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“What Separates Me from You Now?”: Exposing the
Differences between the Male and Female Hero
by Margaret McGoun, '96

Can a female hero exist within the traditional hero structure? Is it possible to remove the male hero from the myth and merely insert a female? Can she perform the duties of the hero as a female, or must she shed her femininity for a more masculine exterior to function as a hero? And if she denies her femininity, is she still a female hero? When a female is discussed in the hero structures of Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and Robert Ray, her role is usually secondary to that of the male hero. She is an accessory that he carries with him as a badge of honor. Should the reader attempt to substitute a female hero from the male hero, it becomes clear that the hero structure quickly disintegrates. A deeper look at each of these hero structures reveals that a female hero cannot exist and that in order to have a satisfying female hero a new structure must be established.

The traditional heroine of myth has been the passive female--the tragic beauty who waits for the hero to rescue her from death or the clutches of another man. She is a heroine only because of her association with the male hero, not because of any deeds of valor that she has performed. Western culture has integrated this ideal of the passive female hero into all forms of literature and entertainment--from novels to movies the female hero, in true heroic form, hardly exists. And that is not because of a lack of mention of women in the hero structure; instead, it is due to the lack of strength in the women who are described by men such as Campbell, Ray, and Frye. All of these men work women into their hero structures but none create a hero structure within which a female hero can thrive.

In each of the three hero structures offered by Campbell, Frye, and Ray, the authors base the structures on masculine characteristics that cannot transcend gender lines. To create a female hero who retains her feminine nature, one must extract the characteristics that are specifically heroic and specifically female. A masculine female is not a true feminine hero. A damsel-in-distress is not a true feminine hero. Instead, a woman who is strong in her femininity and is not forced into a male hero structure is the true female hero.

So, who is the true female hero?

Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Tom Robbins each offers a unique and compelling look at the female hero. The heroines in the novels *Sula*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Still Life with Woodpecker* differ greatly from the female heroes as defined by Campbell, Frye, and Ray. Each of these authors has

found characteristics that are inherently female and created female heroes that follow a new set of rules. For these reasons it has been greatly disputed whether or not these women are true heroines. Instead, Offred is regarded as an inactive hero, Sula as a woman of ill repute, and Princess Leigh-Cheri is an unconventional princess. A closer look at these heroines reveals that there are in fact heroes, but because they are not working within traditional male hero patterns they are not considered as such.

Can the female hero exist outside the male hero structure and be accepted as a hero in her own right? It is unclear whether or not an inherently feminine hero can be accepted in a male-based society. Offering only those characteristics that are considered weak by the rest of the world, the female hero is confined by the walls of sexism. In fact, unless the reader is willing to accept that two separate hero constructs can coexist, the female hero will never gain any ground in the fight against the male dominated society.

To begin the search for the female hero, one must first look to the established male hero construct and how it portrays women. Campbell, Frye, and Ray ignore the female as hero completely--all mention of the hero uses the pronouns "he" or "him"--and any mention of women whatsoever is in the secondary role of reward. Are we to assume then that the female hero is merely a woman who shrugs off her femininity in order to adopt the male persona of hero? According to Campbell, Frye, and Ray that is precisely what is necessary.

Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* offers many different aspects of the hero--none of which can fit a female. In chapter four, appropriately titled "The Keys," Campbell outlines the structure of a hero from birth to death. Throughout this entire chapter of the book he hardly mentions women heroes, and those that he does mention are somehow not quite as heroic as their male counterparts. The hero is generally a warrior of some type, and this part of the structure is the first to disregard women. Traditionally considered the homemakers, women do not fit Campbell's "Hero as Warrior" structure because they do not battle the world in the conventional ways. Boggled down in example, Campbell offers one female warrior-hero in the story of Saint Martha.

Now Saint Martha, at the earnest request of the people, went against the dragon. Having found it in the forest, in the act of devouring a man, she sprinkled holy water on it and exhibited a crucifix. Immediately, the monster, vanquished, came like a lamb to the side of the saint, who passed her belt around its neck and conducted it to the neighboring village. There the populace slew it with stones and staffs (Campbell 340).

This story of Saint Martha exemplifies the problem of woman as warrior-hero. Unlike the male heroes, Saint Martha is unable to slay the enemy herself. She first subdues the dragon with a crucifix--the

ultimate symbol of male sacrifice, in terms of both the father and the son. For whatever reason, Saint Martha does not kill the beast herself; she instead allows the people to kill it and the implication is that it is destroyed with the help of men. The woman is a giver of life, a nurturer, and because of that she is incapable of taking life in any form. Campbell's hero structure falls apart here because the woman cannot fulfill her duties as warrior and retain her true feminine nature. Saint Martha turns to men for help as any female hero would do in Campbell's warrior structure.

