

Men, Movies, & Monsters

by Aaron Kipnis, Ph.D.

One of the major archetypal themes of the last few millennia has been that of the Hero rescuing the Princess from the Dragon. This story has deep resonances in our collective psyche regarding gender that are echoing still in our modern society. In this ubiquitous myth, the rescuer is almost always male; the victim in peril is female. In most of these stories, as depicted in contemporary romantic literature and cinema, the dragon has become the male victimizer, whom the hero must defeat on behalf of a woman. This theme sells tens of millions of books to women every year and dominates a majority of American films.

The Hero, the Dragon/Victimizer, and the Princess/Victim are elements of a split archetype. They are aspects of a unity splintered into its component parts. Each one of us has a courageous hero and a sensitive, helpless child without our psyche; each of us has a ruthless streak and a portion of ourselves that feels wounded by the ruthlessness of others. Problems arise when any one of these psychological elements dominates our character. We can become “possessed” by the split-off part which, acting out of its one-sided role, is also constantly both seeking and constellating its missing, polarized part. Heroes seek dragons to slay and maidens to rescue, while princesses languish and pine for their princes to come.

Both of these gender roles are undergoing important changes. As Naomi Wolf notes in *Fire With Fire*, many women are now beginning to reject the disempowering trend of recent decades in which they found solidarity and membership by identifying themselves as helpless victims. After decades of women’s books, from the *Feminine Mystique* to the *Cinderella Complex*, the perils of immobilizing princesshood are now painfully clear to many women who are reclaiming their personal power. After only a few years of reflective thought about how masculinity is viewed in our culture, however, the deadly trap of the Hero is not as obvious to most men.

Historically, men have found brotherhood and community with other men by joining the cult of the Hero. All their cultural directives – from early education and parenting, through adolescent sports, military inductions, and initiation into the workplace – inform men that in order to be well regarded by others, they must learn to model themselves after the heroic ideal. In ancient Western mythology, this ideal was developed through heroic drama about bigger-than-life characters like Hercules. Most of us learned about him as children in fables that extolled the virtues of his great strength, which he harnessed to overcome seemingly impossible tasks. The name *Hercules* means “glory to Hera.” In the Greek language, *hero* means a man who is sacrificed to Hera.

The myth of Hercules has pre-Christian roots. Like Christ, Hercules was called the “Prince of Peace,” “Sun of Righteousness,” and “Light of the World,” and like Christ, he battled the Lord of the Underworld. Again, like Christ, he was reborn and granted immortality. These myths, like

the story Christ himself, have been major influences on the way in which we idealize Western masculinity as embodying the archetype of the Savior/Rescuer/Knight/Hero.

Ancient mythology gives us a glimpse into the collective psyche of a particular culture and epoch. One thing myth tells us is how that culture imagined gender. In the same manner, cinema is the primary arena today in which the archetypal forces moving through our collective consciousness are displayed (even though contemporary literature and other arts serve a similar function). The heroic archetype that Hercules represents is still very alive in the collective unconscious of the American male.

HEROIC CINEMA

Today, the archetype of the near invincible hero is carried in the roles played by actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Steven Seagal, Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude van Damme, Dolph Lundgram, and Bruce Willis. In the past, it was men like John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Charles Bronson. These few men, and others like them, account for hundreds of millions of dollars in box-office receipts every year.

Regardless of whether the character is the Man with No Name, Rambo, Rocky, Terminator, a Cliff Hanger, a Demolition Man, or a Super Hard-Ass Kung Fu Cop, the themes in most of these films are remarkably similar. Just like Hercules, the male hero defeats a seemingly superior opponent against impossible odds. Often, he combats an extraordinary number of very powerful, vicious, heavily armed men. Yet, he has absolutely no fear in the face of superior forces and he is never confused about the best course of action to initiate.

The hero inevitably suffers a great deal of physical abuse. He endures hardships that seem far beyond the endurance of any mortal man. Yet, he expresses no complaint in response to his wounds, his exhaustion, or his apparently hopeless situation. In most cases, he rescues a woman in distress, either along the way or as his primary quest. Most often, he uses super human strength and fighting ability to defeat all the bad guys.

