

FEMALE PROTAGONISTS: Whoa, Man... You're Writing Her All Wrong!

By: Robert Piluso | September 17, 2015

At some point, many male screenwriters throw up their hands and surrender. They stop bothering to imbue the same blood, sweat, bones and guts into their female characters that they do with their male characters. Instead, male-written screenplays feature the following pantheon of poorly conceived familiar [character stereo/archetypes](#): Gold-Hearted Whore (*Pretty Woman*), Femme Fatale (*Basic Instinct*), Domineering/Automatically Disapproving Mother (*Titanic*), Hot Chick with Big Gun (*Tomb Raider*), and “best” of all, Double-D/2-Dimensional Girlfriend.

Fact: This pisses off a lot of talented actresses—to say nothing of female moviegoers. (And the Suits wonder why grosses are so low.) Fact: Each year, the Academy scrounges the hundreds of annual releases for five roles that are well-written enough to be well-played enough to warrant five nominations for Best Actress. Fact: Every day, somewhere in Tinseltown, a talented actress asks, “Sooooo, my character, she’s about to make herself a sandwich for lunch ... *why* does she take her top off?”

In an attempt to shed some light on (as opposed to remove articles of clothing from) [female protagonists](#), here is a compilation of what I call “arc-types.” Now, these greatly differ from the clichéd, revolting *archetypes* listed above. Each arc-type is defined according to the character arc undergone by a female protagonist during the movie’s narrative. Unlike the five clichéd archetypes above, these five female character arc-types are not defined by the woman’s relationship to the main male character, but by the woman’s relationship of and with herself as an autonomous, fully-formed human being. Imagine!

1. The Heroine Evolving Toward Self-Actualization

The first three-quarters of *Million Dollar Baby* presents an account of a young woman seeking to achieve what she has always wanted to be: a prize boxer. She always works hard. She always tries to do right by others—even when everybody else is doing wrong by her. Assisted by Clint Eastwood’s [mentorship](#) (what better kind is there?), Maggie (Hilary Swank) attains happiness as a superwoman in the ring ... that is, until her life tragically turns to s**t in the film’s last act. Nevertheless, she attained her life goal of becoming a boxer.

2. The Heroine Devolving Toward Self-Hell

Rosemary’s Baby features one of the all-time great character arcs—male or female. Rosemary (Mia Farrow) has a great husband, a great life, and a great new apartment. She wants to be a mom. She gets pregnant. Problem solved, right? Paradise found? Not really: In nine months, her sanity crumbles as everyone she knows, loves, and trusts either dies strangely or seemingly betrays her. Is it all “just hormones”... or is something “really wrong going on here?” In becoming her perfect self (a mother), Rosemary loses herself, insofar as she loses her mind.

3. The Heroine Trapped In Self-Imposed Psychological Prison

As Good As It Gets centers around two complementary narratives that intersect with a romance between the respective protagonists. Both narratives involve people (one male and old, one female and young) who inhabit self-imposed prisons of narcissistically-validated lovelessness. Working as a waitress full-time, Carol (Helen Hunt) is a single mother to a chronically-ill child. At the end of every day, being so exhausted, Carol collapses into an angry pity for herself as opposed to seeking out a life, a love, of her own apart from her family. When OCD-afflicted, super-rich author Melvin (“buys a doctor” for Carol’s son—enabling her child’s improved health henceforth—Carol at long last has to look inward and realize

that she has no identity apart from being a put-upon, selfless mom. She's forgotten how to love and how to let herself be loved. The movie's second half serves the heroine's rediscovery of her romantic, sexual, sentimental, selfish self. (Selfishness isn't always psychologically unhealthy.)

4. The Heroine Trapped In Social Prison

Sometimes, people are victimized not by other people, but by the times. Lady Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) from *Shakespeare In Love* is such a character. Her love of the theatre—specifically her love of the work by hot, young playwright Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes)—demands that she exercise her soul, that she be a player and not merely a Lady who sits around all day in a locked room. However, by edict of Elizabethan law, women weren't allowed to appear on stage. So, Viola sneaks out of her house dressed up like a boy to win the part of Romeo in Will's new play. Her cross-dressing symbolizes the social prison she is forced to navigate throughout the movie. Later, due to her high social status and the according social expectations, she is prohibited from marrying her true love, Will, and instead gets sold (by her parents) into wedlock with the boorish Lord Wessex (Colin Firth—*Bridget Jones's* Prince Charming is Viola's boor—go figure). In the end, love doesn't conquer all, but perhaps in becoming the stuff of an enduring drama, love does transcend history. For the actor, Viola, perhaps that's enough. Heck of an arc—it even won the Oscar® for Best Actress and Best Original Screenplay.

5. The Heroine Trapped In Circumstantial Prison

Apparently, a contemporary setting does not guarantee the chance to chase after one's soul's desire. *Erin Brockovich* stars a single mother (Julia Roberts) who finds herself with the responsibilities of taking care of her bunch of kids, long hours at an increasingly demanding job, an oft ethically-shortsighted boss, working-class wages, a mortgage, various mounting bills, the cost of food, and to top it all off, an attention-starved biker boyfriend. Maybe this arc-type is just a variation on The Heroine Trapped in Social Prison—today, it's hard to find many people, male or female, who are not laden by these semi-imprisoning circumstances. Nonetheless, Erin is determined to get by ... and she does. Furthermore, on her way she takes the time to stop and empathize with others when nobody else cares to do so—thus, she succeeds in her mission to topple the Big Company (Pacific Gas & Electric) causing cancer in multiple families. Director Steven Soderbergh leaves Erin's arc-type's narrative open-ended: "Was winning out over the Big Company worth the personal price she paid—lost time with her children, plus a lost love? Can a big check make up for it?" The audience has to answer that for themselves—males and females alike.