"The Hero as Lover" also offers an interesting view of the female in terms of the male hero. The woman is the bride of the hero--she is beautiful and innocent and always in need of the hero's help. Campbell describes the woman as "the 'other portion' of the hero himself--for 'each is both': if his stature is that of world monarch she is the world, and if he is warrior she is fame" (Campbell 342). The female cannot exist independent of the male hero. She is part of him--she is the reason for his fight, she is the prize that is won. It is impossible then to remove the male hero from that construct and replace him with a female. If the structure is reversed and a male is relegated to the "reward" or "prize" position, that emasculated male is no longer appealing to the reader. Western society has programmed the reader to idealize the strong male and a rescue by a female does not offer such a man.

Northrop Frye discussed the hero of the quest-romance in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. In the section, "The Mythos of Summer: Romance," Frye outlines the hero structure of the quest-romance. Women are central to the quest-romance but not as the hero. As with Campbell, Frye's females are generally the reward of the quest. Sometimes they are accompanied with a monetary gain for the hero or an elevation in stature. But overall, women are secondary characters in the quest-romance, even though they may in fact be the catalyst for the quest. Frye further says that the potential bride often "sits quietly at home waiting for the hero to finish his wanderings and come back to her" (Frye 195). However, the hero cannot commit to this woman because "she spoils his fun with the distressed damsels he meets on his journey, who are often enticingly tied naked to rocks or trees" (Frye 196). Here Frye splits the females of the quest-romance into two categories: the lady of duty and the lady of pleasure. It is this split that pits females against one another, fighting for the affections of a man.

Frye's inability to structure the quest-romance story without a damsel-in-distress makes it impossible to trade a female hero for a male one. The female hero would not find it necessary to cavort with any male along the way if the ultimate goal of her quest was her true love. Frye's structure does not work because it is based solely on the masculine nature or on a masculine cultural construct for male behavior--in order to work a female into this particular hero structure she would only be placed into the masculine mode of heroism. A female hero must be defined not by the masculine constructs, that are set

up by men such as Frye and Campbell, but instead by a new construct completely based on a feminine nature.

In an excerpt from his book, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, Robert Ray examines the American hero, specifically the outlaw hero versus the official hero. Ray explains the difference between the two types of heroes and how each hero reacts to certain situations and rules of society. Ray does not, however, touch on female heroes and how they fit into his hero structure. Like Frye and Campbell, he does refer to women as related to the male outlaw hero. He completely ignores the role of women in the lives of the official hero, leaving the reader to speculate. Overall, women are basically unimportant to Ray as well as to the heroes that he outlines.

In the chapter titled, "The Thematic Paradigm," Ray describes the competing values associated with the official hero-outlaw hero opposition. Grouped with society, women are addressed only as baggage that the outlaw hero does not want to carry. Any relationship with a woman constitutes a compromise with traditional society. "The outlaw hero's distrust of civilization [is] typically represented by women and marriage" (Ray 243). The only women acceptable in the life of the outlaw hero are the "bad" women, generally the prostitute with the heart of gold. She poses no threat to the outlaw hero because, although she loves him, she will not conform to society's laws either by marrying the hero. She is merely an "object of lust" (Ray 243). Women become objectified by the outlaw hero; they are less than human, only things to be used and discarded at the hero's disposal.

In regards to the official hero and his relationship with women, Ray completely ignores the role of the female in the life of the official hero. The reader is to assume that the official hero marries a respectable girl who will give the hero many children. In fulfilling her wifely duties, the official hero's female companion becomes non-existent in his life. How often do we hear heroic tales of Martha Washington or Mrs. Benjamin Franklin? Thomas Jefferson was a widower; perhaps the official hero does not even need a woman except as a reproduction partner and a link to traditional society.

Women cannot fit into Ray's hero structure in any capacity other than as an object of lust for the outlaw hero or as a symbol of traditional society in the life of the official hero. In order to create a female hero--whether she be an official or an outlaw--one must disregard Ray's hero structure, in the same way the structures of Frye and Campbell have been disregarded, and create a new hero structure.

