personal unconscious* as containing personal memories and ideas of the individual, and the *collective unconscious* the shared ideas, and memories humanity, these shared memories and ideas emerge as themes and characters, which Jung termed *archetypes* or *Primordial Images*. Joseph Campbell (1949) evolved these ideas creating *the hero's journey* or *monomyth*. Campbell's work in narratology and comparative mythology showed the use of *archetypal* patterns bring patterns we all unconsciously respond to in similar ways to a conscious level. The term archetype can be applied to images, themes, symbols, ideas and character types (Jung, 1969).

This essay will focus on the symbolism and adaption of Heroic archetypes in film examining the themes of Jung and Campbell and there portal over time, focusing in on how specific genders are represented.

The Architypes are present in our earliest images and motifs, however Greek and roman mythology focuses largely on the hero with characters like Hercules playing the main role in their stories. These myths provide a clear pairing of Jung and Campbell's theories creating connections with the hero, their quest and the many *archetypal* characters they will interact with along their journey. These methodologies have repeatedly been adapted and are portrayed in the most successful film franchises of the last sixty years. It is through the exploration of these franchises that I will examine the portrayal of both male and female Hero Architypes.

Jung (1969) believed archetypal themes impress, influence and fascinate our ego, invoking deep and intense emotional responses. If Jung's theories are

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correct the repeated portrayal of masculine dominance on screen has the potential to impact the most important and central archetype of the *psychic*, *the self*, a representation of wholeness and totality, a unification of the conscious and unconscious mind (Jung, 1969).

Jung (Stevens, 1990) emphasised the importance of not assuming the symbolic meaning of a male or female character he believed it is far more important to recognise the characteristics and context of these symbols, establishing if you are dealing with the Animus or Anima, abstract symbol sets that formulate the archetype of the Self. Neither male nor female they are a representation of the masculine and feminine aspects of the psychic

Dr. Stacy Smith (2014) realised the study “gender bias without borders” this study looked at 120 films in the most influential films. The results of this study showed that 23.3 percent of lead or co lead roles in film are female. These figures were mirrored off screen showing that 20.5 percent of filmmakers were female. The results also showed when a film was created by a female, either in directing or writing there was an increase of lead females and the quality of their portrayal on screen.

It is clear from these results that there is an issue of gender imbalance on screen. This imbalance could be explained by linking back to Jung’s theory (1969), that archetypes can influence our psychic and comparing this to a statement by Campbell (2004) “*All of the great mythologies and much of the mythic story-telling of the world are from the male point of view.*”

If all of our great mythologies are from the male point of view, it could be argued that this repeated influence has led to an over attachment to the use

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of masculine energy in the portrayal of power, Smith (2004) alludes to this stating “ *This explanation reflects the old age, “ write what you know.”*

To explore these theories, this essay will focus on two of the most successful films featuring female protagonists. The first *Alien* is written from the male perspective. The second *Hunger games*, is written from the female perspective. These films will be compared first to attempt to find a link between writer and character and second to explore the possible future portrayal of heroes.

Alien

Ridley Scott’s *Ripley* is commonly used as a reference to a positive portrayal of a female hero, appearing on screen as the main protagonist of 1979 film *Alien*. *Ripley* however was originally created as male. In an interview with *Empire* magazine (2012) Ridley Scott explains the reasoning behind his female adaption stating “ She would be the last one you would think to survive, she’s beautiful” This statement gives credence to the idea of the feminine in *Alien* being used to display weakness.

Alien is widely known as the movie in which all sexual analyses have some basis. In the *Alien* saga (2002) Dan O’Bannon explains that sexual imagery was wielded as a tool to unsettle the audience stating “ One thing that people are all disturbed about is sex. Everybody’s always all in a known about sex. I said that’s how I’m going to attack the audience. I’m going to attack them sexually”

Ellen Ripley, is played by Sigourney Weaver , she fights against two antagonists, the first an alien creature that interestingly dawns both male and female reproductive organs, while the second antagonist, Ash, an android possess no reproductive organs though he is portrayed as a male character. This mix of genders and sexual symbolism makes this film an interesting tool for the exploration of gender bias and architypes.

