

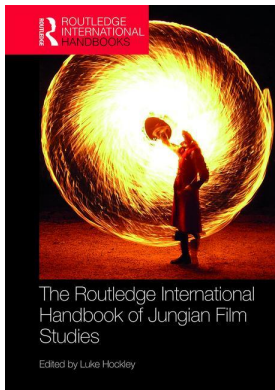
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### **The Outsider protagonist in American film**

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# THE OUTSIDER PROTAGONIST IN AMERICAN FILM

*Glen Slater*

## Introduction

Cinema is art that permeates the everyday world, and American cinema has in no small part defined this art. Hollywood films instill a widely recognized narrative of human experience. This narrative comes in various shades of what is a single dominant theme: a heroic encounter with extreme inner challenges and outer obstacles, most often ending in success against the odds. It is a way of imagining life, reflecting the history and character of the American nation, where tradition and tribe are repeatedly left for personal self-making, perpetually poised to become a divinely sanctioned quest. Hollywood has thereby shaped and promoted a decidedly American condensation of a wider Western pursuit of liberty and the elevation of willful endeavor.

In psychological terms American cinema reflects the growth of an egocentric stance that draws both admiration and condemnation from the rest of the world. This stance sets up great tensions and oppositions in the psyche, reflected in a lengthy roster of memorable screen heroes and villains, battles against the forces of darkness, personal victories over authority, and elevation of the gifted and unique over the unremarkable. On the screen and in the psyche we see a distinct conundrum playing out: how to recover significance and meaning when separated from the past, nature and the wider reaches of being? How to live for one's self while furthering the deeper human story? For better or worse America has become the great Western experiment in the face of this conundrum, and its movies portray this effort. The heroic self-making of the American film protagonist becomes a kind of ideal encounter with the tumult of life. They epitomize the agency that has always defined this dramatic position, but do more than reiterate an archetypal root of storytelling. When these characterizations do not fall into stereotype, which they often do, they reflect a nuanced negotiation of modern existence. We study these characters to find out who we are, and we are drawn to them by far more than their willful drive.

In more complex and layered expressions, screen protagonists are shaped not only by conscious striving, but also far more by the backstory of their lives, by hidden flaws and desires, by other characters and unforeseen events. Films are able to reveal significant depths of character, explore the hand of fate and show us how timeless archetypal patterns continue to shape contemporary events. When the thoroughly imagistic, symbolic qualities that define a well-made

film are added, we find ourselves standing in a vast field of potential psychological insight. A concentration of these wider considerations can be found in a certain type of American screen protagonist, the *outsider*, that has gained prominence in more recent decades and offers both a more defined window onto the American psyche and a more fitting exemplification of what Jung meant by the individuation process.

We begin this attempt to convey something of the essence of American film with two main premises. The first, is that Hollywood-derived screen stories epitomize a critical feature of the modern Western psycho-cultural situation, in which the individual, estranged from traditional sources of meaning and behavioral guidelines, negotiates inner and outer encumbrances to discover a unique and ultimately meaningful path. The second premise is framed by Jung's model of individuation and related concepts that provide a fitting means to comprehend these stories, not only in terms of their dramatic elements, but also their imagistic, cinematic presentation. Further, the Jungian approach prompts us to translate these considerations into an understanding of the key psychological tasks that confront us at various historical moments. This approach exemplifies a 'hermeneutics of amplification' (Frederickson, 2001, p. 30), pertaining more generally to a Jungian 'hermeneutics of hope' (Jones, 2003), which discerns a goal or purpose – a teleology – within the imagery and thematic architecture of the film. It emphasizes the way 'neurotic symptoms and symbolic art draw attention to the fact that a change of conscious standpoint is necessary' (Frederickson, 2001, p. 35). Frederickson underscores this shift in awareness when he suggests that amplification is not 'a "merely academic" activity.... If it is not taken up by a felt necessity, it is better left alone' (p. 40). As Izod describes the process, 'it elaborates the reading of characters, plots, settings and images in a given movie or screen drama by extending it through comparison with the language and symbolism of pre-existent texts' (2001, p. 7), especially by 'setting them against the backdrop of legends and myths both ancient and modern' (p. 7). This exposure of psychic patterns and propensities also attunes us to the psyche's innate self-healing tendency, that can be detected at both personal and collective levels. The perspective employs what Jung called the *synthetic* or *constructive method* of interpretation, which he contrasts with the reductive mode (1921, p. 701). The outsider protagonist takes the story from here.