In each of these three hero structures, the authors base the structures on masculine characteristics that cannot transcend gender lines. To create a female heroine who retains her feminine nature, one must extract the characteristics that are specifically heroic and specifically female. A masculine female is not

a true feminine hero. A damsel-in-distress is not a true feminine hero. Instead, a woman who is strong in her femininity and is not forced into the male hero structure is the true female hero. Until hero structures such as Ray's, Campbell's, and Frye's are thrown out, there will be no place for a female hero in Western society.

In his essay titled "Queen Moves to Protect King," Arnold Wesker purports that "men are quintessentially moral while women quintessentially amoral" (1). While this may sound harsh at first reading, Wesker goes on to explain that women act out of a sense of duty, a sense of practicality, a sense of survival while men act according to a moral code. Furthermore, men may not always behave according to the moral code by which they live, but when they break the rules of that code, guilt is the result. Having no moral code other than their own, women are free of guilt because their actions are a result of survival tactics rather than selfish indulgence.

Wesker, perhaps unknowingly, offers a view of the female as hero; her actions have heroic meaning--she strives to protect those she loves and herself. Other writers have attempted to create female heroes that do not adhere to the accepted hero structures of men such as Campbell, Frye, and Ray; they have all met with controversy. Margaret Atwood, in her novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, introduces a female hero named Offred. Regarded by many as an inactive hero or not even a hero at all, Offred's problematic heroic trait is her gender. Sula, the heroine of the novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison, has also been confronted with the same gender problem. Her uniquely female traits are the cause of many a controversy over her heroic nature. In his irreverent love story between a princess and a bomber, Tom Robbins paints the portrait of a princess who does not need to be rescued. Princess Leigh-Cheri, of the novel *Still Life with Woodpecker*, is Robbins' heroic version of the princess of traditional quest-romance tales. Each of these writers does not work within the traditional male hero pattern and successfully creates a new female hero. Offred, Sula, and Princess Leigh-Cheri are different types of the female hero; just as Campbell offered the male "hero with a thousand faces," so too is the female hero multifaceted.

If survival is heroic then the main character of Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is full of heroics. Offred, as she is referred to throughout the novel, concentrates on her survival alone. In an oppressive society, Offred is forced to appear as though she has internalized her oppressor in order to survive. Deprived of anything that will remind her of the time that has passed, Offred takes drastic measures to insure her sanity. A pat of butter, which at one time she would have used to cook for herself or for her family, becomes an instrument of survival. She saves butter from her dinner plate to use as lotion for her skin, a remnant of the past that she is now deprived of using. Throughout the novel she repeats her mantra--words that she does not understand but that rather connect her to another human

being who has equally shared her pain. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"; Offred does not even know that her mantra perfectly fits her situation until two-thirds of the way through the novel. When she presses the Commander for the meaning of the phrase he obliges her: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (242). While the phrase may not have been written by her predecessor, it is a signal from Atwood for the reader--survival is the most important thing for Offred. She must live, not only for herself but for her child and the generations to come that must know what has happened.

Throughout the novel, Atwood stresses the importance of children. The cruel system of Handmaids and Wives was created in order to make children. When Offred visits the doctor, for the first time the reader is aware of just how important it is that she conceive. The doctor offers himself to her, reminding her that if she does not reproduce soon she will be sent to the Colonies. When he questions her, "You want a baby don't you?", her answer is an instant "yes" (79). She thinks to herself, "Give me children, or else I die" (79). Offred has stated an essential female heroic quality. The hero as mother. The irony is that Offred is a mother but her child has been taken from her; she can no longer nurture in the way that is true to her nature. Instead, she is a rented womb--a space for other people's children to grow but not for her own. Her oppressors have taken from her the most fundamental of her rights--the right to love her child.

Before she became a handmaid, Offred had a child, a husband, and a life that could be referred to as normal. The loss of her child is acutely felt--the littlest things bring memories flooding back. As she enters her evening bath, Offred remembers her daughter and it is the memory that comforts her and ultimately helps her to stay alive.

I close my eyes; and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child's washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine. This is the age she is when I'm in the bath. She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she's not really a ghost. If she were a ghost she would be the same age always (82).

The loss of her husband, Luke, is nearly as great as the loss of her child. She cannot bear the solitude that the Republic of Gilead has forced upon her. It can be said, then, that the female hero is not a loner. A companion of some kind is necessary--not as a foil to the hero but rather as someone with whom the hero can share her strengths and weaknesses, her desires and fears. Without Luke, Offred is forced to look elsewhere.

