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“The Adventures of Spot and Poppy!”  
*Watercolor, Bookbinding*

My project and research delves into origins of the writing structure that is “The Hero's Journey”, and the beliefs of the man who coined the term, Joseph Campbell. I wanted to explore this structure more in depth, as it is very popular in children's fiction, and discuss the absence of the true “Female Hero” and how a lot of children's and young adult media is full of misogyny and internalized misogyny. My art piece is a children's book that I illustrated and wrote that loosely follows the style of “The Hero's Journey”. I used watercolor, colored pencils, and blue india ink to create the illustrations, then bound the pages together and used binder's board, green leather, and more paper to create the cover. I wanted to create a whimsical story that is appealing to everyone, while also challenging Joseph Campbell's views about women and how women “can't be heroes”. I think it's absolutely crucial to have role models in children's media, and I want to help to take the next steps towards that goal.

“The Hero’s Journey” and the  
Absence of the Female Hero



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## 1. What is “The Hero’s Journey” and what are heroes?

Let’s say that you are an avid library-goer. You go to the library, and check out a couple of books. There’s a bit of diversity; there’s some fiction, nonfiction, a couple of comic books thrown in, maybe a children’s book or two. I can almost guarantee that in those few books you checked out, there is going to be at least one that involves the following events: a clever and brave hero that goes on some sort of life changing journey or quest and returns triumphant. This specific series of events is used so often in literature and media that it was dubbed “The Hero’s Journey,” by mythologist Joseph Campbell in 1949 (Yang).

Once you are aware of “The Hero’s Journey”, it can be spotted easily pretty much everywhere, but especially in children’s media. Fantasy, storytelling, fairy-tale books and others are very prominent in children's spaces, and most of those genres follow “The Hero’s Journey.” *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Hunger Games* and *Pete the Cat Saves Christmas* are all different examples of how “The Hero’s Journey” is used. This structure follows all media everywhere. Now, is this a bad thing? Of course not! Since the beginning of time, people have found the need for a hero figure. Most definitions describe a hero as a person who is willing to do whatever it takes to follow their morals, no matter the hurdles they may have to jump in order to do so. They are self-assured and selfless, and they are often looked to for guidance in a time of peril. During the Great Depression, many of the fictional heroes we love today were born, to give the public hope that they would return to normal life. Superman and his well known catchphrase “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” (Robertson) became a symbol for many Americans during the beginning of World War II. During the Cold War, comics and TV amplified the dramatics of the war into their storytelling, which featured “evil” CIA agents and anti-communist themes.

But why do we need heroes? Why do we need them to look up to? Sometimes these fictional heroes like Superman or Batman seem almost sacred. Thousands and thousands of people worship these characters, because they confront real-world and historically rooted peril in a way that is easy to digest. Making the “bad guys” of the real world seem almost fictional in these comic books and TV shows makes it hard to see them as an actual threat. Take, for example, Superman (again): the perfect ass-kicking superhero of the 30’s. Who couldn’t like him? He was created to be relatable, so kids and adults alike could imagine themselves in Superman’s place, fighting crime and saving the day. His villains were carefully crafted around the politics of the time. In one of his early adventures, Superman saves an innocent woman from domestic abuse, and in another stands up against child labor. In *Superman #2*, Superman finds a professor who had created a type of deadly gas to be used “only in the case of defensive war.” However, later on crooks attempted to steal it from him, to use in a civil-war riddled country dubbed in the comic “Boravia.” (Pribitkin) This was direct commentary on the civil war happening in Spain during the end of the 1930’s. In the end, Superman stopped the bad guys and had a peace treaty be signed by both parties in “Boravia”, ending the civil war. Giving something so terrible that was happening in real life a fictional lens and a fake “happy ending” made the general public more at ease, because it seemed real.

I can definitely agree with the statement that humanity will and always will need heroes, because without heroes who are we?

