

Ang Lee's Hulk: Representations of the Hero Cycle

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Ang Lee's 2003 film *Hulk* contains textual elements that reflect the developmental hero cycle described by Joseph L. Henderson in his contribution to Carl Gustav Jung's final work, *Man and his Symbols*, which is a layman's description of symbology as it relates to the unconscious. Henderson writes that there are four basic types of hero, which he characterizes based on their appearance in four myths of the Native-American Winnebago tribe. He introduces us to the stories of Trickster (Coyote), Hare, Red Horn, and The Twins (103-106). Ang Lee's representation of the Hulk fits squarely into this developmental system of archetypes.

In *Hulk*, the four aspects of the hero cycle appear in the order described by Henderson. He writes that Trickster "has the mentality of an infant... Lacking any purpose... he is cruel, cynical, and unfeeling (Jung, et al. 103-104)." [1] Our first glimpse of the monstrous Hulk is in Bruce Banner's lab, where deep anger over childhood events, and a surface, ephemeral threat of losing his former lover to a man he despises, cause him to become enraged. He transforms into the Hulk for the first time and trashes his lab, the place where his mind does its work, and escapes into the night with no thought of the consequences.

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Trickster is the first version of the hero, unsocialized, totally wild and unreasonable. This hero has not yet learned the dangers of his powers, and typically brings new things to man or to the universe. Scandinavian cultures refer to fire as Loki's gift, after the Norse trickster god. Similarly Ture, an African trickster god, stole fire from his uncles and gave it to man. Coyote, the Winnebago trickster god, threw the stars into the sky as a joke. In Greek mythology, the Titan Prometheus brought fire to man against the wishes of Zeus, thereby bringing them science and art, but also war. [2]

Of interest in understanding Trickster is neurologist Oliver Sacks' account of Temple Grandin and her autism in his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Temple recalls her childhood with an unusually intense clarity. Specifically, Temple relates early memories where she began to stiffen in her mother's arms at a young age, eventually clawing her "like a trapped animal" trying to break free of her (Sacks, 253-254). Temple relates the overwhelming sensory load that she was cognizant of at a young age, and the "hyperfocus" she developed to compensate for the never-ending barrage of images, sounds, and tactile inputs. We see here something informative of the hero cycle in our human development; the tantrums and clever misbehavior of young children are very much like the mischievous but resourceful trickster figures, able to change the world, but not socialized enough to do it in a way that others would consider acceptable.

The next time that we see the Hulk, he saves Betty Ross, his former lover closely resembling his mother, from a pack of monsters sent to kill her by his mysterious and malevolent father. The bestial Hulk seeks out his feminine counterpart, and defends her from attacks sent by his father, the conscious creator of Bruce Banner's power. In this second stage of the hero cycle, typified by Hare, Bruce/Hulk is no longer lashing out in random fury, but is acting out of love and compassion, seeking to defend those that he identifies with despite the terrible injuries that he endures in doing so. "One can see that he is becoming a socialized being, correcting the instinctual and infantile urges found in Trickster (Jung, et al 105)." This sacrificing hero gives everything to save those around him, without thought or concern for his own life. Hare emerges in the Winnebago tradition when Coyote leads his people to a new world, dying in the process, and becoming Hare. Hulk puts himself in harm's way to defend those that he cares for, standing between the beasts and the object of his affection, taking her death onto himself, stumbling to a rest beside a pool of water after the fight. When he awakes as Bruce, he is no longer the same, now revealed to be dangerous to those around him, a sign that he is no longer the sacrificing hero, but something more unpredictable.

While each of the other stations of the hero cycle are present in this depiction, Hulk can be most closely associated with the third evolution. In the *Hulk* we have a scientist, an exceptional thinker, who is assisted in his need by a superhuman power of frightening proportions. Similarly Henderson writes of Red Horn that "He has a powerful companion in the form of a thunderbird called 'Storms-as-he-walks,' whose strength compensates for whatever weakness Red Horn may display (Jung, *Man* 105-106)." The thunderbird is that creature in native American plains tribe traditions whose presence causes the thunderstorm, that awe-inspiring power that brings forth tornadoes, thunder, lightning and driving rain. While Red Horn himself is an exceptional person, able to defeat giants by either cleverness or by strength (Jung, *Man* 105-106), the thunderbird is a force beyond all control, possessed of immense power but little focus or discrimination. The Hulk fills this role for Bruce Banner, saving him from physical harm but also distancing him from those he cares for and

tearing him away from the life he knows. [3]

We witness the power of the Hulk to defend Bruce Banner in this way when he is personally defenseless. As he is sleeping, Bruce is emotionally attacked by malevolent outside forces. He has been imprisoned in a sensory deprivation tank in order to painfully control his dreams in an attempt to "get a piece of him." The Hulk emerges, thunderbird-like, to free the frail, human Bruce and return him to his feminine redeemer, Betty.