The other relationships that Offred cherishes to keep her sanity are her relationship with Luke and her relationship with the handmaid before her, the other Offred. Her relationship with Luke is a

matter of survival. Serena Joy wants a child and she no longer believes that the Commander is fertile, so she allows Offred to sleep with Luke in the hope that a child will be born for her to love. Offred's feelings for Luke deepen; he is the only person that seems to care about her and she is willing to do anything for him--she tells him her name, she even gives up on her dreams to escape. Her realization comes when Ofglen tells her that the "others" could rescue her if she is in grave danger. "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (348). Her desperate need for affection of any kind in a world where she is denied all affection is what leads her to this confession. He will not betray her, she believes, and the knowledge that her life means something to someone else is enough to sustain her.

The relationship she carries on with the "other" Offred is only in her head, but it is a fundamental relationship for Offred. It is necessary for her well being to know that someone else has felt her pain, has known a loss similar to hers, and has escaped, even if it was through suicide. Near the end of the novel, Offred realizes that she has never been alone, that this other handmaid has always been with her, pushing her toward escape for the both of them. "There were always two of us," Offred muses (375). She hears the voice of the other handmaid telling her what she has always known. "There's no one you can protect, your life has value to no one" (375). It is this lack of ability to protect that ties into the other characteristics that make Offred a hero. She is fundamentally a nurturing female, but this society has stripped her of those things that make her a female hero. When she realizes this and leaves with the Angels (on the order of Nick, who tells her they are safe), it is then that she assumes her full role as feminine hero. It is her thoughts that are her heroic deeds, her survival, her careful account of events; these are the legacy of Offred and simultaneously her heroic characteristics.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers quite a different view of the female hero. Like Offred, Sula is a survivor. More importantly, however, Sula is a healer of society. Whether Sula realizes it or not, she bands the people of the Bottom together through their common hate of her. She is acting out of self interest--Sula is looking to heal herself--and along the way she heals the people of the Bottom. Her loss is deeply felt in the interpersonal relationships of the people; they loved and cherished one another more because Sula was among them but without her they fall apart.

As a healer of self, Sula searches to make herself before she can make others. Sula has no children because she is not yet comfortable with herself. In a fight with Eva she exclaims, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Sula understands motherhood better than the true mothers of the novel. Hannah, her own mother, did not understand motherhood, and Sula is not ready to make the same mistakes. In creating herself, however, she creates Nel (her best friend) and the two form

a bond that drives the book to its poignant ending.

Through the loving of each other, Nel and Sula learn to love themselves. It is the love of friendship that sustains the two women and without that friendship neither can survive. In her role, hero as friend, Sula acts in what she believes to be the best interests of her friendship with Nel. Sharing everything is a part of that friendship. Jude, Nel's husband, is one of the things that Sula decides the two should share. Morrison articulates the code by which Sula has defined herself: "There was no other that you could count on . . . there was no self to count on either" (119). But it is a problematic code for Sula because she has come to see "Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). Sula was not looking to hurt Nel when she slept with Jude, but rather to share that experience with her. "She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be--for a woman" (121). It is a woman who could be that true comrade, and Sula knew. Unfortunately, Nel does not realize that this is what Sula was doing until long after she is dead.

Without Nel's friendship, disease strikes at Sula and she dies. Never reconciling with Sula, Nel lives out the remainder of her life alone, without a lover or a friend. It is only at the end of the novel that Nel realizes the pain she has felt for years is the loss of Sula, the loss of a friend. "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude . . . We was girls together . . . O Lord, Sula, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (174). Nel's cry for Sula is the call for the hero to return. The hero cannot return, but the acknowledgement of her existence may be enough to heal Nel.

Sula's heroic qualities surface only through her relationships with others. She is the hero as healer, the hero as friend, and her worth is not recognized until it is too late. Without her, the people of the Bottom fall through the cracks, for the tie that bound them has disintegrated. Without her, Nel cannot function, for the hero as friend is what sustained Nel and, in fact, what sustained the hero Sula herself.

Tom Robbins' crazed love story, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, offers yet another view of the female hero. *Still Life with Woodpecker* is a love story; it is the tale of a misplaced princess and a mad bomber. Like Offred, Princess Leigh-Cheri is a thinker; she is not an active hero in the Campbellian respect. It is not Leigh-Cheri's relationship with Bernard the bomber that defines her as a hero; instead, it is her inner relationship with herself that defines her as a female hero.

Leigh-Cheri recognizes her femininity and society's attempts to squelch it. Before the quest-romance section of the novel begins, the reader is given some background on Leigh-Cheri. She is beautiful, charming, intelligent, and sexually active--so active that she has been pregnant twice by the

age of nineteen. Her first pregnancy was terminated, and when her boyfriend implored her to do the same with the second, she refused.