The first introduction to the cast of this film is representative of the birthing of a child. The crew rest in hyperbolic chambers shaped like basinetts. These chambers are placed in a circular pattern; at the core of this circle is a locking mechanism, controlled by mother, the ships navigator. As mother awakens the crew the room is flooded with light.

This sequence of images could be interrupted as a representation of the “ Self-Architype” and its symbolic circular image (Jung, 1978). The crew, placed in the circle could be seen as the rebirthing and unification of the psychic as it prepares to deal with the “ path ahead” (Henderson 1963).

We then see the crew in their “ ordinary world “ eating breakfast. The crew are given their “ call to adventure” when mother informs has awoken them due a signal received from a derelict ship. Many of the crew “ Refuse the call “ believing this signal could be a warning.

Mother acting as the “ supernatural aid “ knows the true reason for sending them on this quest

Once the crew being to explore their environment as H. R Giger’s sexual Imagery becomes clear. The crew approach the openings of the Alien ship,

which Giger (2011) admittedly designed to resemble the vaginal entrance. They “ Cross the threshold” and enter.

The crew enter the control centre of the ship, in the centre of this chamber sits a large phallic protrusion; inside sits an alien pilot. The placement of this phallic symbol is particularly interesting as the first sexual representation of masculine energy (Fink, 2004) it is depicted in a place of power and control.

The crew comes across a derelict chamber resembling the womb or “ Belly of the whale” which holds a large cluster of eggs, one of the crew is attacked by a face hugger and rushed back to the ship. Ripley refuses to allow the face hugger, now attached to a crew member, onto the ship. Ash, Ripley’s male counterpart dismisses her command and opens the ship doors.

Ash determines that the “ Face Hugger” is keeping Kane alive via the penetrative insertion of a proboscis to his throat; according to Bannon (2002) this was a deliberate representation of male oral rape .

“ I’m going to attack them sexually” “ I’m going to put in every image I can think of that I know will make the men in the audience cross their legs, Homosexual oral rape.” - Dan O Bannon

This act is an intriguing aspect in regards to gender, on one side men are made as vulnerable a women, but on the opposing side this penetrative act gives dominant power to the masculine energy of the Alien (Dworkin , 1987)

Later the corpse of the face hugger is discovered, Ripley does not want the corpse examined but again Ash ignores her command. In this examination

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the Face hugger's underbelly is shown, now in a submissive position its proboscis is retracted exposing a representation of the female genitalia.

The crew are united again for a meal and enter the "Road of trials" as a phallic shaped Chest Burster is birthed from a crewmate. Bannon (2002) stated that his use of "birth" in this scene was designed to create discomfort in male viewers, however his process of using a female act to add vulnerability to a male character could be perceived as weakening the feminine.

Ripley Later learns the secret kept by Mother and Ash in her "meeting with the goddess" The Weyland Yutani Corporation's true mission is to collect alien specimens acting as the Temptress they view the crew as expendable.

Ripley Confronts Ash, in a classic "Attainment of the Father" scene. The confrontation becomes aggressive. Ash is exposed as an android becoming the Shape Shifter Archetype; he overpowers Ripley, rolls up a stack of papers into a phallic shape and forces them down Ripley's Throat, this adds to strengthening of Masculine energy and weakening of the feminine. Ripley is saved by a male crew mate. She reconstructs Ash, entering the "Apotheosis" stage she gains information from him. Ripley realises their ship must be destroyed for the crew to escape with their lives "the ultimate boon.

The remaining crew are destroyed; Ripley the sole survivor enters the "Magical Fight" with the Alien as she tries to make her way to an escape pod before the ship self-destructs. Ripley reaches the escape pod, standing now as a powerful hero she begins to undress, she then bends over in a pose that

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resembles an animistic display of submission, this scene could be interpreted as a removal of Ripley's power (Fazio, 1986)

Ripley realises the alien on-board the escape pod, earning the "Freedom to live" she rejects the alien into space. Re-entering hibernation, Ripley is shown in the fetal position; this could suggest her return to the womb to be rebirthed as a new character. (Jung, 1978)

The Hunger Games

The Hunger game is a Science fiction novel written by Suzanne Collins, this novel was adapted into a series of films under the same name. This story follows Katniss Everdeen as she embarks on Campbell's Hero's journey.