### **Light through darkness**

Innovative striving, personal reinvention and the transcendence of external limitations define the American experience. This forthright face of the world's movement west is captured in ideas of America as the New World, the land of opportunity and the frontier. Baudrillard has called this movement 'a violent extraversion' and a 'pragmatic exotericism' (1988, p. 75). As the image-making capital of this frontier, Hollywood sits, geographically and culturally, at the very edge of the movement west and has galvanized its cinematic prominence with *The Western* as its signature genre. However, this is only half of America's story. The other half contains dark historical episodes and deep national wounds: a decimation of indigenous peoples, bloody battles for independence and unity, a major segment of its population starting out enslaved, fraught struggles for civil rights and women's rights, assassinations of masterful and promising leaders, Vietnam, and 9/11. These events/movements *also* underlie the American character and shape its screen protagonists. Hollywood's most poignant and critically embraced characters reflect both sides of this American situation, prompting a reclamation of the dark shadows that lie behind the 'shining city on a hill.' Providing psychic containers for what those around them cannot hold, these characters exemplify the imperative Jung named as an ultimately inescapable dynamic in the human psyche, namely the push to embrace the totality of lived experience.

The *outsider* dimension of key protagonists involves feelings of being set apart and distinctly alienated from society and the flow of everyday life. A prominent feature is some form of dominant wound. This wound is less overcome and more woven into their final accomplishment, which is a hard-won vision of what surrounds them, in its light and dark totality. We find the outsider protagonist anchoring Hollywood classics through characters like Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (dir. Mulligan, 1962), Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* (dir. Curtiz, 1942) and Vigil Tibbs in *In the Heat of the Night* (dir. Jewison, 1967). All are celebrated heroes, but their gravitas comes more from the endurance of inner strife than poised external action. Each comes to carry a great chunk of the fraught world in which they find themselves. The dark undercurrent that runs through their psyches does not simply lend complexity and pathos to their character, but it becomes part of their very handle on prevailing circumstances, which is why these films tend to end on notes of irony and sobriety rather than distinct triumph. It is this darkened perspective and matured conscience that the audience is drawn into and perhaps find themselves challenged to take on. The outsider element is thus a more pointedly *internal* feature, even if it coincides with an external expression of the theme. This coincidence is most evident, for example, in characters like Jake Gittes in *Chinatown* (dir. Polanski, 1974), Conrad Jarrett in *Ordinary People* (dir. Redford, 1980) or Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Demme, 1991), each of whom have found themselves marginalized at some point before we meet them, and before they have become attuned to what lies at the margins of their culture and sensitized to what this culture dismisses or suppresses.

Atticus Finch and Vigil Tibbs may bear witness to a more overt outcropping of this shadowland, as do Benjamin L. Willard in *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Coppola, 1979) and William Munny in *Unforgiven* (dir. Eastwood, 1992). However, more often this shadow relation is indirect, and the outsider appears in stories pervaded with the smell of unfinished business or the feeling of impending fragmentation. Luke Hockley conveys this quality in his Jungian reflections on one particularly American genre, 'the world of *film noir*, with its dark streets ... canted camera angles, and alienated characters,' which, he adds,

was not just the result of war-time restrictions on film budgets.... It can equally be seen as an embodiment of psychological symbolism that represented the growing unrest felt in American society, at again being involved in the horrors of international warfare.

(2001, p. 63)

Light and dark in the American character took yet another turn after the Second World War, with the sense of noble victory forced to contend with the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fire bombings of Dresden and other Japanese cities, not to mention the way the dead tend to linger in the warrior's mind. Entry into a long Cold War with the Soviets was also creeping upon the nation, conjuring images of widespread destruction. In *film noir* light and dark form stark visual contrasts, but the latter always seems to take the upper hand.