It is during this incarnation that the Hulk has his transformative falling scene from atop a bridge [4]. The Hulk chooses to jump aboard a jet-fighter that is spiraling out of control and which is threatening innocent bystanders on the Golden Gate bridge. The pilot of the jet is on a mission to destroy the Hulk, but has been unable to do so, and has inadvertently endangered the innocent people on the bridge. Once Hulk averts this disaster and the pilot has regained control, he is ordered to drag the Hulk upward, toward the edge of the atmosphere to a height where it is thought that the thin air may injure him. On the trip up, the pilot loses control and the Hulk must push off of the jet in order to avoid sharing its fate in being flung off into space.

The Hulk plummets miles back to earth in reverie. He dreams that he is Bruce Banner, wrapped in a towel after a shower, trying to shave before a mirror that is clouded with steam. Bruce becomes befuddled, and wipes a bit of the steam away with his forefinger. He sees something looking back at him, and our perspective is reversed so that we are looking at Bruce from behind the Hulk, who smashes through the glass and becomes one with Bruce in a moment of reconciliation.

Henderson describes something very much like this regarding the final station of the hero. "[The Twins] are essentially human and together constitute a single person. Originally united ... they belong together, and it is necessary -though exceedingly difficult- to reunite them (Jung, et al 106)." After this point we can see that Bruce has become more comfortable with his remarkable abilities as the Hulk.

Hulk comes back to earth in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, and is embedded deep in the earth under the mud of the bay by the impact. After some time he is able to struggle free of the muck and break the surface. At his emergence, soldiers and police and other strange men appear and threaten him. Towering over them, covered in the slime and mud that he clawed through to survive, he prepares to defend himself by destroying his attackers, stopping short only at the appearance of Betty Ross (Jennifer Connelly), the woman he loves. She approaches and beckons to him, and he goes to her, shrinking as he goes until he appears frail and small as he falls into her arms.

It is plain that Bruce Banner/Hulk is being redeemed here. In attempting to save those on the bridge, the Hulk makes a sacrifice of his own safety, unwittingly submitting himself to extraction from the world that he knows, being drawn to a cold and austere perspective that is painful but also freeing. He is plunged back into the earth from which he came, to struggle in the muck and possibly to die there. It is only because of the superhuman strength that his hidden monster-self possesses that he is able to break free of the trap that he has fallen into. Without access to the incredible powers that are possessed by the darker side of his nature, Bruce Banner would have died in this event. Having united The Twins, he is reborn into the world, able to check anger with compassion and reason, and to face the true forces that bind him.

These instantiations of the hero archetypes occur in the order that Henderson lays out in his developmental analysis of the hero. Each of the literal incarnations of the supporting hero motifs occur within the framework of the Red Horn-Storms-as-He Walks -like Banner/Hulk pairing. We are given a complete tour of each of the four stations of the Hero myth, leading to Bruce's full embrace and integration of his dark side. United, he is ready to undertake his last struggle, to break free of his father's dangerous influence.

We follow the Hulk through a climactic encounter with his father, who through a series of incidents, accidental and deliberate, has brought the fearsome creature into existence. Locked in combat, the Hulk's father tells Hulk that he intends to steal his power, and that the more Hulk fights him, the stronger he gets. It is a trick, one that Bruce has fallen for his whole life. Hulk stops for a moment to consider this and is trapped in deep ice as his father draws his energy away from him. Watching remotely, Betty announces that the pair are "absorbing all of the energy out of the area".

Deciding that his anger is too great to remain unexpressed, and seeing that by holding it inside he becomes paralyzed, Hulk lets loose with all his rage, his limitless anger inflates his energy-thieving father (Nick Nolte) to unsustainable proportions, overburdening him and causing him to beg for the Hulk to stop imparting this emotional energy to him.

At this moment, General Ross (Sam Elliot) intones the word "Release.", and a nuclear weapon is dropped on the scene, ending the confrontation between father and son. We then witness an internal scene of reconciliation with his father from within the Hulk's mind as he changes back into Bruce while floating in the suddenly liquid lake, a happy memory of Bruce's father tucking him in to sleep as a toddler, indicating that he has found peace with his feelings about his father.

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Works Cited

Jung, Carl G., et al. *Man and his Symbols*. New York: Dell, 1964.

Hulk. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Eric Bana, Jennifer Connelly, Sam Elliott, Josh Lucas, Nick Nolte. Universal/Marvel 2003.

Notes

1.

2. The Chinese trickster god Sun Wukong (Monkey King) eats all of the peaches from the forbidden tree of immortality in the Jade Emperor's garden and escapes, unable to be caught. Jade Emperor cannot bring Sun Wukong under control, and eventually receives aid from Buddha, trapping the monkey god in Five Finger Mountain. Upon his release, he is transformed, later aiding travelers in Shi Nai'an's *Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh*. Sun Wukong is closely related to the Hindu monkey god Hanuman.

3. During this third appearance of the Hulk, General Ross is called by the code-name "T-bird", perhaps a clue from the makers of the film regarding the inspiration for the imagery we are seeing.

4. During the sequence that leads to the falling scene, General Ross (Sam Elliot) gives us a clue what is going on, saying "Angry Man is unsecure ... "

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