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## The Heroine Archetype

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## The Heroine Archetype

### Cover Page Footnote

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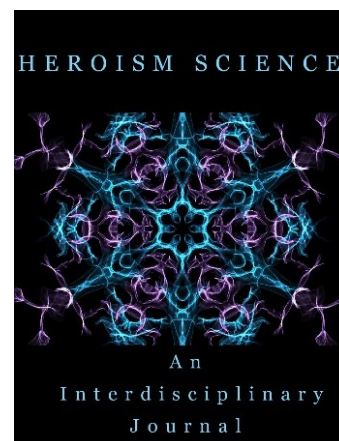
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# The Heroine Archetype

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**ABSTRACT:** Theorists and researchers have documented some of the characteristics of heroes which include humility, endurance, courage, vulnerability, perseverance, and the choice to solve societal problems with moral action. These characteristics help a hero complete a journey derived from Campbell's *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. The journey's cycle begins with a normal state when a call to adventure moves a person to face tests, rely on helpers and transform the self to solve dilemmas. Identifying with a hero as an archetype can activate a psychodynamic and open awareness for insight and emotional strength. Usually, a hero is seen as non-gender specific even though essentially male, as in mankind. Establishing the heroine archetype's characteristics may expand and give balance to the view of the hero-heroine. Feminist studies indicate that relational knowing could be a heroine's unique characteristic. Sophia, a heroine archetype of wisdom, supports this characteristic with her quality of interconnection, and adds generativity to the mix. Current research on women's empowerment affirms the heroine archetype's strength through relational knowing. The heroine's cycle of transformation may include navigating the tests of sexism at work and finding self-care amidst societal stereotypes of women as caretakers for others. The heroine archetype's strengths can help both men and women in achieving balance and power in their lives.

**KEYWORDS:** *the hero archetype, the heroine archetype, relational knowing, feminist studies, archetypal identification, transformation*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Hero and heroine archetypes are particularly powerful in leading people to transcendence, since heroes and heroines embody a range of characteristics leading to wholeness and empowerment. Used metaphorically, the hero's archetypal journey can give humans paths for facing tests in their lives to transform themselves by amplifying characteristics to make their lives work. Research has documented characteristics of hero archetypes and also the application of the hero's journey to heal people emotionally, to assist family communication and to help people develop courage. Other researchers have examined heroes in leadership, as well as different types of heroes. Examining the hero as an archetype taps into Jungian theory that archetypal identification can be powerful in connecting conscious awareness to the Self, the whole of the inner being. This opens the mind to the potential of emotional strength and spiritual insight. The hero archetype is used in literature as being non gender specific. However, through feminist studies, it may be that the heroine archetype has unique characteristics to empower both men and women for wholeness. Before exploring the heroine archetype, research on heroes' characteristics, the hero cycle and applications of this model can set groundwork for understanding how feminist studies and research on women's empowerment could give light to the heroine. This could expand the hero-heroine archetype as a motivator. Heroism studies is enriched by establishing the heroine archetype's unique characteristics to balance the hero archetype.

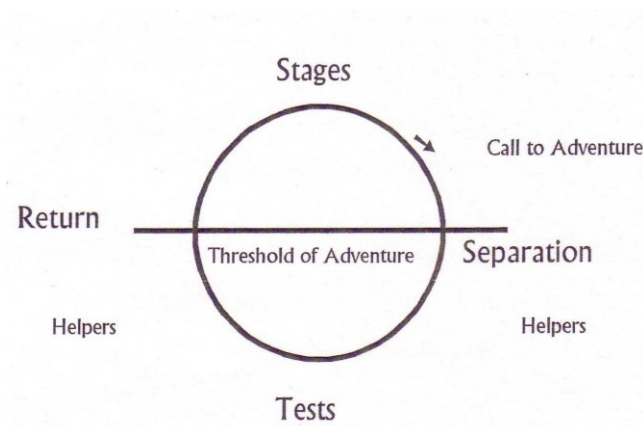
## 2 THE HERO ARCHETYPE

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Heroes go through a journey from a call to adventure to experiencing tests to transform to a new normal. The hero is well established in psychological (Campbell, 2008) humanities (Raglan, 2003), sociological literatures (Frisk, 2019) and leadership studies (Allison & Goethals, 2011). A foundational source on the hero archetype is Joseph Campbell

