

Wonder Woman: The Journey of a Female Superhero

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Zechowski and Neumann asserted that the depiction of Wonder Woman as possessing feminine traits, such as love and compassion, that render her morally superior to men “is both progressive and regressive” (136). It is progressive in claiming that women should cherish those traits and not strive to adopt male values, such as selfishness and competitiveness. However, by essentializing those qualities as natural, as inherent to women’s being, it is regressive.

It is perhaps inevitable the success of the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film would raise issues of gender. Yet, what should not be lost sight of is that a string of successful male superhero cinematic origin stories has constructed a narrative whereby becoming a superhero seems to necessitate a transformation of the man’s moral character in the direction toward becoming more compassionate, empathic, caring, and other-oriented. For example, Tony Stark’s compassion for the people of Gulmira is evident in *Iron Man*, and Thor’s willingness to give his life to the Destroyer is an example of sacrificial love. Nevertheless, there is a difference: for these male heroes, those values were the endpoint of their journey. Diana already possesses them. Therefore, comparing her cinematic origin story to that of male superheroes might prove fruitful in addressing the progressive/regressive tension.

Wonder Woman’s transformation experience fundamentally varies from the male superheroes. In the end, though Wonder Woman’s journey differs from her male counterparts (the regressive aspect), the qualities she

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embraces that make her a superhero are the same (the progressive aspect). Those qualities involve not super strength, nor even love and compassion themselves, but a desire to remain in the world and to fight on its behalf. Such a desire should not be tied to either masculinity or femininity, but to humanity.

Joseph Campbell described the hero's journey as a three-stage process. In the first stage, the hero is separated from their ordinary, everyday world. Next, the hero undergoes trials, faces foes, receives boons or magical aids, and experiences a transformation. Finally, the hero returns to their community ready to renew the world. When applied to a variety of cinematic superhero origin stories, this pattern holds up quite well. Consider Iron Man, Batman, Thor, and even Doctor Strange. Although all these men are privileged, they are not inherently different from other members of their societies. They all experience a separation from their community; all undergo trials and experience a transformation of character; and subsequently, they emerge as protectors and heroes. What is particularly noteworthy is that, in all these narratives, the transformation is moral. The everyday world from which these men were separated is depicted as one of self-interest, arrogance, competition, greed, and apathy. Therefore, their transformation involves overcoming these traits in themselves, choosing to care for others and put the interests of the broader community before their own (Miczo).

Wonder Woman's journey differs from this pattern in two key ways. Though Diana is privileged (as the daughter of the queen), she is inherently different from the other women on Themyscira. She has been marked out for a greater purpose since birth. Additionally, the world she inhabits is not a "fallen world," dominated by corruption and selfishness. Rather, "Paradise Island" is a place both idyllic and idealistic. The women there have established a society that appears almost perfect. Rooted in their own history, they have become warriors, valuing military preparedness and keeping in a constant of readiness. What marks the

perfection of their society, however, is the apparent lack of internal dissension. When Odin exiled Thor, it was because he knew that, as future ruler of Asgard, his son would need the qualities of a good monarch, including the wisdom to deal justly with realms that were frequently at odds with one another. Themyscira appears to suffer from no such civil strife. The one disagreement between Hippolyta and Antiope is a nonstarter; Hippolyta knows that her sister is right and that Diana will need training in the martial arts.

Nevertheless, Diana is not trained in the ways of the broader world. Her own mother sheltered her, and her subsequent innocence becomes the main mechanism for moving the story forward. She does not spend the movie trying to make amends, like Tony Stark, or learning humility, like Thor. Rather, she moves through “man’s world” fully confident in her own core virtues, naïve of how that world works. Yet, this confidence is not intended to reflect poorly on Themyscira. The women themselves have, after all, created a “utopian vision of matriarchy” (Franich 24). Diana is inspired by that vision, it provides her a hope and optimism her male counterparts never possessed. But it would make little plot sense for her to return to Themyscira to renew and save it. Her community was not the one needing regeneration. Accordingly, she left knowing she could never return. Her separation from her society is to be permanent.

