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Heroic Feminism in James Cameron's *Titanic*

by Shannon Grilli

(Honors English 1154)

The Assignment: This paper examines the mythic archetypes in the James Cameron film *Titanic* as they are presented in Linda Seger's essay, "Creating the Myth".

According to Linda Seger in her essay *Creating the Myth*, "Myths are the common stories at the root of our universal experience. [...] underneath it all, it's the same story, drawn from the same experiences [...] – and the most successful films contain these universal experiences" (317). Following this logic, it is no wonder that the 1997 film *Titanic* was such an enormous box office success; for the archetypal characters that Seger describes in her essay are readily apparent in the James Cameron film. The film's basic storyline, when viewed in comparison to Seger's list of "story beats" (318-321), can be said to almost completely adhere to her definition of the traditional "hero myth", though it also incorporates many elements of what she has termed the "healing myth". When viewed in this light, *Titanic* becomes much more than a simple film about tragic lovers aboard a doomed ocean liner. Instead, it may be described as one woman's heroic journey toward independence and spiritual rebirth.

Cameron does manage to make his version of the hero myth unique, however, for while audiences have generally been conditioned to expect a male character as the subject of such epic story telling, the hero in this case is not only of the "gentle" sex, but is the very model of femininity and womanly virtue for the time period in which the film is set. The delicate breeding, refined manners and subordinate mannerisms that are outwardly personified by the character of Rose DeWitt Bukater seem at first to make her more comparable to the "damsel in distress" role of the female that is so stereotypical of the genre itself. Indeed, because of the stigma associated with such a character, it is conceivable that many may overlook the valiant nature of the role played by Kate Winslet, and would instead crown Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Jack Dawson, as the champion of the story. After all, Jack seems to better epitomize what we have come to expect from a heroic underdog. He comes from an impoverished background, receives his call to adventure and overcomes obstacles to win the "princess". He even has his own "helper" in the form of Molly Brown, who guides him through the hostile and exclusive atmosphere of the upper-class dinner party. But for all the traits Jack seems to share with the classic hero, he arguably remains, in the end, a character too static and consistent in his attitudes and behaviors to have experienced the kind of transformation that is imperative in Seger's definition. The Jack we meet in the beginning of the film is, essentially, the same Jack who perishes in the icy ocean at the end of the film. In the end, it is Rose who undergoes the greater metamorphosis as she completely re-evaluates the course of her life, and totally redefines herself.

In her breakdown of the basic structure of the "hero myth", Linda Seger claims that, "In most hero stories, the hero is introduced in ordinary surroundings, in a mundane world, doing ordinary things" (318). When we first meet the young Rose she is preparing to board the *Titanic*; hardly a mundane activity for most ordinary people, but the audience can sense, thanks to her vocal ambivalence in relation to the ship's size, as well as her generally disenchanting facial expressions, that participating in such extravagant activities has become something of a routine in her young life. Her proper, yet somewhat curt behavior towards both her mother and her fiancé further illustrates what ordinary life is like for Rose, while it also begins to hint at her inner frustrations with her restrictive lifestyle. Thanks to voice over narration during this first scene, the audience comes to

understand that while outwardly Rose appears to be the shining example of a proper Edwardian lady, on the inside she is screaming to break free. Furthermore, in the film's early stages, other clues are given to suggest that Rose is struggling to push the boundaries assigned to her station in life. Her habit of smoking at the table, despite her mother's protest, and the way in which she demurely crosses the boundaries of tasteful conversation with her reference to Freud's theories regarding male genitalia, both hint that there is much more to Rose than meets the eye. The Rose that exists beneath the surface does not match the image projected to the world and therefore she is, as Seger would put it, "broken". The ship, then, becomes the vessel (no pun intended) by which she will make both a physical and mental journey towards healing. For as the ship sails into the ocean, it becomes an island removed from civilization and as such, is the best form of exile from the confines of society she could possibly hope for.

