The Super-Heroine's Journey: Comics, Gender and the Monomyth

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Abstract
    The comic book superhero is currently enjoying a period of cultural ubiquity, thanks in no small measure to the continued popularity of Monomythical narratives – which is to say texts informed by, or harking back to, *the Hero's Journey*, as defined by the mythologist Joseph Campbell. This Monomyth is essentially a structural pattern common to a wide range of mythological and scriptural tales from around the world, in which an ordinary yet heroic figure leaves the comfort of home, immerses himself in the unfamiliar and extraordinary events of an outside world of which he has no real experience, fights and wins a decisive victory and, once he has done so, returns home with some essential boon or blessing. Superheroes can, to some extent, be seen as the ultimate modern exemplars of this pattern; this, though, is problematized by the relative lack of viable female heroes of this type.

    Using Campbell's theories in tandem with the work of other archetypal theorists and the relatively new discipline of biocultural criticism, it is my intention to investigate whether this relative paucity – characterised by characters who are often depicted as little more than objects of titillation or fetish, not to mention tending to begin as gender reversed knock-offs of established male heroes – comes as a result of the inherently patriarchal nature of the Monomythical structure itself. Further to this, I intend to argue that while the evolution of our culture and the relative decline of patriarchal strictures have theoretically ensured that the heroic archetype has evolved to the point where traditional gender roles are no longer stable, the archetypes engendered within the Monomyth have become so ideologically paradigmatic as to hamper the imperative toward challenging these codes within the idiom of the graphic novel.

Key Words: Gender, Feminism, Sexuality, Archetypes, Superheroes, Mythology, Evolution, Culture, Ideology, Cross-Media

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1. Introduction

    The comic book superhero is currently enjoying a period of cultural ubiquity, thanks in no small measure to the continued popularity of Monomythical narratives – which is to say texts informed by, or harking back to, *the Hero's Journey,* as defined by the mythologist Joseph Campbell. This Monomyth is essentially a structural pattern common to a wide range of mythological and scriptural tales from around the world, in which an ordinary yet heroic figure leaves the comfort of

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home, immerses himself in the unfamiliar and extraordinary events of an outside world of which he has no real experience, fights and wins a decisive victory and, once he has done so, returns home with some essential boon or blessing for society, the family unit from whence he has come, or even at times simply for himself. Superheroes can, to some extent, be seen as the ultimate modern exemplars of this pattern; this, though, is problematized by the relative lack of viable female heroes of this type. Using Campbell's theories in tandem with the work of other archetypal theorists and the relatively new discipline of biocultural criticism, it is my intention to investigate whether this relative paucity – characterised by characters who are often depicted as little more than objects of titillation or fetish, not to mention tending to begin as gender reversed knock-offs of established male heroes – comes as a result of the inherently patriarchal nature of the Monomythical structure itself. Further to this, it is my assertion that while the evolution of our culture and the relative decline of patriarchal strictures have theoretically ensured that the heroic archetype has evolved to the point where traditional gender roles are no longer stable, the archetypes engendered within the Monomyth have become so ideologically paradigmatic as to hamper the imperative toward challenging these codes within the idiom of the graphic novel. In order to ensure that this investigation remains relatively focused, I use Wonder Woman as the prism through which I examine this issue, though other heroic tropes will also be touched upon. The reasoning behind this is simple: she is arguably the sole female superhero figure who can lay claim to being as instantly recognisable as certain iconic male counterparts, and as such is arguably best positioned to function as a focal point. Fans of the medium often debate whether or not a character has achieved 'iconic' status, and while this type of argument often represents the most poisoned of chalices, it seems fair to say that Wonder Woman would be as instantly nameable outside of comic fandom as, say, Batman or Spider-Man.

2. Wonder Woman and Mythology

In *Wonder Women,* Lillian S. Robinson writes that, growing up in the 1940s, "The dominant cultural message […] was precisely that awakening to womanhood meant abandoning the heroic identity of the war years for domesticity [and] motherhood."[1] As a result of this, it seemed to her, the civilian identities of comic book super-heroines such as Wonder Woman were rendered problematic and worrisome, as – and especially in comparison to male counterparts such as Superman and Captain Marvel – they often seemed poised to allow the simpering and stereotypical presentation of femaleness to rise up and overwhelm the character's heroic nature. This, of course, despite the fact that, as Paul R. Kohl notes in his article *Wonder Woman's Lib,* William Moulton Marston created the character in question specifically to be a female role model, feeling that girls would reject the tropes of their gender if those tropes lacked strength[2].

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Marston's pseudo-feminist ideas are, of course, problematic in and of themselves, in as much as they are informed by his own pop-psychological ideals and sexual predilections, but by the same token the fact that the character was created in order to appeal to, and be used as a role model by, young women is important, and often overlooked. That said, his feminism could be argued to be of a distinctly patrician hue, best exemplified perhaps by Queen Hyppolyte's words at the end of 1947's *Villainy Incorporated* storyline, "The only real happiness for anybody is to be found in obedience to loving authority."[3] Thus it is that by attempting to locate a female hero within the male idiom of both the Monomyth and our patriarchal society, Marston ensured that the Woman was more pertinent than the Wonder to the character's journey.

