



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

## **Rising Up**

***The Evolution of the Female Hero***

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Ragna Björg Bjarnadóttir**

**Janúar 2013**

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Enska

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## **Abstract**

Men have always been considered to be both physically and mentally superior to women. Therefore it is no surprise that the hero stories only revolve around men and their adventures. Women were only given marginal roles where they played the part of the nurturer or the wife or as evil enchantresses and beautiful sirens luring the hero into his death. This essay will show how women have stopped being weak and taken their place amongst the heroes of our day. First the hero concept is explored where the characteristics of the traditional-, Byronic- and the modern hero are explored and how the hero has changed and evolved through the years. The second section is focused on the main roles that women have played, from the nurturing roles of the mother and wife to the destructive roles of evil witches and savages. In the third part the new image of the strong woman is explored where Batgirl, Ripley and Buffy are shown to represent this new wave in heroism. At the end of the third section, the female heroes of the books *Dead until Dark* by Charlain Harris, *Guilty Pleasures* by Laurell K. Hamilton and *Moon Called* by Patricia Briggs are analysed and shown to be just as capable as men when it comes to having what it takes to be a hero.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
1. The view of men in literature.....	5
1.1. The traditional hero.....	6
1.2. The Byronic hero.....	8
1.3. The Modern hero.....	11
1.4. The evolution of the hero.....	12
2. The view of women in literature.....	13
2.1. The Mother.....	14
2.2. The Virgin.....	15
2.3. The Wife.....	16
2.4. The Sidekick.....	17
2.5. The Witch.....	18
2.6. The Femme-fatale.....	19
2.7. The Sex symbol.....	19
2.8. The Savage.....	20
2.9. The roles of women.....	20
3. Strong women.....	21
3.1. Batgirl.....	22
3.2. Ripley.....	22
3.3. Buffy.....	23
3.4. <i>Dead until Dark</i> .....	24
3.5. <i>Guilty Pleasures</i> .....	26
3.6. <i>Moon Called</i> .....	28
Conclusion.....	30
Works Cited.....	33

## **Introduction**

All hero stories are fundamentally the same. They are filled with adventure and wonder, encouraging the reader to continue and discover what happens as the hero enters his next battle. These stories are a huge success among readers and have been the source of many of the most popular films ever made (Hourihan 9). The heroes of these stories are almost always men. They are physically superior to women and therefore more qualified to fit the image of a hero. The view of women in the world also plays a big part in this where until recently women were not considered to be as intelligent and capable as men (Brunel 564). Because of that, women's roles have always been considered to be subordinate to men's. Men have been the greatest source of literature and their view on the world is reflected in their writing (Pringle 201).

In earlier times women in literature were quiet little creatures, depended on their fathers and later husbands to take care of them. If they did not marry well their lives were bound to be miserable and for as long as they could remember the importance of marriage had been imprinted into their brains. Women were mainly given roles connected to the domestic sphere such as mothers and wives, or portrayed as the enemy of the male hero in the guises of evil enchantresses and sirens. They were something to own and admire, not independent persons who made their own decisions. This changed as the time passed and women got more confident, breaking out from under the oppression of men.

Nowadays, women are no longer waiting for their knight in shining armour to come rescue them. Being strong and independent individuals they use their wits and improved physical fitness to deal with whatever comes their way. Women have gotten stronger and do not have to rely as much on men to save them. They can take care of

themselves and some are even more skilled in their line of work than the men in their trade. This essay will explore the change in the female character from being helpless and dependent on men into the strong and independent woman of our time as can be seen in the novels, *Dead until Dark* by Charlaine Harris, *Guilty Pleasure* by Laurell K. Hamilton and *Moon Called* by Patricia Briggs.

### **1. The view of men in literature**

Men have always been considered to be the stronger sex. Even before writing came along the heroes of oral poetry were praised for their courage and strength. This typical hero has been written about for centuries and his popularity has never diminished. From the old fierce warriors and the swashbuckling pirates to the indestructible superheroes, the image of the strong independent man lives on.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century the image of the hero changed. He was no longer required to be heroic and could in fact be the opposite. He was the hero of the book because he was the main character (Reed 8). This change developed a new sense of the hero, he did not have to be the good guy anymore he could just as well be the villain. This hero is not afraid to bend or break the laws to his benefit, he may steal, lie and swear but he does so to help others as well as himself.

The romantic period produced a related side-genre, gothic literature. There a new type of hero emerges. He is mean and bruited and completely different from the traditional one. This type of hero was developed by Lord Byron and has been named after him. The Byronic hero is charming, fierce, powerful, brutal but seductive and devilish enough to perk your interest, while enough of a fallen angel to charm the soul (Gilbert and Gubar 206)

### 1.1. The traditional hero

The traditional hero is the strong, courageous muscleman, rescuing damsels in distress and fighting fierce fire breathing dragons. The stereotypical hero is a white dominant young man who values the company of men more than women and lives to fight.