(2008). In metaphorical terms, he details a hero who engages in self-annulation to metaphorize into a new form, experiencing rebirth. Campbell proposes a cycle for the hero's journey. In this journey there are these stages: a normal state, then the threshold to adventure, tests, helpers for the test, the return and then a new normal. A hero experiences risks, endures hardships and sometimes fights with an opponent (Berstrand & Jasper, 2018). He is an individual who achieves against great odds.

### Figure One: The Hero Cycle



Research has established hero characteristics including humility and endurance (Berstrand & Jasper, 2018), courage, not seeking extrinsic gain (Heiner, 2019), vulnerability, perseverance and courage (Liermann & Norton, 2016). In addition, a hero exemplifies a moral dimension and endures tests to solve a societal problem, through transformation (Fournout, 2019). Sometimes a hero chooses to face adversity, and other times the choice is made for them (Heinman, 2019). The journey of the hero strengthens the soul (Franco et al, 2018) and solves dilemmas that have been insolvable (Fournout, 2017) creating service to humanity (Duffy 2019). The hero's actions might be seen as a right action in a Buddhist perspective (Hahn, 2020).

### 3 APPLYING THE HERO JOURNEY

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Researchers have applied the concept of the hero's journey to inspire youth, to create a therapy approach to help people with adjustment disorders find internal control, to use stress and challenge to increase family communication, and to use storytelling of heroes to encourage healthy choices by teens in the use of substances and in sexual behavior.

Heiner (2019) reports on the increased courage of their participants. In Heiner's study, researchers implemented a heroism curriculum which define heroic acts as voluntary, including risk and service with no expectation of extrinsic gain. Researchers gave a presentation to fifth grade students on heroism. Then, they gave the students an assessment survey and found an increase in self-reported courage.

Duffy (2010) worked within a hero's quest bibliotherapeutic paradigm applying it to people with adjustment disorders. These people had difficulty coping with stressors and transitions. The therapist used hero journeys from literature to help the individual identify with the characters to see transitions as an empowering situation. The researcher documented that those individuals in therapy showed an increase in internal control and a reconceptualization of a traumatic transition into a new perspective of life.

Liermann & Norton (2016) examined an outward-bound experience on youths' family communication. Adolescents participated in an outward-bound three-week program and parents participated in a three-day program. Outward bound philosophy rests on stress and challenge, as in the hero's journey. Participants must rely on helpers in terms of their own characteristics and in peer support. Using a phenomenological interview approach, researchers found youth improved in their communication with their parents and reported they could step back from volatile emotional situations.

Researchers (Nelson, Cordova, Walters, & Szecsy, 2016) found that a curriculum teaching teens to see their life in the hero cycle, could enhance their health empowerment

choices. The storytelling curriculum had teens create a story where they had tests and found helpers to navigate their tests. The aim of the curriculum was to teach substance abuse prevention and HIV prevention attitudes and behaviors. Results from a survey indicated that teens decreased their marijuana use and increased their positive attitudes towards condoms and their ability to talk to a sexual partner about condoms. These results indicated that helping people see their lives as part of a hero's journey, facing tests and looking for helpers, worked to help decision making to protect their health. In another study by Nelson, McClintock, Perez-Ferguson, Nash Shawver, and Thompson, (2008), a storytelling methodology was used to assess the effectiveness of youth development programs. In focus groups, youth created a story of a character (a hero archetype) who attended their program. The hero cycle was followed, where youth were asked to create all the elements of a story: (1) the character before entering the program; (2) the tests they encountered; (3) the helpers assisting them; and then (4) the return to a new normal where they were changed. Through analysis of narrative data, researchers found themes of an effective youth development program including a family environment, basic academic and technology skill training, and the creation of a prosocial peer group to improve school performance.