We are first introduced to "The Ordinary World", ruled by President Snow the archetypical "Old King". This king's dominance is depicted in the cultural values of this society. Split in two classes the "lower" districts, shown to be inhabited by a struggling class of humble and moral people and the capital, Snows domain, lavished in decadence and modernity.

Snow rules through intimidation and manipulation. The soulless nature of The Capital is highlighted by its unwavering support of The Hunger Games.

These games are cruel and violent, created by Snow, they point to the absence of the Queen archetype. Snow rules alone, he is purely masculine, lacking in totality, with no feminine counterpart. This absence of feminine qualities leaves the people restricted as according to Jung (1995) "permanent loss of the anima, means a diminution of vitality of flexibility and of human kindness". The capitol is surrounded by the "Lower" districts;

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these districts are forced to participate in The Hunger Games, sacrificing one male and female “tribute”. To survive these tributes must garner sponsorship, typically from the people of the capital. They must sell themselves by fulfilling the desires of their captors.

Katniss Everdeen is the protagonist of this story; her very name draws associations to her character type. Cat an association of the feminine power (Fontana, 1993) sleek, and cunning and evergreen, symbolising natural life the nourishing soil of the soul (Sabini, 2002). Katniss is a young woman, innocent and open she exhibits feminine energy. In her first introduction she appears trusting and humble, unlike the surrounding raped and soulless society. The feminine side of Katniss could represent the potential birth of the new generation, placing her in the role of potential Queen.

Katniss also exhibits masculine energy; she shows courage in The Hunger Games while exhibiting physical attributes strength and focuses to master her skill with a bow, a skill she learned to provide for and protect her family. This masculine energy also highlights her ability to fulfil the role of King.

Katniss is reminiscent of Artemis, the Greek Goddess, skilled with a bow, strong, nurturing, protective and connected to nature (D’Este, 2005). Our first introduction to Katniss shows her hunting a deer, a symbol commonly linked to the portrayal of Artemis.

This mix of feminine and masculine energy leads to a potentially interesting dynamic. It could be said that Panem does not merely need a female leader, but a unified one, both male and female, mother and father.

Katniss is born in the twelfth district, twelve in Gematria, is a representation of totality (Dennis, 2007), a symbol of synergy between the anima and animus (Jung, 1969).

This coal miner district is also similar in design to Nazareth, the domain of Jesus. She understands through her experiences the darkness minorities face under the rule of Panem. Archetypically this could be linked to Judeo-Christian tradition and the tale of Job seeing the dark side of God. (Jung 1969) When in the capital Katniss is a link back to nature, the light in the dark, a place to be purified, embodying what Jung called the “ the two million-year-old man within.”

Katniss receives her “ Call to Adventure “ when her sister is chosen as tribute. She displays warmth and understanding, sacrificing herself to free her. This symbol of courage is the embodiment of what Jesus believed is needed in a world filled with difficulties; she is “ as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10: 16)

Katniss “ Crosses the threshold” as she boards a train to take her to the capital. She is visibly disturbed by the opulence in front of her which starkly contrasts the modest home she is leaving behind.

According to Campbell (1949) every hero needs allies; Katniss is no exception to his rule. Traditionally these allies are unexpected with a unique understanding of the world. It is in his fashion that Katniss meets her literal and archetypal “ Mentor” the drunken Haymitch Abernathy. Katniss soon learns that the Haymitch’s battle with alcoholism and disconnected nature is

a direct result of his assimilation into the society of the capital, a soulful man in a soulless world , forced to train tributes who will be sent to their death .