According to Walter L. Reed in his book *Meditations on the Hero: a Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, the hero developed from the divine beings of myth (11). A good example of a mythical hero is Beowulf from the famous eponymous epic poem. He is no ordinary hero, he is a super-hero. Beowulf is said to have the strength of thirty men and in lines 2181-2 his strength is said to be “unequalled / among mankind” (“Beowulf” 119-20). Beowulf does not only possess immense strength he can also hold his breath underwater for a whole day (“Beowulf” 98). In lines 247-51 as Beowulf approaches the Danish shore with his followers the watchman says:

I have not in my life  
set eyes on a man with more might in his frame  
than this helmed lord. He's no hall-fellow  
dressed in fine armour, or his face belies him;  
he has the head of a hero (“Beowulf” 59)

Hero stories speak of the deeds of brave men on a journey with a goal to acquire and rewards to claim. Other characters that happen to surface do not matter unless they affect the hero and his quest in some way (Hourihan 38). Women are of no interest to the hero except as a means to show his bravery or as his opponents (Hourihan 41). On his journey the hero meets people that may be able to help him but as soon as he gets what it is he requires, whether it be sexual release or information, he leaves them



behind. This can be seen clearly in the James Bond movies. Every girl Bond meets either ends up dead or is left behind, but not before he has bedded them at least once (Hourihan 76). The hero does not give up until he has reached his goal, one way or the other, and never doubts the rightness or the primacy of his cause (Hourihan 58).

The hero's fundamental trait is his unwavering courage and fortitude. When Beowulf is going to fight Grendel he decides not to use any weapons because Grendel does not have any weapons ("Beowulf" 72). In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy Frodo goes on a journey to Mordor in order to destroy the One Ring that controls all the other Rings of Power. He along with his companions has to go through an extremely dangerous quest through mountains filled with vile creatures such as the giant spider Shelob who guards one of the entrances into Mordor and Gollum who once was a hobbit but the ring has turned him into a twisted creature of greed. Even though the journey is long and the ring grows heavier with every step he takes, Frodo does not give up. No matter what he has to face he goes through it, hoping that his mission will eventually be completed (*The Lord of the Rings*).

Violence has always been a big part of heroism. The old legends were renowned for their fighting skills and their success in eliminating the enemies of their people. From the ancient heroes of Troy to the mediaeval knights of Camelot they have all proven themselves as heroes by striking down the enemy and regain the people's glory. The Arthurian legend is full of accounts of knights engaging in single battle for no better reason than to prove their honour (Hourihan 98-99). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain courageously offers to stand in for Arthur as the Green Knight asks him to play the Beheading Game. He chops off the Knight's head only to discover that he is still alive and expecting him to visit him at the Green Chapel in a year's time

to pay his due. Gawain does not want to bring shame upon his name so he goes to meet the Knight, at first shying away from the blade but then deciding that his honour is more important than his life he promises the Knight that he will not flinch a second time. The Knight only leaves a small wound on his neck and Gawain wears that scar as a reminder of his cowardice ("Sir Gawain").

### **1.2.The Byronic hero**

The Byronic hero is not brave and dashing like the traditional hero before him. He is cunning and secretive, playing with people's lives and living life as he wants. He is against authority's repression and does not want to follow the expectations of the society (Stein 8). The hero is a complex character made up of many traits and flaws but that only makes him more desirable. He is supposed to be beautiful but damned, his hidden dark side excites the reader and draws him in even though the hero is dangerous. His flaws make him more human than the mighty heroes of the past and therefore more relatable to the reader.

The Byronic hero is a selfish anti-hero who does not care what effect his actions may cause to others. A good example of that is Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Satan rebels against God and is banished out of Heaven for his sins. Even though he loses against God and his son, Satan gets his revenge when he tricks Eve into eating the Forbidden Fruit. Satan is very proud and in Book 1 line 263 he feels that it is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton). Satan becomes jealous when God creates his son to stand at his right hand and rebels because he does not want to be valued less than the son of God. Satan is very cunning and transforms himself into a cherubim and tricks Uriel into allowing him to enter Heaven again. He then possesses a snake in Eden

in order to trick Eve into eating the Forbidden Fruit. Satan has a moment of doubt when he sees how beautiful Eden is, even more beautiful than Heaven, but is quick to shrug it off as being weak.

In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Grubar say that Satan, as a prototypical Byronic hero, is found in the character of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. They refer to him as a ferocious natural force and state that Heathcliff's fall echoes Milton's Satan (Gilbert and Gubar 253). His aim in the latter part of the novel is to wreak the revenge of nature upon culture, Heathcliff being a force of nature ready to destroy the aristocratic society that wronged him. His Byronic traits come through as he proves himself to be sly, brooding, cunning, and manipulative and he adapts quickly to his changed social rank and circumstances.

Heathcliff is described in the novel as being satanic and animalistic. Nelly, the house maid, wonders whether he could be a vampire or a ghoul but then rejects the notion as being absurd (Bronte 293). Even on the day he first comes to Wuthering Heights Mr. Earnshaw says the child is "as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Bronte 31). Cathy knows how cruel Heathcliff can be and tries to warn Isabella Linton when she tells her she is in love with him. She tells her "he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man... and he'd crush you, like a sparrow's egg" (Bronte 90-1). Isabella ignores her words of warning and marries Heathcliff who immediately starts mistreating her. Isabella writes to Nelly and asks "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?" (Bronte 120).