Together these studies support the use of the hero's journey as an effective intervention to solve varied societal problems for very different groups of people.

## **4 HERO ARCHETYPES**

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A hero is an archetype as it conveys a given group of characteristics. In Jungian thought, identifying with an archetype helps a person embody the characteristics of that archetype (Ravitz, 2022). An archetype is an energy pattern in the unconscious that humans naturally and unconsciously align with to motivate and organize their personality (Fleischer, 2023;

Nelson, 2014). Humans can shift this process to become conscious and choose to identify with an archetype, and this will amplify the archetype's characteristics within the person.

The hero is not only a powerful image to inspire change and transformation, but it can activate a psychodynamic to move people to wholeness. Archetypal identification activates the embodiment of the hero's characteristic (Edinger, 2017). For example, people could identify with their father as a hero archetype and admire their fathers being protective of the family. This person would embody that characteristic and act to protect their own family. Archetypal identification is a natural psychodynamic that happens unconsciously with humans at a young age to organize and motivate their personality. If one moves this dynamic to conscious awareness, it can gain power for transformation. This means that consciously identifying with a hero or heroine archetype will energize this dynamic.

In Jungian thought (Von Franz, 1985) the goal of development is individuation where a person's awareness has access to the whole Self. As a result, the person is no longer reactive to outer events nor is controlled by stereotypes, and self-awareness increases. Archetypal identification can speed this process.

Edinger posits an ego-Self axis (Ravitz, 2022). The ego in his model can be thought of as conscious thought. Self is the whole of the inner world including access to the personal and collective unconscious. Archetypal identification can activate this axis creating an ego-Self animating loop and a fluid consciousness. The inner world becomes spacious and incoming perceptions, memories, emotions, repressed material can be sensed and integrated. This psychodynamic unites the inner world and propels a person towards clarity and wellness.

Understanding of the power of hero or heroine archetypal identification is not only a metaphor for overcoming life's difficulties and reaching one's potential. It is also a tool for inner transformation.



The point of seeing the hero as an archetype expands the possibility of heroes as transformational vehicles. Individuation happens when archetypes become more balanced between the opposites. In Jungian thought (Jung, 1968) there are masculine and feminine archetypes, known as the *anima* and *animus*. The goal in moving to wholeness is to have balance between these. This is reminiscent of the yin and yang. One does not stay on either side but has fluidity between these. Thus, if the heroine archetype has unique characteristics, it would benefit both men and women to document these. People could seek balance with characteristics of both the hero and heroine.

## 5 FEMINIST STUDIES AND THE HEROINE ARCHETYPE

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Researchers in Heroism Science (Franco et al, 2019) rarely talk about the heroine. The hero is presented in a gender inclusive way, giving the message that both women and men have the same cycle in their lives if seen from a hero's journey lens. However, psychologist Murdock (2020) created a heroine journey focusing on the separation from the feminine and the integration of the masculine and feminine, using a Jungian and psychoanalytic perspective. This is a step in the right direction, and feminist studies adds more to a complete picture of the heroine archetype.

Carol Gilligan (Josselson, 2022) was a researcher working with Kohlberg on children's moral decision making. She noticed that the research did not include a girl's moral reasoning and began a career focusing on women's ways of knowing. Over time, Gilligan's work emphasized the importance of voice and deconstructing a patriarchal culture which suppressed relational sensibilities and the ethics of care. Her perception was psychology privileged the autonomous self not humans in connection to others in relationships. Gilligan's foundational work *In a Different Voice* (1993) showcased women's unique voice. Certainly, a heroine archetype would have a unique voice and value relationships.