As Haymitch begins to train Katniss he begins to notice the unique nature of her personality, this is where he transforms into the archetypal mentor teaching Katniss the importance of presentation and catering to the whims of the sponsors.

Early in the story we are shown that Katniss does not view her mother in the archetypal sense, it is only when she arrives at the capital that we are introduced to the true “ Mother Architype”, the anima to Haymitch’s animus and a symbol of societal oppression, the African American male, Cinna.

Cinna’s introduction marks the entry to Campbell’s “ Tests, Allies and Enemies “ stage of the Monomyth (1949). Cinna is a sensitive and nurturing character, wielding his knowledge in beauty, grace and sensuous flare he, along with Haymitch, trains Katniss, who now captivates the Capital. Cinna’s techniques to transform Katniss are very similar to that of Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother. He does not change Katniss; he instead reflects her inner self and beauty to the audience. Cinna supports and balances Katniss keeping her grounded and disconnected from the temptations and power of the capital. Cinna offers her a symbol of comfort, her Mocking Jay pin, as she enters “ The Inner Most Cave “, the arena.

When Katniss enters the games she acquires a young ally Rue “ The Innocent Child”.

Rue's entry to the story marks the beginning of "The Ordeal" as she directs Katniss to the wasp nest she uses against her attackers. Rue is an African American girl, from the agricultural district; district eleven. Rue could be seen as a representation of slavery and racism in Panem. Despite the attempts of Katniss to protect the child, she soon becomes "The Sacrifice", used to empathetically connect the twelve districts.

After the death of her friend the game makers change the rules, stating that there may be two victors of the games, as long as they both come from the same district. Katniss seeks out Peeta her fellow tribute from district twelve and soon makes a new ally. Earlier in the story we were shown Katniss and Peeta training together, but she suspected, to save himself, he had turned against her. Peeta is redeemed when he suggests a group of competitors "wait her out" rather than climbing a tree to kill her. Peeta like Katniss is an interesting mix of feminine and masculine energy, he is strong but does not wish fight, instead he chooses to hide from his competitors. Peeta decorates cakes for a living, this shows his delicate side, but he is also stubborn, insisting the games will not change who he is.

Peeta confesses his love for Katniss; he is injured and taking on the role of "Damsel in Distress" requires her aid. Katniss is now faced with a moral dilemma; the audience views the pair as the Shakespearian "Star crossed lovers". Katniss deceives the audience and goes along with this charade to receive aid from the sponsors. Meanwhile her true love, Gale, whose name suggests a well-developed anima, is waiting and watching these events unfold from district twelve. This is a difficult decision and turning point for Katniss; she manipulates the people to get what she needs, a very masculine

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move, more suited to President Snow. This arguably is a skill needed in a potential leader.

Katniss retrieves medicine and Peeta is healed; now their only competitor left in the arena is Cato. It is in this final confrontation that we see Katniss “ Seizing the Sword” as she knocks Cato into a pack of creatures and “ Receives her reward” leaving Katniss and Peeta as the victors, at least for a short time. The game makers suddenly change the rules forcing Katniss into “ The Road Back”. There can be only one victor of the hunger games. Peeta offers himself as a sacrifice but Katniss refuses. She shows her cunning side as she enters the “ resurrection” stage of the Monomyth. Katniss decides they will both consume poison berries; this act would kill both competitors leaving the games with no victor. As Katniss predicts the rules are changed again, both competitors win the games.

Peeta and Katniss will now live a life of luxury this could be seen as “ The Return with the Elixer”, but the elixir in this story is far more important. Katniss has openly defied President Snow becoming an example to the lower districts. This act could lead to a rebellion. The true elixir of this journey is given to the lower classes at the moment of her victory, hope.

Characters like Katniss Everdeen have the potential to change the assumed characteristics of the hero archetypes, but this type of portrayal is still an uncommon occurrence, is that occurrence due to a misunderstanding of the hero archetype or an overall issue of gender imbalance in media.

This character could be marking Jung's paradigm shift and what he believed would be the necessary emergence of positive archetypal feminine energies (Rowland, 2009), a true female hero.

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