When Heathcliff returns his mind is set on revenge. He runs away from Wuthering Heights when Cathy decides to marry Edgar Linton, determined to earn some money and improve his social status. He is full of rage and knows his revenge

cannot be followed through unless he plays along with the society and destroys the people's lives from within. Heathcliff gets his revenge on Hindley when Frances, Hindley's wife, dies. Hindley is Mr Earnshaw's son who was jealous for his father's affection towards Heathcliff and treated him as his servant after Mr. Earnshaw passed away. In his grief over his wife's death, Hindley becomes an alcoholic and a gambler and is forced into mortgaging his house to Heathcliff to pay off his debts. Heathcliff sees an opportunity to get his revenge on Edgar for taking Cathy away from him when Isabella, Edgar's younger sister falls in love with him. Heathcliff marries her out of spite but does not want anything to do with her after their marriage. Cathy is the love of Heathcliff's life and he is going to make sure they will be together by destroying everything around them until only their love remains.

Even though Heathcliff is described as a devil he does have a softer side. After Hindley dies Heathcliff is stuck with his son Hereton. Heathcliff hates that child and punishes him, making Hereton no better than a dog, just as Hindley had treated him in their youth. As time passes Heathcliff becomes fond of him, even more than his own son Linton. When Cathy dies Heathcliff is inconsolable and Nelly, the house maid, finds him in the garden, bashing his head against a tree trunk. "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!" (Bronte 148). Later Heathcliff confesses to Nelly that he no longer cares for revenge as he has "lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction" (Bronte 287).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Byronic hero was given superhuman abilities. He follows his own rules and moral code and if he breaks the law while pursuing his goal he will take responsibility for his actions. The Byronic hero is also a loner, an outcast, and has a hard time relating to others (Stein 1-2). Edward

Cullen from the *Twilight* series is a perfect example of this type of the Byronic hero. He is a vampire and therefore endowed with superhuman strength and speed, as well as being able to hear people's thoughts. He displays his superhuman abilities when he stops a skidding car from crashing into Bella in the school parking lot (Meyer 48). He is a loner because he knows he is different from everyone else and does not let anyone in until he meets Bella who excites him not only because of her alluring scent but also because he cannot read her mind. Edward displays many of the typical Byronic traits, with self hatred and eternal damnation always on his mind, but he also possesses some of the more positive traits such as beauty, intelligence and charm.

### **1.3. The Modern hero**

The modern hero is a combination of the hero that emerged during the seventeenth century and the Byronic hero. The hero is no longer required to be heroic and often portrays characteristics of villains, such as selfishness, greed and violent tendencies. He can be on either side of the law and does not hesitate to bend or break the rules if it benefits him or his cause (Stein 1). Jack Sparrow from the big movie franchise *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-2011) is a perfect example of that hero. He is a pirate running from the law who does not hesitate to betray everyone if it somehow benefits him. Jack is not heroic and usually runs away from battle, but when he is forced to fight Barbossa, his former first mate, and his skeletal crew, he does so with great finesse, rescuing Will and Elizabeth, the local blacksmith and the governor's daughter, who by some strange turn of events ended up as his shipmates, but making sure that he gets something out of the bargain (*Pirates of the Caribbean*).

The modern hero does not always have the characteristics of the villain. John McClane in *Die Hard* (1988) is an ordinary man put in an unordinary situation. During a Christmas celebration at his wife's workplace a group of German terrorists invade the building and hold everyone hostage. Being a police officer helps him deal with the terrorists but his own good sense and resourcefulness is what eventually saves the people (*Die Hard*).

Through the twentieth century a new type of the modern hero emerged. This hero does not seem to possess any human qualities except strength, violence and aggression (Hourihan 72). Everything this hero touches crumbles and usually it is the bones of his enemies. Good examples of that hero are the men in *The Expendables* (2010). They are the best of the best when it comes to fighting and do not hesitate to slaughter their opponents to get what they want. Just like the heroes before him they take the law into their own hands to enforce their own code of values (Hourihan 67).

#### **1.4. The evolution of the hero**

The traditional hero has its roots in mythology and can possess supernatural abilities. He is very courageous and his glory and honour are more important than his life. Violence has always been a big part of heroism and from the ancient heroes of Troy to the medieval heroes of Malory the hero strives to gain honour through battle.

The Byronic hero is charming, narcissistic, intelligent, handsome and self absorbed. His deep dark secret side is alluring and is what makes him so popular among the readers. He has a satanic side that can be traced back to Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* and from that developed into the Romantic and Gothic period where Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* was born. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the hero

developed even further, now inhabiting superhuman strength as Edward in the *Twilight* series.

The Modern hero is a combination of the traditional and the Byronic hero. He has the dark villainous quality of the Byronic hero and the traditional hero's will to save people, even though the modern hero usually does not do it unless it can somehow benefit him. In the twentieth century a new hero was developed. He does not inhabit any human qualities except immense strength and aggression but just as his predecessors he does not care much for rules and regulations and does whatever he wants.

## **2. The view of women in literature**

Even though there are more women than men in the world and that the women have been working beside them, doing much of the work, the hero myth does not regard them as equals. In these stories the women are few and most are only given the role of the wife and nurturer. Many are mothers or fair maidens in the glory of their youth. The few females found outside the domestic sphere possess amazing power and perform extraordinary functions. These amazing women are goddesses, fairy godmothers, evil witches or sirens. Their appearance tends to indicate their nature where those who are beautiful and blonde, like Tolkien's Galadriel, are certain to be benevolent while those who are dark haired are often seen as evil, deceptive and dangerous (Hourihan 156).