War might well be archetypally geared for moral ambivalence, but America has so often converted that ambivalence into an entrenched dissociation, clinging to ideals like freedom and democracy on one side while disowning destructive impulses and paranoid projections on the other. The more that ambivalence cries out for recognition, the more those who come home after seeing the action up close tend to be disowned. The Vietnam War and its cinematic portrayals explore this dynamic, with protagonists who mirror a schizoid reality that the nation as a whole has not been able to overcome. It is not merely the horror of war that is being witnessed, but also the hypocrisy and madness of its execution and the inability of the collective to hold its

heroic ideals alongside its shortcomings. As Chris Taylor of *Platoon* (dir. Stone, 1986) says at the end of the film, 'I think, looking back now, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us.'

The outsider protagonist comes to carry an awareness those surrounding them cannot, which points the way to the coexistence of previously incompatible realms. In their psyches light and dark, upper world and underworld undergo a collision, opening a portal into the realm of collective wounding. Notable realizations of this dynamic in American films often take place in everyday urban settings, showing that this collision often surfaces here too. Benjamin Braddock of *The Graduate* (dir. Nichols, 1967), Thelma Dickerson and Louise Sawyer of *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Scott, 1991) and Lester Burnham of *American Beauty* (dir. Mendes, 1999) all become psychic vessels for what is unconscious in the collectivity surrounding them. Secondary characters in these films, such as the iconic Mrs. Robinson, nearly every male character in *Thelma and Louise* and Lester's wife Carolyn in *American Beauty*, are contrasting casualties of the larger split, which can manifest as repression, possession, fragmentation or a combination of these processes. Benjamin Braddock's quest to save his integrity from a future in plastics first requires an inoculation, through an encounter with the cynical and manipulative existence of Mrs. Robinson. Thelma and Louise must confront and then overpower the misogynist objectification that has dogged their lives, eventually raising the value of bonded womanhood above that of life itself. They take a road trip as a temporary reprieve, but find themselves forced to confront a rapist, which catapults them far beyond their socially constructed female identities. Lester Burnham also eventually loses his life, but not before seeing through the emptiness of middle class materialism and midlife escapism. To do this, however, he must fully enter his malaise and stop outsourcing his inner vitality to an adolescent cheerleader and a driven, gun-toting wife.

These characters are forced to acknowledge the cultural problems that grip them and realize they can no longer escape by means of the defended, hyper-masculinized striving that surrounds them. Sometimes they survive the immersion in their particular social affliction, surfacing in an authentic way, only to finally meet with another order of intolerance because of what they have awakened. The juxtaposition with the repressed and defended world they inhabit is too great and, as we see with Thelma, Louise and Lester, their lives are sacrificed once they expose the psychological splits in those around them. We are left looking straight into the American shadow.

Although outsider protagonists can face an insurmountable opposition to their counter-cultural endeavors, and end their quests in a pool of awareness rather than a blaze of glory, from the psychological point of view, in terms of individuation, they start at an advantage. Here I am reminded of James Hillman's assertion that human lives are placed in service of the soul rather than the other way around. He writes, 'our lives are on loan to the psyche for a while. During this time we are its caretakers who try to do for it what we can' (1975, p. 180). This is a more radical statement of Jung's perception of an autonomous psyche at work, something beyond the ego that orientates our experience in the direction of a deeper calling, meaning or principle. The organizing factor that Jung placed at the center of this movement, which he calls *the Self*, sometimes feels like the hand of fate at work. Hillman preferred the notion of a *daimon*, a personified figure within, conducting our lives with an alternate agenda. The outsider protagonist, unable to find a comfortable footing in the everyday world or escape the pull of their own wounding, is thrust more directly into the hands of this subterranean factor. While their ego may suffer, a deeper purpose has more room to make itself known. In *Ordinary People* (1980) the young protagonist, Conrad, attempts suicide after losing his brother in a boating accident. But the deeper problem, which he must finally overcome, belongs to the atmosphere of denial and persona perfection imposed by his mother, Beth, who is unable to reconcile events with her

upper middle class version of the American Dream. These protagonists may go through their own resistances and wrong-turns; they may push against what must, in the end, come through them. But they are, from the beginning, equipped to question habitual perspectives and explore what others cannot or will not perceive. If, as Delbanco suggests, ‘Americans have tried to save themselves from the melancholy that threatens all reflective beings’ (2000, p. 10), these are characters that, in the end, cannot or will not do so.