The catalyst, then, that will set her transformation into motion, must be her suicide attempt, for not only does it demonstrate the gravity of her mental anguish, but it introduces us to Jack, who will act as the main teacher or guide for Rose throughout the film. Love, as *Creating the Myth* points out, is "both a healing force and a reward" (321). The love that grows between Jack and Rose in the film is indeed important, for it serves as the emotional catalyst for the other transformations in her character. As important as love is in opening Rose's eyes to alternative possibilities, the life lessons she learns from Jack are ultimately the means by which she is able to break away from her former existence. The spitting scene, despite its comic relief, is significant in that it represents Rose's first attempt to bend the gender roles for appropriate behavior. Indulging in un-lady-like behaviors such as spitting, fantasizing about riding a horse with a leg on *each* side, and, later, learning how to swing an axe, all break the rules of etiquette that she is accustomed to and the bonds of conventional femininity begin to weaken. Furthermore, Jack helps her to overcome the boundaries of class division, whether through his brutally honest drawings, their journey to the third-class party (where she further participates in such un-lady-like behavior as drinking, smoking, and wild dancing) and even a journey into the boiler room and connecting cargo hold; this latter adventure bears a striking resemblance to the journey into hell or the underworld that factors prominently in so many classical and medieval epics.

Like any good hero, though, Rose has daunting obstacles to overcome in her quest for freedom and love, and she stumbles more than once. The scene immediately following her attempted suicide, in which Cal gives her the diamond necklace, serves as a powerful deterrent to any ideas she might have of leaving him. Wealth, or lack of it, is undeniably a major obstacle that Rose must learn to overcome, for as we come to know, Rose and her mother have no assets of their own, despite their lavish lifestyle, and Rose's marriage to Cal is the means by which they can maintain appearances. The symbolism attached to Rose being painfully laced into her corset by her caustic mother can hardly be ignored in this scene as she is once again imprisoned by societal expectations. This scene is countered later, after she makes the decision to stay with Jack and has her portrait drawn, not just without her corset, but without any clothes at all. She has, in theory, put herself on a level with the poor French women in his sketchbook, and her nudity is the emancipation of her body as well as her mind. Afterwards, the dress she wears for the rest of the film is the most unrestrictive of her costumes, and the color is not insignificant either, for lavender, as mentioned earlier, is a color her mother detests.

Rose's "black moment" occurs when Cal has Jack arrested for stealing the necklace and her trust of him is tested. For a time, it seems as though she might return to her old lifestyle, but her transformation has progressed too far and she can no longer tolerate the behavior of, nor buy into the mentality of upper-class society. She realizes her mistake, repents, and then embarks on the most physically challenging leg of her quest. This time, she is the one who must save Jack, and her transformation into a heroic figure finally shows itself. This is the point in which Seger would say she, "seizes the sword and takes possession of the treasure" (5), though in Rose's case, the "sword" is

the axe she must use to free Jack, and the “treasure” is love and the chance for a new life.

The last obstacle to overcome is obviously the sinking of the ship, for it is the outcome of that trial that will determine whether Rose can survive long enough to actually start her new life, or if it will be extinguished as soon as it has begun. By giving up her spot on the lifeboat, Rose passes the final test of her loyalty to Jack and to love, for she has grown enough to take an active hand in her life and follow her heart. The grueling physical task of trying to survive the sinking is not half as hard as the decision to undertake it, but in both cases, her courage is tested to the utmost. Finally, having survived in the freezing water long enough to be rescued by the lifeboat, Rose has to make the heartbreaking decision to let go of Jack in order to save herself. Rose’s last step in her transformation has to be done without the aid of her beloved helper. While it was Jack who first saved her from an icy death in the suicide scene, this time, Rose must save herself from the same fate, and as she blows the whistle that will bring the lifeboat back, she has passed the final test in her journey and the audience recognizes that she has come full circle in her quest. The inward screaming of her soul that was yearning to break free seems almost to find its long awaited release in the whistle’s piercing shriek. Her ultimate rebirth occurs when she arrives safely in America and the clerk asks her for her name. Rose DeWitt Bukater’s life is over, but Rose Dawson’s is just beginning.

With *Titanic*, then, Cameron has found a way to conform to the successful clichés and archetypes of popular mythology, while still finding a way to make his story unique. By combining elements of the “hero myth” and “healing myth” as defined by Linda Seger, the film conforms to the highly successful formula that guarantees an empathetic response from its viewers, while presenting issues, such as feminism, that make it both refreshing and appealing to a modern audience. Thanks to the combination of a tried-and-true formula, and a creative spin, Cameron was able to produce a film that reached mythic proportions in its own right.

Work Cited

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