Wonder Woman was not the first costumed super-heroine to be regularly published – that distinction goes to *The Woman in Red,* a feature that first appeared in *Thrilling Comics* in 1940[4] – but she was the first designed with the express purpose of being a female counterpart to Superman and Batman, and indeed is (alongside those characters) one of only three such creations to have remained in continuous monthly publication for more than seventy years. While much has been made of the idea that the aforementioned male icons can, to some extent, be seen as counterpoints to each other, in as much as one is essentially a sun-god while the other is a mortal man who operates under cover of night, both represent a fundamentally male archetype, that is to say an update of the Monomythical hero. The creation of a female character along such lines is somewhat problematized, however, by the fact that the Hero's Journey is so typically masculine, perhaps as a result of the heroes of myth tending themselves to be male. While Marston conflated the matriarchal society from which Diana comes with the Amazons of Greek legend, this conflation was somewhat hamstrung by the relative lack of Amazonian heroes within the mythological paradigm itself: the only named female warrior of any real note in Greek myth may be Antiope, and even she is best defined as a peripheral character, kidnapped and ultimately seduced by Theseus: another female excuse for a mythical war. Within the pantheistic idiom, even fierce warriors such as the Amazons were at best vaguely defined and presented, and even then only really in relation to male characters and patriarchal societal systems. As Jennifer K. Stuller notes in *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors,* the idea that a hero must always be male is implicit within Campbell's idea of the Monomyth[5], and this, for the most part, is a result of the phallocentrism of the original myth cycles from which his studies draw their findings. It is worth noting that pantheistic mythological tales, especially those of Greco-Roman origin, often tend to be as postlapsarian in nature as those that spring from the Judeo-Christian tradition; as the latter has the tale of the fall of man and Original Sin, so does Greek Mythology place the blame for the ills of the world on the curiosity of Pandora. By their very nature, then, the original myths tend to reinforce the patriarchy.

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3. Biocultural Perspective

If the relative lack of a female hero trope within the original folklore can be seen, in real terms, to hamper the development and cultural immediacy of female superhero characters, it is imperative that we attempt to unpack why this should be the case. After all, the cultures within which the original myth cycles from which Campbell draws his pattern were first established were markedly different from our own. However, if, as evolutionary psychologists maintain, 'cultural evolution' is essentially a blanket term used to explain the evolution of those human thought processes, understandings and adaptations that help to maintain cultural phenomena,[6] it must follow that cultural anthropology can be used as the foundation for any examination of the continuity and evolution of that which we have come to understand as modern or popular culture. Using this criterion, there is evidence to suggest that culture itself is an essential component of the drive toward courtship inherent within humanity's genetic imperative towards the propagation of the species. In other words, culture can be seen to function as more than a mere by-product of the human brain: rather it is an intrinsic part of the mutations and adaptations that determine our genetic fitness. At their most basic level, then, the original myth tropes from which the Monomyth has been extrapolated, can be argued not only to have been attempts by members of relatively primitive societies to explain phenomena for which science was yet to provide workable answers, but also as a means of performing courtship rituals; as such, they must by necessity carry within them the trappings of the patriarchal societies they were partly meant to underpin and maintain. The implication is clear: the reliance of modern storytelling tropes on an antiquated and myth-based structure must be seen to ensure that the structure in question continues to hold cultural importance and influence to this day.

Muddying the waters still further, a biocultural analysis can be seen to suggest that there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which members of each gender approach fantasy, not to mention what men and women look for in a heroic figure. These small but crucial gender differences can to some extent be seen to inform Campbell's theory, without actually validating gender stereotypes or clichés. In *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner,* the celebrated educator Vivian Paley writes of her attempt to impose some form of gender neutral behaviour on the preschool children she taught, and the fact that this experiment was always doomed to fail, with boys tending to find ways to revert to action-hero style modes of behaviour, while their female counterparts remained determined to recreate domestic scenarios or play at being fairy tale princesses.[7] This is not to say that the boys gravitated strictly toward violent scenarios while the girls played games that implied some form of intrinsic safeness: violence and danger permeated each gender group's role play, they just took different forms within each conclave, with the boys inventing battle scenarios of various kinds, while the girls tended to

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resort to violent acts only when the sanctity of their games – and therefore their 'homes' – were in some way threatened. As Jonathan Gottschall notes in his appraisal of Paley's study*,* "Sex differences in children's play reflect the fact that biological evolution is slow, while cultural evolution is fast. Evolution still hasn't caught up with the rapid changes in men's and women's lives that have occurred mainly in the past one hundred years."[8] In other words, the way in which children play, and by extension the stories that inspire this play, and within which the play tends to be grounded, is more often than not informed by traditional patriarchal gender roles, with the male of the species gravitating towards fighting and hunting/gathering, while the females look after and protect hearth and home. As Gottschall further notes, anthropologists have yet to find convincing evidence of any culture wherein these gender roles have historically been reversed.[9]