What's wrong with being heroes? Essentially nothing, on an occasional basis. Every one of us must connect with our own personal heroics in order to write a book, raise a child, start a business, face an illness, or engage in the hundreds of human endeavors that require us to overcome our fears. For many men, however, the problem is that they feel that they must *always* be heroes.

To win the girl, even a completely rehabilitated chauvinist, such as depicted by Bill Murray in *Ground Hog Day*, must also face his own death several times; perform a variety of charitable acts, save a little boy's life, learn to play classical piano, and discover everything about the personal likes and dislikes of the woman he is pursuing. He must perform at a level of accomplishment way beyond the capacity of most mortals in order to be loved by a woman who doesn't have to do anything but look cute in order to win this sort of heroic attention from him. For many men, cinema imitates life to the extent that it articulates the unreal, heroic ideals that they feel they are expected to emulate.

The martyrdom of Christ embodies the idea that the ultimate goodness of a man is expressed in his willingness to die for others. This belief led countless generations of men to march heedlessly off to slaughter in wars. My generation of men was called cowardly for suggesting to the world that the time for peace had come - not through more fighting to end war, but by ceasing fighting altogether. The Knight needs armor to fight when there is clearly no other recourse. But, when he forgets how to remove it, he becomes trapped within his strength and is unable to tend to the wounds that lie hidden beneath his hard exterior.

The Hero is incapable of forging meaningful connections with others. Just as hysteria was the dominant psychopathology attributed to women in the 19th century, narcissism has become the primary psychological dis-ease of contemporary men. The Hero, like so many males these days, is often excessively narcissistic - solitary and self-involved - confined within the prison of his heroic identity. Whether the character is Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, Charles Bronson's vigilante killer Paul Gurney, or Bruce Willis' Die Hard cop, all these icons of heroic masculinity believe that they, and they alone, can solve the problem of the day. Contemptuous of conventional rules, they often solve their problems, one of which is almost always rescuing the girl, by means of compelling ultra-violence.

We need heroes in times of distress and it is commendable that women and men, in times of great danger, do reach beyond the ordinary limits of their bodies and emotions. As women's empowerment leader, Elizabeth Herron, has noted, the problem for women is no longer simply one of acknowledging their specific wounds and seeking justice, but now also one of habitually thinking and acting like victims, thus creating an identity imbued with helplessness. Similarly, the problem for men occurs when they create an identity of heroic masculinity, that is divorced from their deeper vulnerabilities.

Heroes can't ask for help when they need it. Men caught in the heroic archetype often suffer greatly and die early deaths. They've been trained to believe that they don't need anyone but themselves. Just as over-identification with the Victim/Princess cuts women off from their power, over-identification with the Hero cuts men off from their feelings and their capacity to provide sustained care for themselves and others. The abuse men inflict on themselves often takes the form of alcohol and drug abuse, workaholism, or sports and sexual obsessions that enable them to stay in heroic denial of their pain, their fears, and their human needs for connection. As vulnerability becomes relegated to the Shadow, this heroic denial creates monsters in the depths of the male psyche.

THE HERO'S SHADOW

To the degree that vulnerability is rejected by the conscious mind, something deep within the male psyche grows cold, dark, and utterly unfeeling. In the alchemy of the psyche, that which is split off takes on a pathological dimension, gathering force until it breaks free of its repression. No longer the original element - feeling - this new element has been transmuted by tectonic forces of repression into the embodiment of its opposite; psychopathic invulnerability. Mythology is replete with images of this dark masculine quality in the form of the Monster.

Contemporary culture is fascinated with the male monster. The bulk of our horror films are concerned not with the Dark Mother whom men fear, but rather with the hidden, monstrous male

who exploits, stalks, terrorizes, wounds, rapes, and kills women. Although there are female vampires, they are usually servants of the primary male monster – mortal women whom the vampire has subverted to his will. Vampirism is imagined as a masculine force that preys upon the life's blood of young women. The werewolf is also most often male, are most other Creeps, Beasts, Things and Its.

Another related genre in film and literature deals with the human monster - the psychopathic killer. From *Scarface* to *Silence of the Lambs*, in well over 90% of our thrillers, the human monster is male. Freddy Kruger of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and Jason of the *Friday the Thirteenth* series take this genre to macabre new heights, adding an otherworldly dimension to their psychopathic powers.