### Jung on American culture

My reading of these themes relating to the deeper function of the outsider protagonist also draws upon Jung’s psychology of modernity, in which his view of the American psyche plays a critical part. Christopher Hauke (2014) has previously assembled Jung’s analysis of the American situation, and has considered its bearing on cinematic offerings. In terms of resonance with the themes I’ve been laying out in this chapter, one of the most pertinent passages comes from a *New York Times* interview with Jung. He is quoted as saying:

When I see so much refinement and sentiment as I see in America, I look always for an equal amount of brutality. The pair of opposites – you find them everywhere. I find the greatest self-control in the world among the Americans – and I search for its cause. Why should there be so much self-control, I ask myself, in America, and I find for an answer brutality. I find a great deal of prudery. What is the cause, I ask, and I discover brutality. Prudery is always the cover for brutality. It is necessary – it makes life possible until you discover the brute and take real control of it. When you do that in America, then you will be the most emotional, most temperamental, the most fully developed people in the world.

(Hauke, 2014: 61/Jung, 1978 [1912], pp. 13–14)

Hauke introduces this passage by noting a critical psychodynamic, which underlies Jung’s formulation:

The compensatory nature of the unconscious means that the self-control and prudery Jung finds in the American are both covers for the inherent brutality (the leitmotif of the Western film) once required for conquering the New World, and which is still barely managed in the American psyche.

(2014, p. 61)

The return of the repressed is in Jung’s thought extended into the more nuanced notion of compensation – an understanding that the unconscious can supplement and balance the one-sided attitudes of consciousness. Such unconscious tendencies gather additional strength when they’re ignored by the conscious mind, and a vicious cycle can ensue. The antidote to this process comes at the end of the passage, where Jung suggests that America ‘discover the brute and take real control of it.’ (Hauke 2014: 61/Jung 1978 [1912], p. 14). Without this more conscious negotiation, however, the subterranean brute might also rise up and take charge.

A path of development around this theme is precisely what the most visionary American films invite – a discovery of the subterranean character of the culture through an alignment with the compensatory dynamic at work in the psyche. Whereas some films no doubt reinforce conscious values and defensive dynamics, and others just exploit the shadowlands, those that expose the underbelly of a culture in order to challenge the habitual cultural mindset exemplify the

psychodynamics of Jungian thought. This is what the American outsider protagonist models for us: a reconfigured relationship with the inner brute. It is for this reason that Hauke highlights a scene towards the end of *In The Heat of The Night* (1967) where Tibbs, a black Chicago police officer, slaps a white Southern plantation owner immediately after this man has slapped him (2014, pp. 57–58). It parallels the moment in *Thelma and Louise* (1999) when the pair now reveling in their rebellion ignite the oil-filled tanker of a male trucker whose repeated objectifying gaze and predatory habits have become intolerable. It is as if they have been waiting their whole lives to put this kind of man in his place. In both cases, the outer character also represents the inner antagonist, and the real accomplishment is overcoming the internalized cultural complex. The antagonizing element is not eradicated or banished in the typical heroic style, but out-manuevered through an inner familiarity with its influence, suggesting a certain interpenetration of conscious and unconscious factors.

This psychological achievement is vividly contrasted by the way in which disowned aspects of the American psyche can be projected onto the face of the other. We have already touched on this scapegoating process in terms of the zeal to fight enemies at a distance, but it pertains even more so to the racial divisions shaping the country. Despite Jung's own racial insensitivities, he saw how this played out, especially in the South, amplifying the general psychic opposition set out above by describing the coexistence of 'cruelty and chivalry.' He continues:

The Southerners treat one another very courteously, but they treat the Negro as they would treat their own unconscious mind if they knew what was in it. When I see a man in a savage rage with something outside himself, I know he is, in reality, wanting to be savage towards his own unconscious self.