No more vacuum cleaners, no more steel. They can scrape my heart, they can scrape my brain before they'll scrape my uterus again. It's been over a year since my last D and C, and I still feel raw in there. It feels bitter when it should feel sweet, it feels ragged when it should feel smooth, it feels deep purple when it should feel pink. Death has thrown a stag party in the most sacred room in my body. From now on, that space belongs to life (15).

The pregnancy ends in miscarriage and disgrace for Leigh-Cheri, but it forces her to realize the irresponsibility of her actions. From that moment on she is no longer the damsel-in-distress. She takes hold of her own life and of her ability to create life.

Unlike the typical heroines of the traditional quest-romance, Leigh-Cheri does not need to be rescued, nor does she want to be rescued. "I goddamn refuse to be dragon bait," Leigh-Cheri tells Bernard early on in their relationship. "I'm as capable of rescuing you as you are of rescuing me" (99). Furthermore, she does not look to assume the role of male hero by rescuing Bernard. When he is jailed after visiting her home, she visits him in jail but rather than devising a plan to free him, she chooses to share his confinement by cloistering herself in the attic of the Seattle palace. Leigh-Cheri's relationship with Bernard leads her down the path to heroism; he is the friend, the companion that leads her toward herself.

Early on in the novel, Robbins poses that "there is only one serious question. And that is: Who knows how to make love stay?" (4). It is this question that Leigh-Cheri ponders while soaking up the solitude of the attic. In order to make love stay, one must first find love. Leigh-Cheri, until she meets Bernard, has yet to find love. "I don't have a love life because I've never met a man who knew how to have a love life. Maybe I don't know how, either" (76). As a heroine, Leigh-Cheri recognizes her failings and it is through her relationship with Bernard that she begins to understand the romance of solitude; it is this understanding that leads her to a greater understanding of self.

At the end of the novel, Leigh-Cheri and Bernard are reunited but their lives appear to be over as they have been locked inside a pyramid. The roles of bomber and princess are reversed; she sets the dynamite and throws her body over his in an effort to save him. Neither lose their gender roles as a result of this reversal. Leigh-Cheri's need to protect Bernard is a result of her innate female nature. Protecting Bernard is what she must do--any other choice is not right. Leigh-Cheri realizes that it is this word, this choice, that makes love stay. It is "the word that allows yes, the word that makes no possible . . . In the beginning was the word and the word was CHOICE" (190).

In answering the question of how to make love stay, Leigh-Cheri finds the hero within herself. She is the contemplative hero, driven to action by her desire to make love stay. Her ability to choose love, to choose to save Bernard rather than herself, that makes her heroic. This choice is an intellectual one rather than an active one, and it is the intellectual that is uniquely feminine. Not to say that women heroes are solely intellectual and male heroes solely active, but when it comes down to the choice, the female hero arrives at conclusions through an inner, intellectual struggle rather than an active, physical confrontation.

What can be concluded about the female hero from the three versions of her offered by Atwood, Morrison, and Robbins? The female hero does not need to be active in the way that her male counterpart must be in order to achieve heroic stature. She is a nurturer, a lover of life, a searcher for self, a healer of society, a carrier of knowledge and above all a carrier of life. The capacity to carry life inside her is the one trait that completely separates the female hero from the male hero. Any of the other qualities, while innately female, can be achieved by men. But modern science has not yet found a way to allow men to be the carriers of life, the vessels of knowledge, the connector between past, present, and future. It is the choice to create life that is the ultimate characteristic of the female hero. It is this choice that separates her from the male counterpart and makes her heroic; she can make this choice alone and still retain her femininity. Offred is caught in a world that has twisted this choice and made it her duty to create life; at the same time it does not allow her to see her creation through to its fruition. Sula recognizes her choice and at the same time realizes that she is not yet prepared, that she must make herself before she can properly make another person. Leigh-Cheri also recognizes the choice but adds the love component to the mix as an essential for the creation of life.

While this notion of female hero as creator may not be easily accepted, the question must be asked: If it was accepted once before with a male hero, God the father as hero and creator, then why not once again with female hero as creator? Arnold Wesker purports that women have, in one way or another, shaped the world by being the mother of men. Did the story of Eve evolve out of a distrust of women, "or did the story reflect what had been observed of the female mind--a mind for which I'm personally grateful since it was a mind that ignored God, bit the apple, and released knowledge" (2). It is this ability to shape the minds of men, to create new life that truly defines the female hero.

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