Most of our cultural imagination still depicts feeling in a feminine image, because women have been socially sanctioned to retain their emotional bodies. Men, however, tend to split off their feeling function in their quest for identity through heroic autonomy. When the feeling function is split off, it becomes layered with accretions of social and psychological repression; in essence, the diamond of the male emotional body is transformed into a lump of coal. This black hole in the center of the male psyche becomes enormous, a monstrous, hungry maw; it devours feeling the way a collapsed star devours light. Most horror/thriller stories, of which there are thousands, have remarkably common themes:

- (1) The male monster is ruthless (*Cape Fear*), obsessively focused on his prey, relentless, and devoid of compassion. The more terror, grief, and pain he can evoke, the better, since his primary quest is for emotional libido of any kind, something for which he is literally starving.
- (2) He preys on women (*Psycho*), usually very young and alluring women (when he kills men, it is usually incidental).
- (3) He is either utterly devoid of feeling or takes a certain sadistic glee in his slaughter (*Freddy*), which is a psychopathic return to feeling.
- (4) He is usually immune to tactics that would kill ordinary men and often repeatedly rises from the dead (*Terminator 2*), or is "undead" (were-wolves and vampires).
- (5) He is cold-blooded, dead-eyed, and often has hypnotic powers over his prey (*Dracula*).

In short, he has many reptilian qualities. Epitaphs for a man who exploits women are that he is a *snake*, a *worm*, a *slime*.

The Monster lives hidden in the shadow of the Hero and, as such, shares many of the Hero's characteristics. The Monster is strong, purposeful, fearless, and practically invincible in battle. He is also a relentless and dauntless hunter. If we probe more deeply into the ancient structure of the male psyche, we find at its foundation a Hunter. For millions of years the primary occupation of men was hunting. It is what men are built for. Men's greater physical stamina, muscular strength, skill at stealth and stalking, and instilled stoic response to pain and discomfort are all required skills for successful hunting. These are also the attributes a man needs to be a skilled warrior. So when a man uses these abilities in the service of others, and especially that of

protecting and supporting women, we call him a Hero. When these skills and powers are used to stalk and prey on women, however, the man becomes a Monster.

Although classical Jungian psychology views the dragon as symbolizing a negative mother complex, it is an archetypally more complex image than just this one theme. The aspect of male sexuality that is purely reptilian (cold-blooded, unfeeling, primal), predatory, and narcissistic is what women most fear in men. The Hero is in the business of rescuing women from their fears, which is one reason why, in mythology, the Hero is often depicted slaying a reptile, the dragon. On one hand, conscious men are trying to escape the bonds and burdens of living up to the Hero. It is oppressive for a man to feel that he always has to be strong, can never show fear, and can never ask for help. But on the other hand, there is an aspect of the Hero - what we might call the sacred Warrior or Hunter - that is sorely needed in this time. There is real evil in the world. Our cinema monsters hardly do justice to the monsters of our passing century: Hitler, Stalin, Ceausescu, Pol Pot, and Serbian "ethnic cleansing" through the systematic rape of tens of thousands of women, to name a few.

The horrors of this world - the starvation of large populations, the destruction of entire species and whole ecosystems, the degradation of the ozone shield above our very heads - are all human made, and we need real heroic warriors, both male and female, to meet these horrors. A first step toward becoming a sacred Warrior, however, must be to confront the horrors of the monsters within. If we have not taken care of "business" in our inner world, how can we ever act in a trustworthy manner in the outer world? The Monster embodies men's best capacities to defend, nurture, and create life, turned in the direction of destroying life. Darth Vader (the Dark Father) was a noble Jedi knight before he was seduced by the dark side.

The Monster and the Hero are separated parts of the same archetype; all the exploitive power is in one and all the nurturing power is in the other. The Monster/Hero, and the Victim are all part of the same psychic complex. Like the atom with its subatomic particles, these elements become extremely dangerous when split. As an integrated whole, however, this psychic complex represents a fundamental dynamism of the human psyche.