(Hauke 2014: 56/Jung 1978 [1912], p. 16)

Hauke suggests that 'many of the aspects of American life identified by Jung are indeed those that America has faced – with varying results – since 1960' (Hauke 2014, p. 63). Many films have worked hard to expose dark chapters of American history. However, whereas a certain style of repression may have been lifted by 'America's own reflexivity' (ibid.), resulting in a more widely exposed underbelly, the culture still suffers from an oscillation of extremes and has yet to find a way to contend with its dual nature. Slavery was not only an abominable, inhuman source of labour, it was also a psychic management system, a ready-made method of avoiding all manner of contradiction within the psyche of slave-owners and the society supporting them. The deep-seated resentment of Civil War defeat, reignited during the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s, was fueled by the removal of this scapegoating mechanism. Since this time the psychic splitting and projection, pervasive in the history of this region, has continued to give rise to a defensive outlook. For example, what is known as the American Bible Belt directly overlays the map of former slave-owning states. This coincidence might be considered a response to a long period of darkness, but the fundamentalist obsession with the light and associated Biblical literalism breeds an ominous dissociation. The anti-intellectualism, suspicion of East Coast Liberals and 'Hollywood-types' that runs through the American Evangelical movement is not just focused on perceived moral differences; it is about the intolerance of social and psychological complexity. In Robert Duvall's *The Apostle* (1997), we find a preacher who tries to live with integrity but cannot seem to escape the cultural undertow. Writing from inside the southern religious scene, one reviewer noted: 'I have known many preachers just like Sonny (Duvall's character) over the years who have preached a hot Pentecostal gospel with seeming success only to fall into the very sins that they so fervently denounced from the pulpit' (Synan, 1998). This dissociation from the devil within continues to exert a determinative effect on the American political scene.

Another increasingly pervasive psychological style that manages to circumvent the complexity of the American soul is narcissism. In this posture we find an attempt to fabricate a false and highly rigid ideal that seeks success and greatness while doubling down on splitting and projection, typically resulting in an 'us and them' mentality. While on the screen and also in life this syndrome inevitably winds its way to a destructive conclusion, it has nonetheless proven to be useful in getting ahead in American culture (Lasch, 1978). *Citizen Kane* (dir. Welles, 1941) is an early cinematic expression of the pattern. The way the film sees through the grandiosity of its protagonist Charles Foster Kane is perhaps one reason it is often claimed to be the best American film ever made. In what is undoubtedly one of the most famous scenes in cinema history, Kane's final utterance of 'Rosebud,' and the recollection of the simple pleasure he enjoyed playing in the snow as a child, instantly pierces the lifelong attempt to become an outsized personality and live an outsized life. Memorable characters like Gordon Gekko of *Wall Street* (dir. Stone, 1987) and Daniel Plainview of *There Will Be Blood* (dir. Anderson, 2007) are cut from the same cloth.

Through its cinematic offerings America might have begun to follow 'Jung's recommendation that America should "face itself"' (Hauke, 2014, p. 49); however, it is here we need to see the difference between the mere return of the repressed and the embrace of the compensatory dynamic Jung placed at the heart of the psyche. Whereas the former releases a certain amount of psychic tension and frees libido for more creative expression, the latter requires another level of awareness. Namely, what returns from the unconscious does not do so in a willy-nilly fashion, but offers shapes and forms, symbols and metaphors for the path ahead.

### ***Sunset Boulevard***

An enduring and celebrated example of film noir that also offers a rich array of symbolic and metaphorical potential in terms of the themes we are exploring here is *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed and co-written by Billy Wilder. The opening is a perfect example of the dreamlike capacity of cinema to alert our imagination to the territory it is about to enter:

*Sunset Boulevard* begins with a shot of the famous street name, not high on a sign, but down in the gutter where street names are sometimes stenciled. The choice is not arbitrary. While this street already conjures an arterial sense of Hollywood high and low life, 'sunset' points to the theme of death that pervades the film. Seeing this name in the gutter builds these associations into a potent metaphor for a story of failure, desperation, and faded stardom.

(Slater, 2005, p. 5)

The underworld character of the film is established, not only by the layered meanings of this opening shot, but by the very framing of the entire story, which is narrated from the grave. More precisely, the film quickly moves to an image of its protagonist, Joe Gilles, floating facing down in a swimming pool, and it is his story, prior to this event, that we are about to enter. We soon realize the pool belongs to an aging silent film star, Norma Desmond, on the grounds of a Sunset Boulevard mansion that was once majestic, but has become a crumbling monument to a bygone era, dedicated to her former self. The pathetic attempts to preserve that self now cover a crippling underlying emptiness. Her inner state is on full display in her surroundings.