The women are essentially not 'characters' in the story, they are symbols of events in the hero's life. They do not appear unless they are involved in the hero's adventure, which suggests that women are of no importance unless they make an impact on men. Stories like *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, have even gone so far as to omit women completely. From the treatment of women in these stories, young

readers are inclined to think that women are of no interest or significance except as objects to be rescued and claimed as the hero's lover (Hourihan 156-8).

The narrative structure of hero stories implies that only the actions of men are regarded as important, while the actions of women are considered inferior. In history books the participation of women is also diminished because their involvement in daily life is not considered to be as important as wars and political matters, even though the women's discoveries of better diet and child care often saved and improved innumerable lives. Only queens and women like Joan of Arc, who took on roles usually reserved for men, were considered to be important enough to be mentioned in history (Hourihan 158-9).

### **2.1. The Mother**

Mothers do not play a vital part in the hero's story. They often appear at the beginning to see their sons off on their adventure and then again in the end to greet them when they victoriously return. They are kind, loving and nurturing, making sure their sons have everything they need for their journey, whether it is food, new shoes or clothing (Hourihan 161). Sometimes the mother is dead or dies at an early point in the story which makes the hero even more determined to excel on his journey. This is the case with Bruce Wayne in *Batman* who loses his mother when his parents are murdered by a mugger. Bruce is set on revenging them and their deaths are what primarily drive his thirst for justice and order (Madrid 56).

Mothers have not always been considered unimportant and weak. In early myths the hero's mother is sometimes very powerful, often a goddess from whom her son gets his powers. An example of that is Thetis, the goddess of water in Greek mythology and



the mother of Achilles, the great almost indestructible warrior whom she dips into the river Styx to make him invulnerable. It fails because the heel she holds him up on is not touched by the water, and in the end it is that weakness that leads to his death. These women can appear in any place or time in the story and are not bound by the beginning and ending like the later interpretation of the mother. This image of the mother does indeed challenge the theory that women are believed to be subordinate to men, but it is based on a more ancient view of women. These women are supposed to be descended from “the great mother goddess, universally worshipped, under many names, in early human history” (Hourihan 167). She was seen as the source of life and giver of milk and crops. In her earliest form she was shown as a mother with her breasts and sexual organs emphasized. Later she was also worshipped as a maiden and even as the incarnation of eroticism in Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation. Because of the great mother goddess’s status as the giver of life she was all-powerful but as the discoveries of male involvement in conception became more clear, male gods appeared and in the end pushed the goddesses down to act as their subordinates (Hourihan 167-8).

## **2.2. The Virgin**

The Virgin is an incarnation of the great mother goddess. She is very popular in twentieth century fantasies for children and young adults where the Virgin is supposed to inspire the hero, but she only plays a minor role in the story. The Virgin may appear to the hero when he is facing danger, either in body or as a voice in his mind, but takes almost no part in the action. *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien contains several inspiring female figures, but Galadriel, the elf-queen, is the one who most resembles the

image of the Virgin. She is tall, blonde and beautiful and her purpose is to bless the heroes and encourage them on their journey. Another and more vigorous example of the Virgin is Princess Leia from *Star Wars* (1977). She gets Luke Skywalker, the hero, to help her on her cause and takes an active part in the struggle against the evil Empire and Darth Vader. Nevertheless most of the action and the audience's interest belong to Skywalker and his friends (Hourihan 172-3).

### **2.3. The Wife**

The woman the hero marries must possess certain aspects. She must be beautiful and preferably blonde, with the exception of Snow White whose beauty lay in the contrast between her raven hair and blood red lips against her pale complexion (Hourihan 193). The stereotypical princess has always been described as being 'fair', which in English means both blonde and beautiful (Hourihan 194). She has to be slender, young and delicate and Cinderella's tiny foot is a good example of the preferred delicacy. Female slenderness was considered to be an indication of a noble birth since physical work made your body more muscular. To be a fitting reward to the hero his bride needed to be a lady of high degree (Hourihan 195). Although the hero and his bride are happy, he possesses all the power in the relationship. His encounter with the woman is often presented in a favourable light where he often is her saviour and brings light and meaning into her world (Hourihan 196). In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* Lancelot saves Guinevere from the fire when Arthur decides to burn her for her infidelities. The woman is not given a choice when the hero asks for her hand, she has been chosen and that is all she can ask for. These women are just trophies for the heroes to enjoy (Hourihan 198-9).

## 2.4. The Sidekick

For many years comic books claimed that women were better as assistants to male heroes than working on their own. They were not popular among the male readers who considered them to be weak and a liability to the heroes since they often had to rescue them. Male superheroes were given female partners for two reasons: they provided sex appeal for the male reader and romantic storylines to attract girls (Madrid 12-3) Even though the women possess great strength and power the idea is always that they need the love of a man to be complete. As an example Batwoman's feelings for Batman were considered to be a weakness that damaged her ability to fight crimes. Batman constantly tells her to give up crime fighting since women are not built for battle and shows more faith in Ace the Bat-Hound than in her. Batwoman was created to be Batman's female counterpart but her weapons were disguised as feminine products, reinforcing the idea that women were not seen as serious crime fighters (Madrid 63).