Koeggel and others' work (2022) supported women's penchant for relational knowing. Koeggel and coauthors define relational theory as seeing humans as shaped by and acting in and through relationships. Further they point out that feminist relational theory includes the value of anti-oppression, the importance of interpersonal relationships, care ethics and emancipatory goals. Again, these values would be championed by a heroine archetype.

Not only feminist theorists and researchers, but some male critical theorists point relational knowledge as central to the human empowerment. Park (1999) created a model knowledge including representational, relational and reflective knowledge. Representational knowledge is factual and conceptual, whereas relational knowledge can translate to community wellbeing and interconnectedness. Relational knowledge then can lead to reflective knowledge.

Further support for relational knowledge as a heroine's approach to navigating tests through relationships comes from post-traumatic growth (PTG) literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Researchers report that some people seen as heroes have experienced trauma in their life (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Allison, Beggan, & Goethals, 2024). The ability of heroes to face tests successfully may stem from the fact they have experienced trauma earlier in life teaching them ways to overcome difficulty. Tests in the hero's journey are traumatic, sometimes even life threatening, as in the loss of a loved one or physical pain in real life. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) documented that trauma could actually catalyze positive changes for some people. They isolated factors in people who grew emotionally after a trauma. Tedeschi notes that traumas challenge people's core beliefs similar to what happens in the hero's cycle when there is a call to adventure from what might be considered normal. PTG can include psychological changes including: flourishing, positive emotions; thriving, coping emotions; positive reinterpretation; a sense of strength from adversity; and

transformational coping. One factor that catalyzes the post traumatic group is social support. This supports the feminist construct of relational knowing.

## 6 TESTS AND EMPOWERMENT

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There are a number of givens in the hero's journey as a metaphor for life. First off change happens, as in the call to adventure from what has been normal. Change is inevitable and can actually be a catalyst for growth and moving into one's full potential. In life there are changes in employment, living situations, relationships, changes in self-awareness for a few. The second inevitable is that there will be tests in life. Challenges, either self-generated or part of the ups and downs of life. The gift of using the metaphor of the hero's journey to understand life's pathways to build resilience and hope in life, is that helpers exist.

Helpers on the journey can be inspiration or support from family, friends, deities or the love of a departed one. Also, inner characteristics, resources and capabilities that a person has can be helpers. A metaphoric example of helpers is in the tale of Cupid and Psyche (Craft, 1996). Venus, Cupid's mother, had the hubris of considering herself the most beautiful goddess, but others thought Psyche was the most beautiful. This story is quite complicated, but at one point Venus sets up many tests to prevent Psyche and Cupid from marrying. One of these is sorting a great mass of mixed wheat, barley, poppyseed, chickpeas, lentils and beans. A kind ant calls all of his friends and helps Psyche complete this impossible test. For a hero or heroine to successfully face tests, one would need to look for helpers like Psyche found the ants.

To truly understand the hero or heroine cycle, one has to find the helpers to face impossible tests. Learning the characteristics of both heroes and heroines can give a full range of ways to navigate life by looking for helpers around.

## 7 SOPHIA: THE HEROINE ARCHETYPE OF INTERCONNECTION

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Sophia is a good choice as a meta-archetype for the heroine. Maria von Franz (Robertson, 1998; Von Franz, 1985) calls her the archetypal mundus, which means she is the first archetype that all others stem from. Her name is derived from the Greek word *Sophos* meaning wisdom (Matthews, 1991). In the Gnostic gospels she is the creator (Christ, 2022). Sophia personifies interconnection, as the Gnostics creator, generated life out of herself, not looking down from the heavens above. She is the spirit in matter, not separate but interconnected. She is also in literature as a middle eastern goddess (Matthews, 1991), and some say she is Jehovah's mother. As such she is generative, creating and sustaining life. Generativity allows one to keep one's energy alive and to inspire others. Sophia as an example of an archetypal heroine, supports relational knowing and generativity.