Whereas Norma Desmond reveals a garish, grandiose narcissism, her 'victim,' our protagonist, is carrying a more recessed narcissistic wound, wanting to overcome his weak personality by making it as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Down on his luck and maybe his talent, Joe's



weakness lies in wanting a share of the limelight. He ends up in Desmond's driveway, fleeing the repo men; it seems like a good place to hide after his tire blows out, but we ultimately come to see it was fated. In a wonderfully subtle addition to the start of this early sequence, Joe pulls into the street from his parking spot behind Rudy's Shoe Shine and, as he passes the black man doing an honest day's work, he narrates: 'Rudy never asked any questions about your finances, he'd just look at your heels and know the score.'

The film is a meditation on how Joe's inner world is reflected in the spider web of Norma's existence, how her largely transparent means of escaping decrepitude aligns with Joe's attempt to circumvent his own sense of emptiness. Norma becomes both an accurate externalization of Joe's *anima* and, by extension, a portrayal of the dark *anima* at work in the high-octane version of the American Dream that is Hollywood. When they first meet, after he has managed to stow his vehicle in her overgrown garage, she mistakes him for the undertaker she is expecting to measure her recently deceased pet monkey for a coffin. It is an omen, as Joe will, in many ways, soon take the place of the monkey. Recognizing her for the first time, he says, 'You used to be big.' And in one of the great lines from the film, she replies, 'I *am* big. It's the pictures that got small.'

Norma is constantly suppressing and denying the encroaching reality, in the same way she tortures her face and body with beauty treatments to slough off the years. But when Joe threatens to finally leave and return to his smaller life in the Midwest after facing his own manipulative enabling of the façade, the dam finally breaks and the gun finishes things off. Norma's final, psychotic return to the movies occurs as she descends her stairs playing Salome, with news cameras rolling and members of the press witnessing the haunting spectacle: 'You see, this is my life,' she says. 'It always will be. There's nothing else. Just us, and the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark. Alright Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up.'

The character of Norma Desmond offers insight beyond the femme fatale stereotype by showing us the way the soul turns rancid when the only concern is the persona field. This is obviously a distinct syndrome of show business, but it is also a sizable trap of general American psychology. Joe unknowingly creates the conditions of his own demise and becomes a kind of sacrificial lamb on the altar of a place obsessed by pseudo divinities. When the persona-shadow split becomes too great, it is always the shadow that wins, because one-sided investment in a perfected, god-like self-image is met by a compensatory demand of the psyche for an imperfect whole. And here we see a large portion of the American problem in close up. The true faith, the real religion of America, is the cultivation of the persona field, combined with the ability to self-make and remake, to craft an image and convey substance where, very often, there is none.

Los Angeles is a place where the American Dream exerts its most outlandish claims, where the 'radicalization of the utopian demand' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 75) is most radically displayed. Fittingly, it is the most fabricated of cities – a paved desert that must beg, borrow or steal life-sustaining water from neighbors. Filmmakers like David Lynch, the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino, troll its underworld and deconstruct its idealism in very effective ways. In *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Lynch uses a dreamlike obscuration, which has been noted by Terrie Waddell, who calls the film 'a dark and complex myth' (2006, p. 62). It begins with a car crash on the notorious twisting thoroughfare, a consistently effective metaphor for the way life unravels going into or out of Los Angeles, and the surviving figure stumbling into an apartment on Sunset Boulevard. Waddell's description of the way the title sequence introduces the protagonist (of sorts) tunes us into the movement that is about to take place. We see first the 'overexposed image of "Diane Selwyn" ... with a synthetic "ingénue-in-Hollywood" giddiness,' and then 'Diane, falling into the pillow, the dream, the unconscious' (p. 52). Waddell suggests further

that the ensuing dream ‘provides a form of compensation for the malleable and fluctuating state of Diane’s fragile ego’ (p. 54). Fragile egos are very often drawn to the heightened version of the dream this city seems to offer, but it is the compensatory dream that moves things from the self-making to the Self-making – from the ego to the larger totality.