There is a great difference between the superpowers the male and female superheroes have. Women in comic books have historically been given weaker powers, presumably to reflect the status of women in the real world and to give the reader a world he is familiar with. Female superheroes are given powers that make them look good and do not require much physical activities. Their powers are often related to psychological matters such as mind reading and sonic mind waves as well as illusions or magic (Madrid 291-2). As Mike Madrid says in his book *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* they are "Gorgeous women who can stand back, cast their spells, invade someone's mind, scream their heads off, and still look fabulous doing it" (292).

## 2.5. The Witch

While the beneficent female figures in hero stories do not serve a vital importance in the tales, their counterparts, witches, sirens, enchantresses and other evil females are more involved in the action as the hero's opponents. They are wild and irrational controlled by their emotions and sexual desire. They try to divert the hero from his goal, offering themselves to him which often resolves in the hero falling into danger. A good example would be the beautiful spies who work for the enemy in the James Bond movies. These deadly divas are often thought to be the manifestations of the dark side of the great goddess, with Medusa, a monster from Greek mythology, as one of her best known incarnations. Medusa is often described as a beautiful woman despite her wriggling hair of snakes (Hourihan 174-5).

Stories with witches and evil enchantresses were very popular during the Middle Age and several such figures can be seen in the Arthurian legends. Morgan le Fay, Arthurs's half-sister is a good example of that. Morgan seduced young Arthur who did not know that they were related or that she was already married to Lot, the king of Orkney and had four sons. She bore him a son called Mordred who eventually brought about Arthur's death (Hourihan 178). The witch is not only popular in medieval stories but also in children's literature. Almost every fairytale has a witch or an evil stepmother, who often turns out to be a witch. In Narnia, the fantasy world from C.S. Lewis's famous book series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is a witch called The White Witch who has the same ability as Medusa; to turn living things into stone (Hourihan 183).

## **2.6. The Femme-fatale**

The phrase femme-fatale is used for seductive evil women who use their sexuality to trick the hero into falling for them and then destroy his life (Hourihan 184). They can be monsters, witches, sirens and even superheroines, but they all have in common their fashion for skimpy clothes and an unsatisfying sexual desire. These women use their sex appeal to get what they want. In the 2007 film version of *Beowulf*, Angelina Jolie plays Grendel's mother, a monster who takes the form of a stunningly beautiful seductress and tricks Beowulf into her lair, creating a new heir to replace the one Beowulf killed. She gives birth to a dragon who when Beowulf grows old attacks his kingdom. During their battle Beowulf tries to kill the dragon by cutting off his own arm which then leads to his death (*Beowulf*).

## **2.7. The Sex symbol**

The common image of the superheroine is that of a sexy, scarcely clad lady in high heels. Around 1947 comic books were filled with seductive female victims emerging from bathtubs, draped in towels right before they were killed. The Phantom Lady, one of the first female superheroes to debut in the 1940's, raced into battle half dressed, showing cleavage and her long legs and often ended up in bondage (Madrid 23). In 1969 a creature more startling than The Phantom Lady appeared, wearing almost nothing at all. Vampirella, a vampire superheroine from the planet Draculon, had a costume that consisted of two straps and a g-string with a tiny gold bat above the crotch and spike heeled boots. She existed in an erotic world meant to fuel male sexual fantasies (Madrid 147). The superheroines were supposed to have the sexy appearance of models but also look strong and powerful so they can succeed at their job. The

problem was that the women could not look too powerful lest they risked looking manly and thus unappealing to the male reader (Madrid 291)

## **2.8. The Savage**

After the Second World War the savages took the place of the heroes (Madrid 28). The most famous female savage is Sheena, the Queen of the Jungle, first published in 1937. She is often thought of as a female version of Tarzan who is a passionate beauty and embodied the erotic fantasies of men (Madrid 31-2). In *Jumbo Comics #10* she kills a lion that has been killing the people of the town she is visiting. She makes a new dress out of its pelt which turns out to be a skimpy swimsuit with a plunging neckline, confirming her title as a savage jungle queen but also showing her as the comics' first sex symbol (Madrid 39). During the Second World War, to entertain the troops who were avid comic book readers, Sheena was drawn in provocative poses that best showed her ample breasts, carefully concealed by animal hides (Madrid 44). She proved that female comic book characters could be beautiful and strong and that women can be every bit as tough as men. Sheena was perhaps the perfect male fantasy, exhibiting all of the traditional characteristics of a man like bravery and nobility while looking like the ultimate woman (Madrid 47-8).

## **2.9. The roles of women**

In ancient legends the mother was worshipped as the source of life. She was a goddess often endowed with great powers and beauty. When the male gods took over the mother lost her powers and was lowered down to take care of the domestic sphere as a mother and a wife. In the world of superheroes the women are considered to be a liability and

only good for assisting the “real heroes” against their foes. Their powers are always weaker than the men’s and do not involve much physical exercise so that they can look good while fighting.