## 8 THE HEROINE SHIELD OF THE SELF

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The Heroine Archetype may differ in some dimensions from the hero particularly since societal sexism and stereotypes keep women in certain roles. The heroine archetype could reveal helpers to navigate these tests. It should also be noted that men need to navigate stereotypes of masculinity. Pulling out the heroine archetypes characteristics could help men find balance as well. Recent research (Nahshi & Dziwak, 2024) on women's empowerment gives information about how the heroine archetype accesses helpers. Below are two studies that researched how women flourished and succeeded.

Dziwak wanted to find out how women working in Latin American corporations who scored high on the Secure Flourishing Index (SFI) reported that they created flourishing in their lives. Dziwak's thematic analysis of narratives showed that these women had the ability to set boundaries and were self-aware and had skills of self-expression. These women also

relied on supportive relationships. They created wellbeing by speaking up to balance work, family and their own health. She found that women moved into an authentic self-identity.

Nafshi in her study of Iron Moms who were women with children at home and who competed in Iron Man competitions. An Iron Man competition is a triathlon consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a marathon 26.22-mile run. She interviewed women with children who had competed in an Iron Man and were currently training for one. From her narrative interviews she found themes of strong body and mind, inspiration from children, spouses and friends, love of sport and finding joy in meeting challenges by juggling responsibilities and putting the self-first. She found that women reported the skill of managing tensions, such as training and family responsibilities.

These data give a view of how women create empowerment in their lives, in essence to become heroines. Fundamental to this was women's self-awareness. Through this awareness, they put themselves first, which became a helper on their journey. Their sense of self became a protective shield to use in the tests they faced. They did this by facing challenges to manage the tensions in their life between their jobs or training and family and self. They also spent time with self-care to build a strong body and mind to increase their wellbeing. They focused on activities that gave them joy. These changes were accomplished by tapping interconnections in their relationships.

Women find themselves with many societal expectations to put others first and to take differential roles in the face of sexism. In each of these studies, the women to put themselves first, not to surrender their roles as mother, daughters, friends or community members, but to make themselves a priority in this constellation. This might be seen as the creation of a new normal in the heroine journey cycle.

The choice to make themselves a priority creates a shield, The Shield of the Self to give them perspective to make choice from internal and external influences. What allows a

woman to do this is relying on support, the gift of relational knowledge and awareness of interconnection. Heroines in these studies show that the heroine seeks power with, not power over. She uses her strength of interconnection to do this. She develops a strong mind and body, the courage to face challenges and nurtures a network of family and others to find strength.

## 9 CONCLUSION

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In the review of literature, heroes' qualities were established including humility, endurance, courage, vulnerability, perseverance, the choice to face societal problems and solve these dilemmas with moral action. Educators, therapists and wilderness leaders have used the hero journey metaphor to help young people improve communication with their parents and to develop courage. Therapeutic applications helped individuals to increase internal control and a develop a healthy perspective of life. Further curriculum based on the hero cycle helped teens make healthy choices. A common theme is the metamorphosis of the person through the hero journey to experience a transformation to a new normal that helps themselves and their community. A person's life changes from the current normal, tests abound, and helps emerge to help navigation of tests. The person has changed and there is a new normal.