The Coen brothers pack *The Big Lebowski* (1998) with noir allusions, altered states and a good slice of the LA underworld, as they canonize slackers who linger in the cracks of this west coast ‘paradise.’ Offerings by the Coens like *Blood Simple* (1984), *Fargo* (1996) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) show the flipside of cultural ideals in other locales, their characters always seeming to emerge from some deep America mythos. Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), also serves as a punctuating point for these reflections. Lydia Lennihan’s reading of the film (2001) highlights the juxtapositions between the white and black characters, the everyday world and the criminal underworld, as well as the alchemical patterns that seemingly direct events. It’s an unlikely set-up for an individuation process, but Lennihan convincingly argues that Jules, played by Samuel L. Jackson, undergoes a psychic transformation wherein the sense of ‘good and evil, darkness and golden, [and] a union of sublime complexities’ (p. 67) takes hold. She notes: ‘What is happening to Jules is also happening to us as we view the film’ (ibid.). It is this vicarious encounter with the compensatory movement of the unconscious and the creative reshaping of the rejected cultural elements this movement generates that invites a reshaping of our own vision.

### Reframing the cinematic hero

It must be clear by now that the outsider protagonist does not fit the mold of the traditional hero, and that Campbell’s model of the hero’s journey (2008 [1949]), which is often turned to as an interpretive key for many American films, is inadequate for understanding this figure. The most telling feature that differentiates the two is that the outsider does not ‘return’ from their ‘Night-Sea Journey’ in the typical hero manner. Sometimes they are more apt to stay in the underworld or be so affected by its gravity that a large part of their psyches never leave it. Too, the ‘helpers’ and ‘mentors’ that Campbell identifies as appearing once the hero has heard the ‘call to adventure’ (p. 210) are typically scarce if non-existent. This also reinforces the alienation of this figure. And rather than depart from the community and then return with a gift or ‘boon’ (p. 211), the outsider protagonist begins and ends in a largely separate state. The boon is perhaps a psychological state, which is what they and we come to see at a distance.

We must keep in mind that Campbell’s hero is an abstraction, even if a helpful one. The abstract hero is an attempt to see what Jung called the archetype per se, which he also admitted was something we can never glimpse. It is the fleshed-out version we always see, which is a particular character in a particular story. What is most interesting, psychologically, is not the skeletal form of the timeless, universal structure, rather where and how these universals have been remade by the prevailing social and cultural situation.

One critical feature of the hero, which *does* apply to the outsider and is often circumvented by stereotypical Hollywood offerings, is what Campbell called ‘self-achieved submission.’ He immediately follows the naming of this quality with the question: ‘But submission to what?’ (p. 11). Before Campbell, Jung had taken up the theme of the hero in his first major publication, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*, revised and republished in English as *Symbols of Transformation* (1956). Here he discusses the way the mythic hero must first sacrifice the regressive tendency to remain unconscious and avoid the challenges of life. But he goes on to describe another kind of sacrifice, a kind of purposeful, willing regression. He refers to this as a sacrifice of power and also a sacrifice of the libido. Much of Jung’s psychology emanates from this early insight,

which he describes in terms of 'an unconscious transformation of energy, of which the ego becomes aware in much the same way as sailors are made aware of a volcanic upheaval under the sea' (1956: §669). He later adds: 'Through sacrifice man ransoms himself from the fear of death and is reconciled to the demands of Hades' (§671).

The character of Frankie Dunn in *Million Dollar Baby* (dir. Eastwood, 2004) is an outsider protagonist who embodies this process. A common mistake in looking at this film, especially if one looks too hard for the heroic element, is to see Maggie Fitzgerald, the female fighter played by Hilary Swank, as the protagonist. But in the end Maggie is the vehicle for Frankie's evolution of consciousness. In this film the boxing ring, the fight and the training are all metaphors for the challenges of life, and, as the voiceover tells us at the start, 'everything in boxing is backwards.' Conscious intentions are reversed; everything has a flipside. The film itself is telling us how to read the film – to discover what's behind every willful action.

For example, known in the boxing world as a 'cut-man' (an expert at repairing open facial wounds) Frankie's own wounds remain open, especially those surrounding an apparent estrangement from his daughter. However, he is suffering the situation in a largely defended way, and is initially unable to break the guilt-ridden cycle of returned letters and attending daily Mass. Frankie is forced to make two sacrifices. The first occurs when he agrees to train Maggie, a trailer park escapee from the Ozarks, still waitressing in her mid-thirties to make ends meet. The second takes place when he must surrender to her wish to die. Between these two sacrifices, their bond grows, and he seemingly regains a 'daughter.' The hyper-masculinized world of boxing is also reversed to reveal a story of deep relatedness, devotion, loyalty and love.