Evil women are more prominent in hero stories than their good counterparts. They serve as opponents of the hero and in their many guises trick him into danger. The most popular form of the evil woman is the witch who exists in almost every fairytale, often portrayed as an evil stepmother. The evil women have broken out of the domestic sphere and are loose in the wilderness. Savages like Sheena, Queen of the Jungle were very popular during the Second World War, creating a woman who was fierce, strong and independent, fulfilling every man’s fantasy of the perfect woman.

### **3. Strong women**

The image of the strong, independent woman is featured in every medium today. In movies, TV-shows, books and comics, these women are making a name for themselves, fighting crimes, slaying monsters or even venturing into space. Women such as Batgirl, Buffy and Ripley do not let anyone tell them what they can and cannot do and are prominent examples of the strong independent woman of our time. Patricia Briggs, Charlain Harris and Laurell K. Hamilton have all created successful book series where powerful young women try to survive in a world inhabited by supernatural beings. In the following chapters, after a short analysis of Batgirl, Buffy and Ripley and what makes them strong women, the first book in each series will be explored where their dynamic women are shown to be just as capable as men when it comes to danger and survival.

### **3.1. Batgirl**

Many of the heroines of the early comic books were forced into the roles of well-mannered daughters or girlfriends, and the secret life gave these women a chance to be themselves. By hiding their identity behind a mask and a cape they were able to live the life they dreamed of where they could help make the world a better place (Madrid 5).

Batgirl's alter ego Barbara Gordon is a librarian who one evening on her way to a masquerade party, dressed in a sexy Batgirl costume, witnesses a fight between Batman and a villain. This encounter thrills her, leaving her with a thirst for a more adventurous life. In order to perfect her secret life she starts training her body, assembling an arsenal of weapons and once again puts on the Batgirl costume, ready to fight for justice (Madrid 123). Batgirl is a new and improved version of Batwoman. Unlike Batwoman before her, she does not fight for Batman's love. She fights under his name but does not require his protection. This makes Batgirl an independent woman who Batman can regard as a peer and partner in the crime on war the same way he would a male superhero (Madrid 124-25).

### **3.2. Ripley**

The film *Alien* (1979) directed by Ridley Scott is one of the first science fiction films to show a woman as a strong heroine. Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, is a new type of female hero who is very different from what had been seen before. In *Alien*, the typical gender roles are switched where Kane, played by John Hurt has the alien offspring and the computer in the spacecraft is called Mother. Ripley is the sole survivor but not because she got help from a man but because she is smart and can take care of herself (Bell-Meterau 10). Ripley does not allow anyone to tell her how to act as she



shows when the alien attaches itself to Kane's face and the other crewmembers want Ripley to open the ship for them to be able to save him. Ripley knows it is against the regulations of quarantine so she will not open the door. Later she shows her courage by leading her group of people in the search of the alien, holding the device that can locate it. In the end she is the one who destroys the alien when all the others have been killed (*Alien*).

### **3.3. Buffy**

Buffy Summers from the hit series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) is, as the title states, a vampire slayer. There is only one slayer born to each generation and that individual is always a woman. Buffy is immensely strong and skilled as a fighter even though she is only a teenager. She does not want to be a slayer because it is keeping her from having a normal teenage life but she soon accepts that this is her destiny and nothing can be done about it. Buffy lives in Sunnydale, which is unfortunately located above "the mouth of hell" where there is more supernatural activity than anywhere else in the United States. With the help of Giles, her Watcher, and her two friends, Xander and Willow, she battles the evil forces in her town; vampires, witches, demons and even a gigantic she-mantis (*Buffy*).

These strong women all have in common their need to make the world a better place. Batgirl fights criminals in order to feel free and experience something thrilling while Ripley fights with all her might to stay alive aboard a spacecraft with a ravenous alien on the loose. Buffy, because of the destiny she has been given, feels obligated to rid the world of the infestation of vampires and other creatures. They all use their

common sense and unwavering courage to accomplish what they set out to do; fighting criminals, monsters or aliens.

### ***3.4. Dead until Dark***

The narrator of the novel *Dead until Dark*, Sookie Stackhouse, is a waitress endowed with the unique ability to hear people's thoughts. She hates being a mind reader because she has to focus really hard on keeping her mind closed to all the thoughts around her, but her ability also proves to be a gift. Sookie's mind reading saves Bill, her vampire lover, from biting a man infected by the Sino-AIDS Virus (Harris 68) and helps Eric, the vampire sheriff of area five in Louisiana, and his business partners to avoid the police when they come to raid their vampire bar, Fangtasia (Harris 110-11).

Sookie's supernatural power does not only attract the attention of the vampires, it also serves as a way to separate her from the rest of the town. By having that power Sookie is better equipped to fight and keep herself safe as well as helping others in need. She is special, one of a kind, and therefore very valuable to the vampires. Despite that she does not let anyone use her. When Eric asks her to help him find who is embezzling money from Fangtasia she only agrees with the condition that he will not harm the culprit (Harris 201-2). Sookie's supernatural power can be linked to the supernatural hero and how women have stopped being weak and taken on the roles of male heroes.