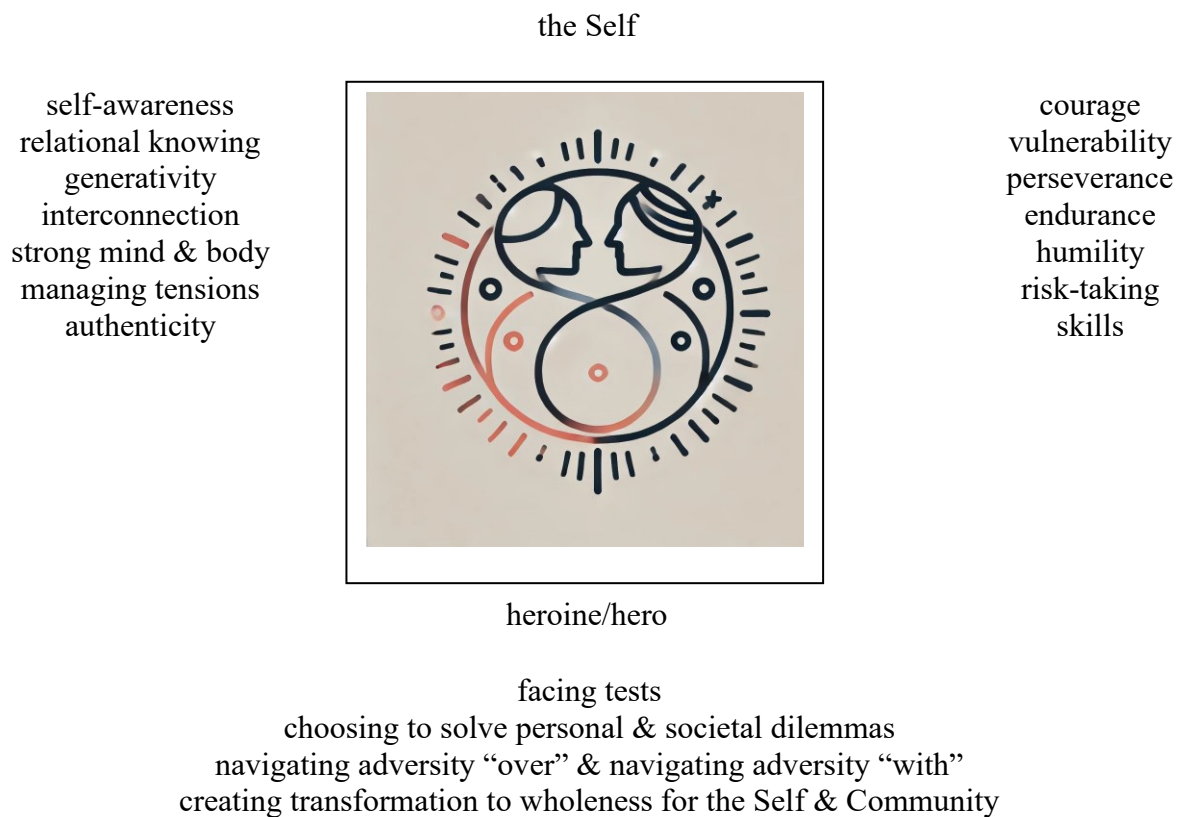
In Jungian theory of archetypes, the hero or heroine can be seen as an archetype who personifies certain characteristics. By identifying with an archetype, a person strengthens those characteristics within themselves. Feminist studies shine the light on relational knowing, which is strengthened by the Sophia archetype with her quality of interconnection. The heroine archetype can add these qualities to heroic studies. Often the hero is seen as achieving and defeating adversity. However, the heroine may balance this view with valuing

relationships. The heroine works with others, not by defeating others. She works within a context, as opposed to mastering a context.

In the heroine journey the call to adventure might be women's self-awareness that meeting women's stereotypes and facing sexism is not working. The test she has to navigate is how to put herself first for a strong mind and body. Her helpers would be relationally knowing to transform herself into a new normal to fulfill her many roles and find joy. She embodies generativity to find wellbeing and joy for herself while fulfilling her multiple roles. These characteristics can be strengthened for both men and women in meeting tests as a hero and heroine to strengthen themselves and others.

The graphic below shows the integration of the hero and heroine characteristics towards a balanced archetype.

Figure Two: The Hero/Heroine Integration Archetype  
Original art by Denise Dziwak, Generated by AI ChatGP3



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## 11 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

*The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*