The second sacrifice finally upends Frankie's life. He can no longer hold on to Maggie and must fight every instinct to help her escape the suffering of feeling trapped on artificial life support. No more heroics of the striving kind, only a submission to a deeper imperative and the full realization of what he himself says to Maggie at the start: 'Tough ain't enough.' It seems like a bleak ending, but his gym custodian, Eddie 'Scrap-Iron' Dupris, has been tracking and narrating the bigger picture. When Frankie returns from talking to the burnt-out Catholic priest, he 'confesses' to Scrap, the real priest in the story. And then Scrap sets him straight: Maggie was given her shot in life, and achieved something she'd not dare imagine, because of Frankie. He had cleared a path for Maggie's genius and effectively became the father she had lost.

We are left to imagine how Frankie might now be carrying the restored feminine presence that had been working its way into his psyche. Reading Keats and learning his ancestral Gaelic was not enough; neither was daily Mass. He had to become 'reconciled to the demands of Hades.' The subtext of the ending, where Frankie walks away from it all, contains a hint of accepting life in all of its backwardness, unfairness and contradiction. A closing image of the diner he and Maggie had visited, with the telling name of 'IRA's,' the one that served 'the best lemon pie around,' implies a movement toward an acceptance of the bittersweet. Further, Scrap's voiceover narration of the letter he has been writing to Frankie's actual, estranged daughter, plants the seed for some kind of renewal.

The reconciliation to Hades that Jung described and Frankie embraces through a self-imposed sacrifice, is at the core of what Jung referred to as the *religious function* (1921: §150). This concept is constantly woven into Jung's various reflections on the psyche, and provides a basis on which to assess the ultimate significance of the outsider protagonist in American film. Jung wrote:

Religion appears to me to be a peculiar attitude of mind which could be formulated in accordance with the original use of the word *religio*, which means a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors that are conceived as 'powers': spirits, daemons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals, or whatever name man has given to such

factors in his world as he has found powerful, dangerous, or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful, and meaningful enough to be devoutly worshipped and loved.

(1938/40: §8)

The heart of the individuation process is the effective embrace of the religious function. The ego shifts the locus of concern away from itself and recognizes the powers and values operating beyond its direct influence. It pertains to Campbell's refinement of the authentic hero's 'self-achieved submission' as well as to Hillman's attempt to restore our sense of the original mythic hero's ties to the underworld (1979: 110ff).

The outsider protagonist emulates this deeper essence of the hero by giving themselves over to something that is trying to make its way out of the shadows and into awareness. By contrast, the hero that has been untethered from an underworld orientation personifies much of America's habitual attitude. Always preferring action to thinking, as this culture also tends to use action as a way to avoid soul-searching. Hillman addresses this problem in his *Re-Visioning Psychology* stating: 'Sometimes we act in order not to see ... to avoid knowing what my soul is doing.' He adds, 'Without ideas the soul is more easily compelled, more compulsively active' (1975, p. 116). The compulsiveness of action increases in direct relation to the lack of insight. Along such lines, the stereotypical action hero of American cinema might be regarded as more an emblem of neurotic defense than an accurate expression of a timeless archetype.

The underworld is not only a place, it is also a perspective. In an earlier encounter with the underworld quality of these films I had suggested that both 'possession by the dark' and 'the darkened eye' which 'sees more deeply, less naively' are recurrent features (Slater, 2005, p. 14). Many of the protagonists we find in these cinematic offerings function as psychopomps for a culture in desperate need to awaken to its denied darkness. Their outsider status becomes a shamanic gift for the rest of us. Jung's call to individuation is too often framed as elitist navel-gazing, confined to the world of weekly analysis. However, it is more aptly considered an individual assent to a movement that corrects society's one-sidedness and hosts archetypal values that may be indispensable for a viable future. The necessity of this movement is more glaringly apparent against the American backdrop for, as I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, it is here the modern experiment has reached its zenith. American cinema, considered through this perspective, provides a stark, often thrilling, sometimes moving response to the dilemmas of Westernized cultures. We are transported to a psychic field in which victory and defeat, justice and injustice, love and lamentation rub together, and we are given a glimpse of something noble and dignified about the human spirit as it emerges from the fray.

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