Sookie is very brave and puts the lives of others before her own. She does not pay much attention to her own wellbeing when someone is in trouble. When Sookie goes to save Bill from the Rattrays, a couple of vampire blood dealers who wanted to drain him, in the beginning of the book she does not think about the fact that she is

outnumbered. She only wants to do what is right. Sookie attacks them with a chain she finds in her brother's truck, which the Rattrays take with them as they escape. Sookie worries more about how mad her brother will be when he finds out the chain is missing than her own life (Harris 14). This selfless thinking is a common quality in the traditional male hero. Women are used to be the objects of rescue not the rescuer themselves but Sookie shows that women are just as capable as men when it comes to saving people's lives.

Being a tough woman does not exclude the chance of a romantic relationship. In earlier stories, women were forced into marrying the hero who rescued them, whether they liked it or not and were told to be happy that he chose them. In the modern times this view on relationships is mostly gone. Sookie is attracted to Bill because she cannot hear his thoughts. Their relationship gives her a calming relief from the constant pounding of thoughts around her. Bill is an old vampire and therefore his view on relationships is a bit archaic. He does not know "the way women want to be treated now" (Harris 293) but Sookie makes sure he knows exactly what she wants from him. She does not want to be carried and treated like a child (Harris 191-2); she wants their relationship to be as equals. Sookie is not looking for a hero to save her; she can manage quite well on her own.

Sookie does not give up without a fight. She has a strong survival instinct and refuses to lie down and be killed. When the Rattrays attack her in the parking lot outside Merlotte's, the bar where she works, she fights with all she has to stay alive. Later in the novel, Rene, the man who is responsible for the mysterious deaths in the town, is amazed how hard it is to kill her. Unlike her, the other women he killed did not fight back (Harris 280). It rarely occurs to Sookie to ask for help, she wants to take care of

things on her own. This will to stay alive is what makes Sookie a hero, even though she is facing death she does not surrender. As long as Sookie is alive she will keep on fighting.

Sookie is a determined young woman who does not let anything stand in the way of her getting what she wants. Being able to hear people's thoughts has haunted her all her life but she finds a way to use that unique ability to help people around her. She finds comfort in the silence that Bill's mind brings her and wants their relationship to be built on equality. Her need to help others often gets her into danger but she always manages to find a way to stay alive.

### ***3.5. Guilty Pleasures***

In *Guilty Pleasures*, Anita Blake is a tough woman who you do not want as your enemy. She raises the dead for a living and kills vampires in her free time. The police also often ask for her help with crimes related to the supernatural and she is very valuable to the police force since Anita is the only person Dave, an informer who is a former police officer and now a vampire, wants to talk to (Hamilton 117-8). She uses magic to raise the dead but also owns several guns and knives and knows how to use them. Being a vampire slayer and zombie raiser is a dangerous profession so Anita always carries weapons and has gruesome scars from earlier vampire attacks. Anita is quicker than most humans and is even able to avoid some vampires when they attack. Her work requires much energy and stamina so she tries to keep herself in good shape, mostly by running but she also lifts weights and practices with her weapons. The men on the police force treat Anita like one of their own and make crude remarks about her but she knows how to keep them in place (Hamilton 25).

Anita is a fierce murder machine who does not need a man to help her. Anita is known to the vampires as The Executioner, a name that puts fear and awe into many hearts. She kills vampires because she is afraid of them but as her fellow animator Zachary comments, most people run away from things they fear, she runs towards them (Hamilton 79). Anita is brave and courageous and does not let her fear stop her from relieving the world of vampires and other creatures. Just like the heroes of old myths she rids the world of unwanted beasts and does so with great finesse. Anita is the best in her trade, both as an animator and as a vampire slayer, and therefore is greatly sought after. Anita rarely finds herself in need of other people's help but since she is dealing with the supernatural world she cannot but admit that her powers are nothing against the vampires, which is where Jean-Claude comes into the picture.

Anita is partly immune to vampire hypnosis. Jean-Claude feels it fascinating and tries to get through her defences. He is stronger than most vampires so Anita has to fight harder to keep him out of her head, but for him it is just a part of the thrill. This seduction game usually ends with Anita noticing what he is up to but he sometimes comes really close to winning her over (Hamilton 20). He has great respect for her and feels Anita is worthy of his attention. Anita is attracted to him but does not admit it, no matter how much he tries she will not cave. She can feel that he is attracted to her as well and after their surprise kiss, Anita notices that he seems to be having a hard time being around her (Hamilton 39-40). Anita does not like how he tries to manipulate her into falling for him. Even though she admits she does have a soft spot for the vampire, Anita is determined not to give in to him. She does not want a relationship built on oppression and deceit.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Jean-Claude enhances Anita's immunity for vampire glamour. During Anita's visit to Nikolaos, the queen of the vampire seethe, Aubrey, one of Nikolaos' vampires attacks Anita and hurts her severely. Jean-Claude shares his life force with Anita, making the first step in the servant-vampire bond while healing her from the blow (Hamilton 45). Later when Jean-Claude gets hurt he gives Anita two more marks, making him able to draw energy from her through her sleep. After that Anita is almost completely immune to vampire glamour (Hamilton 60). Anita is what keeps Jean-Claude alive as he lies in a chained coffin. The traditional gender roles are reversed as Anita is the hero and Jean-Claude the damsel in distress. Jean-Claude gives her the power to save him but Anita is the one who decides to use that newfound power to help Jean-Claude instead of leaving him behind, showing true heroism and nobility.