In most stories, it is the male Hero who defeats the male Monster in the service of the female Victim/Princess. Defeat, however, is not the solution; as our horror tales tell us, the monster is never really defeated - he just vanishes for a while, only to rise again in the sequel. What is needed is awareness of and reconnection with these split-off parts. One of the ultimate ironies of the Hero is that, in order to defeat the monster, the Hero must *become more violent* than his antagonist. Thus the cycle becomes perpetuated. The battle of the invincible Hero against the invincible Monster is a battle to reclaim feeling, imagined as the feminine principle. So one way to look at the telos of the Hero/Monster/Princess tale is as a man's quest for feeling from opposing directions within the psyche.

As long as vulnerability is split off as a feminine trait however, there is no place within men's imaginations in which nurturing and feeling exist as masculine traits. Lacking connection to their own vulnerability, men will feel compelled either to heroically rescue the Princess/Victim or monstrously devour her. The primary way in which men deny their vulnerability is by adopting a heroic persona. This persona requires the repression of many feeling-related traits. In time, this

repressed energy gives birth to the Monster and renders the expression of violence a psychological inevitability. In order for men to escape the splintered dynamic of the myth and reunite with the feeling aspect of their psyches, they must acknowledge that, just as feeling has been relegated to the feminine, so, too, has their victimization been projected onto the feminine. A more current, post-Jungian way of looking at this issue is to see that vulnerability is just as much a quality of the deep masculine as it is of the feminine. The route to reclaiming feeling lies directly within the male psyche. It requires no outward act of heroism nor covert abduction of the feminine, but rather an inward turning to face, befriend, and reclaim the depths of masculine feeling. In this way, vulnerability is owned and integrated rather than converted into the violent expression of dissociated shadow qualities.

Many people today ask why American men are so violent and why our predominant American male self-image is so “tough.” One of the major reasons is that every generation of American men, whether or not they've actually gone to battle, has been trained to go to war. Our movie heroes merely reflect this ubiquitous socialization of men be soldiers. The deliberate toughening of boys begins immediately after birth. Male babies generally receive less demonstrative acts of affection their mothers and are weaned earlier than female babies. Boy babies are touched less, talked to less, cry more, and are more likely to be held facing outward, toward the world and other people, than girl babies. Girl toddlers receive quicker and more positive responses when crying for help or complaining of a minor injury than boys. Boys are generally pushed toward independence and the denial of pain. Indeed, they often become independent to the point of isolation.

Boys are systematically trained to disconnect from their feelings. Most are told, “Don't be a baby... don't whine... big boys don't cry.” In their adolescent games, boys are expected not to show pain, not to flinch when startled, not to retreat from a fight, and not to show fear in the face of danger. The popularity of football and other contact sports gives the message that boys must abuse their bodies in a heroic manner to win affection from girls and recognition from older men.

If, as many psychologists believe, rage erupts as a reaction to deep-rooted pain, then the increase of violence in our culture may be related to the growing degree of unreconciled grief in men. The alienation, loneliness, isolation, substance abuse, distrust of women, violence, and emotional numbness associated with the heroic model of masculinity are both symptoms and causes of the breakdown in our social fabric. The more heroically men act, the more split off from feeling they become and the more their propensity for violence grows, incubating the Monster in the virulent crucible of repressed emotion. Male violence is often a desperate response to psychological, social, and emotional oppression.

Today, there is a serious drought of compassion for males who suffer. Cynicism toward men abounds. There is a growing double standard of care for males in need. For example, men who batter as adults were often abused themselves as children. Most treatment programs, however, do not address these men's untended wounds but attempt only to modify their abusive behaviors. At least one third of all sexual child abuse, perpetrated by women and men, is against boys, yet most treatment programs focus more on female victims of male abusers. Child battery is much more prevalent than sexual abuse, accounting for tens of thousands of injuries and hundreds of deaths each year. The majority of these children are males and the majority of perpetrators are women.

Yet we rarely see these statistics cited in articles about societal violence. I believe that the socially tolerated abuse of males is one of the primary causes unarticulated unconscious male rage.