4. Updating the Monomyth

This said, the success and visibility of television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have gone some way to proving that the Monomyth can be adapted or interpolated to fit a more feminine, even feminist, viewpoint or experience. The two most prominent super-powered heroes of the former show, Buffy Summers and Willow Rosenberg, each possess an agency that, it is arguable, few female comic book superheroes have historically been allowed to boast. It's worth remembering that Campbell models his pattern as a journey for a reason, with the hero trope effectively symbolising the transition to adulthood and the replacement of innocence with experience, and this transition is one that *Buffy* presented extraordinarily well. Importantly, none of the female characters within the show are presented as sex objects or ciphers, and while it is true that over the course of *Buffy's* seven-year run each character's sexuality and sexual agency is explored, often even in disturbing ways, this is always done as part of that character's (Monomythical) journey into adulthood and beyond. Within the context of the show that bears her name, then, Buffy Summers can be seen to own her own heroism and hero's journey, but this is something that is perhaps harder to assert about equivalent characters within the idiom of comic books and graphic novels. As Buffy's creator, Joss Whedon, writes in the foreword to *Fray,* "Where are the girls? Girls who can fight, who can stand up for themselves, who have opinions and fears?"[10]

The easy answer to this question is provided by Bradford W. Wright: the traditional and overriding presumption within the comic book industry was for decades that the readership was predominantly male and adolescent, and so female heroes tended to be tailored toward that particular demographic group's assumed predilections.[11] This, of course, may have been due to a case of the tail wagging the dog: after all, if adolescent male power and sex fantasies were all that were on offer, what motivation was there for a female readership to investigate the form? Even when Gloria Steinem cited Wonder Woman as an icon of feminism, featuring

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the character on the cover of the first issue of *Ms*, DC's response was essentially to rob the character of her agency by having her revoke her powers and heritage for the love of a man, and become the owner of a clothes boutique, learning martial arts on the side at the feet of a male sensei.[12] It is clear that after the death of William Moulton Marston in 1947, DC had little idea of how best to present the character, though whether or not Grant Morrison is correct in his assertion that this lack of understanding is best exemplified by the robbing of the title of the peculiar eroticism brought to it by its creator is open to debate.[13] The character has been reinvented and reconfigured multiple times since then, with varying degrees of success, though one can argue that the relaunches wherein Diana has to some extent been returned to her mythological roots have tended to be the most successful, both critically and commercially[1]. These runs on the title have by their very nature corresponded closely to Campbell's Monomythical pattern, and have presented Wonder Woman as something akin to a Greek demigod or heroic archetype, as opposed to a figure who is a hero despite her gender.

5. Conclusion

The Monomyth, as set out by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* continues to permeate popular culture, and this is reflected in the continuing popularity of films and television series based around comic book superheroes. This said, there have been no such films or series based around female characters, barring the relatively peripheral role played by Black Widow in *The Avengers.* Wonder Woman herself is due to play a supporting role in the forthcoming cinematic meeting of Batman and Superman, but she is evidently not viewed as a property that would be capable of carrying an entire feature herself. This is, in part at least, due to the fact that the Hero's Journey, that is to say both the pattern elucidated by Campbell and the tales told themselves, is one that is steeped in patriarchy, and as such has simultaneously evolved alongside our culture and also failed to do so. While shows like *Buffy, Xena* and, to an extent, *Alias* have gone a long way towards proving that cultural and social advancement can effectively be mirrored by the archetypes and Monomythical tropes featured within popular culture, comic book super-heroines are still, to an extent, hampered both by the antiquated thought that comics are some kind of boys' club, as well as the fact that evolution itself moves more slowly than our culture. Thus it is that the unavoidably patriarchal nature of Campbell's theory continues to at least mirror the struggle of the female superhero to achieve some kind of parity of visibility, agency and fair treatment with her male counterparts.

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[1] The most pertinent examples of this phenomenon are arguably George Pérez's late-eighties relaunch, and the current Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang run on the title.

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[1] Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Women (*New York: Routledge, 2005), 12-13

[2] Joseph J. Darowski, ed. *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times* (McFarland and Company, 2013), 90

[3] Anton Kawasaki, ed. *Wonder Woman: The Greatest Stories Ever Told*, (DC Comics, 2007), 56

[4] Tim Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound* (Chicago Review Press, 2014), 25

[5] Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* (I.B. Tauris & Co, 2010), 108

[6] Robin Dunbar et al, eds. *The Evolution of Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 72

[7] Vivian Paley, *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner* (University of Chicago Press, 1984)

[8] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 41

[9] Ibid.

[10] Joss Whedon et al, *Fray* (Dark Horse, 2003), 3

[11] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 250

[12] Ibid

[13] Grant Morrison, *Supergods* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 45

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