The second way that Wonder Woman’s journey differs involves the transformation experience itself. Recall that for male superheroes, the moral transformation of their character typically involves a growth or expansion of more typically feminine traits: empathy, caring, and other-orientation. They don’t lose any of their masculinity; instead, they gain a set of motivations and values that render them more well-rounded. Diana already possesses the virtues of peace, hope, and love. Not only does she begin her journey with the virtues that are the endpoint of the male hero, she also starts with the aids and talismans (i.e., the sword, the lasso, and the cuffs) that are often acquired by the male hero along the way (e.g., a

suit of mechanical armor, a powerful hammer, or magical spells). Given this, what sort of transformation can she undergo? In her innocence and naiveté about “man’s world,” her virtues initially serve her well; she changes the parameters of the mission and goes to save the village. This small-scale victory turns out to be short-lived. Evil remains triumphant; Diana could not save the villagers, she is not yet effective. The first step in her reformation, then, occurs when she kills General Ludendorff and the war does not immediately end. Her innocence and naiveté are shaken; her transformative experience involves having something taken from her by “man’s world,” the fallen world. This aspect differs from the male journey, since worldly men such as Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark were never innocent in the first place.

Wonder Woman’s transformation begins with a sense of betrayal. She feels deceived, lied to, her world no longer makes sense to her. Diana realizes what the male superheroes already took for granted: the world is corrupt largely because of human intention. At that point, if Ares had not appeared to tempt her, it is possible she would have gone off by herself and left the world to its own self-destructive devices. Interestingly, Ares’ appearance is consistent with other depictions in which he appears more akin to a Christian devil figure than a Greek god.¹ Here, he tempts her to give in to her despair, to surrender to her anger. However, as with Yinsen’s sacrifice for Tony Stark, Steve Trevor’s sacrifice for the greater good recalls her to her higher self. This is when she experiences the second stage of her transformation. Having lost her innocence, Diana is faced with the decision as to whether or not she will live out her virtues, even if those virtues cannot save the world. In other words, she must act on the virtues of peace, hope, and love because they are the right ways to

¹ In George Pérez’s initial Wonder Woman storyline (“The Princess and the Power”), though all the other Greek gods are depicted in togas and gowns, Ares is shown wearing dark armor, his face a black shadow behind his mask. In the animated film *Wonder Woman*, he is portrayed with horns protruding from his head.

be in the world, not because they might save it. She must integrate her newfound wisdom about “man’s world” with the traits she possessed all along: her feminine traits. Once she makes that decision, she has the ability to be effective on a large scale, successfully defeating Ares and seemingly ending the war.

One of the reasons for the film’s success may be the way Wonder Woman’s journey complements the pattern of many male superheroes. Diana possesses feminine traits and values, and she doesn’t lose those qualities in becoming a hero. In the end, she reaches the same place as her male counterparts: choosing to remain in the corrupt world and fight to protect it as a worthy end in itself. Her journey does not exactly follow theirs, however, and so, this leaves her journey susceptible to different readings. A critical appraisal might suggest the message is harmful. That is, Wonder Woman possesses many “essentially” feminine qualities and hails from a matriarchal utopia (itself, an essentialist notion that women could create a perfect society). In leaving such a society of feminine cooperation and entering “man’s world,” Wonder Woman (and by extension, women more generally) must shed her (their) innocence forever. By that logic, however, the parallel to the women of Themyscira is the group of male leaders who refused to countenance Diana’s arguments. This enclave of ultra-masculinity is clearly meant to be seen as regressive. By this all around regressive reading, masculine and feminine remain divided, and Wonder Woman must leave one world behind forever in order to enter the other.

Another way to read the film, however, is to acknowledge that it reinforces the values of a masculine society. In such societies, women are socialized to be other-oriented, caring, compassionate, and tender (Hofstede). At least in the U.S., we may be ready to accept that Wonder Woman possesses these characteristics because she’s female. Yet, the question is whether or not those values can survive a confrontation with “man’s world.” In other words, the cultural divide between masculine and

feminine cannot be bridged by remaining in separation, in sequestration, but by stepping across the gap. By this read, the women of Themyscira are not less than human because they are female, but because they are existing in a state of isolation from the rest of the world. Themyscira, then, is not just mythical because it is populated by immortal women, but because it depicts women as seemingly lacking qualities that are not just male but are human. It is hard to imagine a society without internal diversity of opinion in much the same way it is impossible to imagine a person without a mix of masculine and feminine characteristics.

Thus, Diana's virtues are not "essentially" female, as much as they are necessarily human. But those qualities acquire their meaning only in connection with the broader world. In isolation, they are just empty words, meaningless gestures. Those virtues must be tested out in the field, so to speak, to guarantee their authenticity, to ensure they are genuine. In this reading, the lesson of Wonder Woman's journey is that isolation breeds illusions and ignorance. Connecting across gender, cultural, and ideological divides can be hard and painful, but it is the only way to stop the spread of evil. Such a message is progressive in its reading. The question then becomes: Can a person espouse the values and live the virtues of peace, hope, and love, and still be effective in a strife-torn world? Regardless of our own answer to that question, Wonder Woman will always answer, "Yes, she can!"

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