The double standard of care for males at risk is not well articulated today. Many men do not experience the same compassion we give to women in need of public assistance. This institutionalized injustice of omission can fuel the rage that erupts into violence. Violence against males is not only institutionalized and socially sanctioned in our culture (over three million boys annually receive corporal punishment in school), it is also form of entertainment in sports like boxing, in which 75% of the athletes suffer brain damage, and in car-racing, hockey, and football, where a player's average life span is 54 years. Over 331,000 boys are injured annually playing high school football, 14,000 are hospitalized, and 12 die. In response to a society that places lesser value on boy's mental health and physical safety, and locked within a socially reinforced heroic persona that does not allow them to ask for help, many young men despair. They are now committing suicide at the unprecedented rate five-to-one over girls.

Our society vigorously encourages boxers like Mike Tyson by rewarding them with fame and millions of dollars for developing an extreme capacity to inflict brutal pain other young men. Then we are shocked and condemning when they do not behave as gentlemen in their relationships with women. Tyson personifies the classic pairing of the Hero/Monster who loves one Princess and victimizes another. Our military intensively trains men to kill in war and then expects them to return to the streets as productive citizens with no comparable training in how to make the transition to peace-time. Not surprisingly, about 25% of all prisoners in America are Viet Nam veterans. The double messages we give men - rewarding them for one kind of violence and punishing them for others is crazy-making for many.

Society has become more concerned about violence toward women, women's poverty, and neglect of women's health needs. As it should be! But we usually also fail to note that males account for 70% of all assault victims, 80% of homicide victims, 85% of the homeless, 90% of persons with AIDS, 93% of persons killed on the job, 95% of prisoners, and over 99% of all combat veterans. Even though twice as many men as women are victims of violent crimes, those committed against women receive much greater prominence in sociological and psychological research and dominate the vanguard of new legislation. In cinema, about 90% of the characters who die violently are male, yet the vast majority of public concern is about the image of the female victim. The problems of male victims in all circumstances have been seriously understudied. Male victims make us uncomfortable. They violate our cultural notion of men as heroes and Providers.

Higher levels of testosterone endow men with a biological potential to be more aggressive than women; but this does not mean they are destined to be more violent. There have been some Native American, Island, Eastern, and other cultures in which men were not significantly violent. The violence of our movie heroes and monsters does not come out of a vacuum. Often a man's violence appears senseless, until we examine the broader social context that shaped his character, fueled his rage, and pushed him toward monstrous acts of destruction.

The majority of men are sorely in need of our compassion, clinical understanding, social activism, and community support. In order to better support boys and men, we need to institute educational and psychological services that are designed to meet their *gender-specific needs*. Men's groups designed to heal male wounds can help in many different contexts, ranging from veteran support groups to drug and alcohol recovery groups. These sorts of groups create social contexts that are meaningful to males and that serve as viable alternatives to gangs and other violence-prone groupings of men. Through their immersion in nature, music, poetry, dance, myth, and community experience, mythopoetic groups help men recover a sense-of- self connected to something greater than the small constraints of their lives. Many men are breaking out of the myth of the Hero and attempting to embrace an authentic masculinity that is more deeply connected to feelings, the body, nature, and soul. In these groups a new male myth is being born. The search for community and brotherhood is beginning to supersede that of the heroic quest, even in the face of the media's attempts to keep men locked in their heroic persona by widely ridiculing their expression of honest emotion.

Information about how to nurture and heal male wounds is absent from most clinical training programs. Therapists could be more helpful if they were better trained to understand gender-specific aspects of male psychology. Teachers, increasingly sensitive to girls' self-esteem issues, must also be trained to better understand how to meet the often differing emotional and educational needs of boys.

The media can help by dismantling its blood-soaked shrine to male violence and embracing a new kind of heroic drama. In stories like *Enemy Mine*, for example, the human protagonist finds brotherhood with his alien antagonist in a drama no less compelling than any super-hero's violent triumphs. A new myth of a Hero who feels deeply and is vulnerable also makes way for Heroines in the roles of protector and defender. Through this, a new vision of partnership between the sexes may come, with the Princess claiming her power in equal measure to the Hero claiming his depth of feeling. Only then, as in *Beauty and the Beast*, can the enormous energy of the Monster become allied with the process of making soul instead of destroying life.

FURTHER READING

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