Anita is a remarkable woman who is not afraid to get rough. She is independent and strong and does not hesitate to kill in order to save herself. She has a strange relationship with Jean-Claude, who is close to making her his servant which annoys her greatly but it does have its benefits.

### ***3.6.Moon Called***

Mercy Thompson, the heroine of *Moon Called* is a mechanic. She owns her own business and is very proud of it. Mercy is also a skinwalker, more commonly known as a shapeshifter. She is able to change herself from a human into a coyote but sadly she is the only one left in the area (Briggs 190). She lives next to Adam, the alpha of the local werewolf pack. Mercy grew up with a pack of werewolves after her mother, who is not a skinwalker, decided that she would be better cared for by someone who was familiar

with shifters. When Mercy grew up and wanted to leave home, Adam was assigned as her guardian, but in the novel she proves that she does not require anyone to watch over her. Her coyote form gives Mercy increased speed, smell and hearing but in her human form her sense of smell is also heightened. Mercy practices karate and does some weightlifting in order to be strong enough to carry the heavy auto parts needed in her profession.

Being a coyote has its advantages. Mercy is partly immune to vampire magic which she discovers during a visit to Marsilia's vampire lair. Marsilia is the queen of the vampire seethe in her town and after she loses her control and bites Samuel, Mercy's former lover and a werewolf, Mercy uses her necklace, which is shaped like a lamb and is supposed to symbolise Christ, to burn her so that she will release her hold on him. Marsilia screeches and uses some magic that brings everyone to the floor in pain except Mercy. Because of her coyote nature she is the only one who can stand the spell (Briggs 178-9). Being a coyote, the only one left in the area, makes Mercy very unique and therefore more desirable. Mercy has more freedom than the werewolves because her change into a coyote is quick, completely painless and is not connected with the lunar circle or strong emotions. In that sense Mercy is more powerful than the werewolves since she has more control over her nature than they do.

Mercy is very independent and wants to take care of herself. She does not like when Adam decides what she should do and how she should behave. Mercy is not a werewolf and therefore does not have to obey him but it does not stop Adam from trying. Being an Alpha and in love with her, he wants to protect Mercy but she shows him that she does not need any help. She can take care of herself. Mercy saves Adam and his daughter at the end of the novel, where a group of werewolves had abducted

them and were keeping them in a warehouse. Just as Anita in *Guilty Pleasures*, Mercy takes the role of the hero while Adam is the one in need of rescuing. She also displays the hero's fundamental trait of self sacrifice when she jumps in front of the spell Robert, a fairy working for the enemy werewolf pack, cast for Adam (Briggs 267). Although she does not die she was prepared to give up her life for his which both shows her bravery and her love for him.

Adam and Mercy have a strange relationship. They both know that they are in love but are afraid to admit it to each other because of pride. Adam and Mercy's lives are ruled by customs and regulations that are present in the world of werewolves. Mercy grew up with a pack of werewolves so she knows how important it is for Adam to have control over everything, but Mercy does not like to be patronized or dominated so she fights him every step of the way. Mercy will not give Adam the pleasure of admitting to him that she loves him. She wants them to be equals but it proves to be hard to get Adam to accept it.

Mercy is strong and independent, willing to help others in need and does not hesitate to risk her own life in the process. Being a skinwalker has its benefits and Mercy uses them to help the people she loves. Mercy does not want anyone to take care of her; she is well capable of doing that herself, but because of what he is, Adam is having a hard time accepting it.

## **Conclusion**

Ever since stories were first told men have been considered to be superior to women. Women were not featured in history books unless they were royalty or in some way related to the power hungry world to which the men belonged. Women were considered



to be weak and were only given marginal roles where they served as the hero's helper in the form of a beautiful goddess, the loving mother that sends his son off on a journey or as a reward when the hero victoriously returned.

The male hero is courageous and self sacrificial. Heroes like Beowulf and Gawain fought for honour and glory while later heroes such as Frodo from *The Lord of the Rings* fought for the future of Middle Earth and its people. Later interpretations of the hero were more satanic and alluring to the reader, ranging from the demonic Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* to the charming Edward from the *Twilight* series. The modern hero is more complicated and displays many of the characteristics of the heroes before him. He can be an innocent bystander caught up in a surprise danger or a selfish hero with not regard for the law, but what they both have in common is their will to help, even though it may come with a price.

In earlier days, women were only given power as evil witches or sexy savages. These women, such as Grendel's mother, preyed on the hero, leading him into temptation that would eventually destroy him. Other women such as Sheena the Queen of the Jungle, appealed to men's fantasies, scantily dressed and oozing sex appeal as well as toughness. In the past few decades women's roles in literature have drastically been changed. They have become more independent and fight for justice beside the men. Ripley started a new wave of female film heroes who are tougher than any man and use their good sense to survive in bleak situations. Buffy proves that teenagers can be pretty tough and Batgirl shows her claws, proving herself to be Batman's equal.

Sookie Stackhouse, Anita Blake and Mercy Thompson are clever, independent women who do not want a man to tell them what to do. These women represent all that women have been fighting for, respect, independence and power. Women no longer

have to stay behind and serve the hero; they can go out and make their own adventures. Being strong, confident and courageous these women show that the male hero's tyrannical reign is over and the independent female hero has risen up to take her part in the evolution of the hero.

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