## **2. Campbell’s views on femininity and masculinity**

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), who first coined the idea of “The Hero’s Journey,” studied at Columbia University and taught at Sarah Lawrence College before his retirement (Segal). He

was an author, most famously known for his book where he introduces “The Hero’s Journey”:  
*The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. Unfortunately, he had some pretty problematic takes when it came to women and “The Hero’s Journey.” When asked how women fit into “The Hero’s Journey” and why he described all hero’s with the same male archetypes, he responded: “The male usually has the more conspicuous role just because of the conditions of life. He is out there in the world, and the woman is in the home.” (Frontigia, 15) From that quote alone we can see how Campbell views women in general. He favors the stereotypical archetypes of women: The Mother, The Lover, etc. (Frontigia, 16) From other quotes, you can clearly see that he doesn’t view women as heroes at all. In another statement, Campbell says that a girl “becomes a woman whether she intends it or not,” but talking about male adolescents he states that boys have to “intend to be a man.” (Frontiga, 16) Claiming that women aren’t in control of their maturity is not only incorrect, but a super misogynist take. Firstly, knowing the complexities of the female experience is something that Campbell probably knows nothing about, and much less should be commenting on it. Campbell’s view of maturity for women is purely biological, and he claims that “At the first menstruation, the girl is a woman. The next thing she knows, she’s pregnant, she’s a mother.” In this quotation, he essentially says that he views young girls as women through a purely biological standpoint and not a mental maturity standpoint. This full quote also implies that women aren’t really in control of their motherhood, or their bodies, and that pregnancy happens just “out of the blue”. It also suggests that women don’t have any future besides becoming a mother, and a young mother at that. Becoming a “mature” person, in my opinion, for anyone requires experience and mistakes, and going on the journey that is becoming an adult.

### 3. What is an Archetype?

If you're writing a story, having strong, complex characters is key. Now, creating a whole character from scratch is a bit tough. In lots of stories, writers use things called archetypes to help them build the base for their characters. An archetype is basically a generalized description of something, but here I reference archetypes mostly when I am talking about characters that repeat themselves often in books that have “The Hero’s Journey” as a structure. There’s The Hero archetype, a character who is super strong and usually the protagonist of the story you are reading. Usually, The Hero has a Sidekick, or friend that helps them along the way. There is a Mentor, or Guardian, and then a Villain. Of course, there’s a million different archetypes out there, but those are the ones that I have noticed to repeat the most.

A lot of traditional stories love to use the Mother, the Wife, the Seductress or the Damsel archetypes for describing women, but much like Campbell, callously ignore the Heroine archetype. A lot of the princess stories that we grew up with feature the same plot: there's a beautiful, young, stereotypically attractive girl who needs to be saved in some way and a prince saves her and then they fall in love. I feel like I don’t really have to explain why this is problematic. Archetypes are at their core stereotypical, and I can’t argue with that, but using the same couple of archetypes with more harmful stereotypes towards women, and simply choosing to not acknowledge the others is the problematic part. Especially in children’s media, it’s so crucial for kids to see themselves in characters, and if the only characters young girls see are mothers or damsels in distress, what example does that set?

#### 4. UMP

Something I've seen in the media a lot, that goes back to "The Hero's Journey," is this idea of the Ultimate Male Protector. I would classify this as kind of an archetype, but it's more broad than that. I think that the classic Hero archetype is a little bit more complex than the Ultimate Male Protector. The Ultimate Male Protector's job is not to embark on the journey, rather his job is to make sure to save the day and show off his muscles in the process. This Ultimate Male Protector is always the guy who saves the day, quite like Superman if you can think about it that way. One of my favorite examples of this is the hit television show, Doctor Who (Coile, 83). The Doctor, who is the protagonist, and his sidekick (often a woman) travel time and space together, and get into crazy adventures, blast aliens, and whatnot. But no matter how skilled or cunning the Doctor's companion is, he *always* ends up saving the day. This plot isn't inherently bad, but even when his companions are supernatural and are much beyond him, he still keeps this role. Not only that, but five out of eleven of his female sidekicks end up falling into the Love Interest archetype, which isn't very empowering to say the least. The show also has historically avoided strong female leads, even in the example of Donna and the Tenth Doctor. Donna was different from the other female companions of the Doctor. She "establishes herself as a woman who is far more interested in exploring the universe than a romance" (Coile, 85). It was definitely a refreshing difference for the show, but even when Donna becomes superhuman later in the season, the Doctor must turn her back into a regular human to save her life. Other superhuman characters, however, have survived, so this did nothing for the plot and was purely to avoid having a strong female lead.

In children's media, there are lots of stories of small groups or trios of friends that help each other save the day. I don't think this pattern is problematic, because it shows kids the

powers of friendship and how it is sometimes helpful to do things in groups. But, sometimes in these stories, there's a pretty prominent leader and the other friends just act like their sidekicks. I'm going to use *Harry Potter* as an example. Harry, Ron, and Hermione are all the best of friends at Hogwarts, the school for witches and wizards. However there are few to no times where Hermione actually saves the day. There's also quite a lack of diversity in the female characters in the *Harry Potter* Universe, with the obvious racial microaggressions tied in with some of the POC characters, and the complexity of the female characters is severely insufficient. There's almost no character development for Hermione, versus her two male co-stars, and when Hermione gets a romantic subplot, it almost regresses her character. When she has feelings for Ron, she exhibits behavior that is very out of character for her, like hexing other students so Ron can look better, etc. It's almost like switching archetypes. Hermione used to be the smart, athletic, "not like other girls" girl, but when found to be less relatable to an audience, was switched to the Lover archetype. Femininity in general is also spoken down upon in the *Harry Potter Universe*, all the female characters who are actually relevant are almost strictly tomboy, while the characters who are more inherently feminine are shamed and much more unpopular, like Luna Lovegood, who is slightly flamboyant and unique but because of that doesn't really have any friends. (Rose).

## **5. Interviews!**

Now, I don't want to end this on a bad note. I definitely think that telling stories in a more inclusive way needs to happen, but that doesn't mean uprooting everything and starting over. I think instead maybe we could give storytellers some tips as to how to make stories more inclusive, so people can see themselves as heroes. I took the time to interview some kids and ask



them some questions about heroes and what they mean to them, because I think kids truly are so intelligent, and we can always take the time to learn from them. The kids I interviewed were ages 8 and 9, and they attend the Blue Oak School in Napa, CA.

*Q: What is a hero?*

helpful person and someone who helps someone in need

A hero is someone who helps people

someone who helps fix problems

A hero is someone that helps people

someone who saves and helps other people and is kind

A hero is someone that's for the good of others

*Q: Are you a hero?*

No

I am a hero if i believe i am

NO!

I do not believe i am a hero

well, i dont have a cape and superpowers but i help people and i am kind

NO

(my friend says i am a hero) but i do not believe i am a hero

*Q: Who is your biggest hero?*

My mom

My teacher

My biggest hero is my mom because she has a preschool called IPE and it helps a lot of families

Taylor Swift

Shack! (*Shaq*)

My teacher, my mom, and Taylor Swift

*Q: Why are heroes important?*

they are kind and helpful

Because with out them , we would have many problems

because they motivate people

heroes are important. because if someone is in danger they need help

because there wpu;d be lots of

motivate people

Because they are awesome!!!!

## **6. Conclusion**

I think that the survey answers were pretty much what I expected. However, I was a little shocked at the answers on the “Are you a hero?” question. It made me a little sad to think that

some of these kids thought so strongly about themselves not being heroes, and I would like to live in a world where every kid out there thinks that they are/they can be a hero. I know we can't fix that problem in a day, but I think adding a little more diversity into children's media would help.

## Works Cited

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Edwards, Lee R. “The Labors of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, pp. 33–49. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343084>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

This journal offers a perspective on heroes in literature and how the typical “hero” is defined with stereotypical male characteristics. It also discusses how the few strong famous female heroes are not treated with half the respect as the male heroes. Even though this journal was published many years ago, it still offers a great take I haven’t seen much before.

Barstow, Anne Llewellyn. “Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1985, pp. 29–42. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002016>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

This journal discusses the famous Joan of Arc, and her story of living in a “time of men”. I didn’t really know much about Joan of Arc before reading this journal, and I thought it was very interesting and well thought-out and written. It talks about her struggles living in her time and struggling with maintaining a female identity while also being strong and independent.

Feeney, D. C. “Epic Hero and Epic Fable.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1986, pp. 137–58. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771065>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

This journal talks essentially about the origins of a hero and what is “the hero”, while also delving into the “literary epic”. It references many famous texts while asking the question: “Who was the hero?”

Coile, Charlie. "More than a Companion: 'The Doctor's Wife' and Representations of Women in 'Doctor Who.'" *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2013, pp. 83–104. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610153>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

This journal dives into the world of the famous TV show "Doctor Who" and discusses the relationship between the role of the doctor and the role of his female sidekicks. It brings up a lot of great points, especially the "Love Interest" archetype that a lot of the women in Doctor Who fall under.

Frontgia, Terri. "Archetypes, Stereotypes, and The Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives." *Mythlore*, vol. 18, no. 1 (67), 1991, pp. 15–18. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26812483>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

The journal talks basically exclusively about the role of archetypes of heroes in literature, and talks a lot about Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey". It offers a really refreshing perspective, since Campbell's take on heroes in literature is misogynistic to say the least. It mentions many quotes from Campbell about his opinions on women and corrects them with grace.