

The Taming of the Shrew: Writing Female Characters & Archetypes

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One of the biggest topics discussed in entertainment this year, especially the last few months, is the decrease in the number of women in the industry and especially the lack of female directors and female protagonists in cinema.

Despite there being a number of films with female leads that have become massive hits, there are still far fewer produced than those with male leads. Studios are still passing on female protagonist projects and it's our job to figure out why instead of just bemoaning that it happens.

Recently, at the [Final Draft](#) Screenwriting Awards, the infamous Nancy Meyers labeled 2013 as the Year of the Shrew. That with few exceptions, most of the lead female characters in films last year were basically shrew-like bitches that no one could like and advised that writers "should write women you want to know, instead of run away from."

The more I thought about it, the more I realized – she's not wrong. Look at most of the 2013 movies featuring major female roles or female protagonists; *Blue Jasmine*, *August: Osage County*, *American Hustle*, *Her*, *Saving Mr. Banks*, *Mama*, *Identity Thief*, *Spring Breakers*, *Admission*, *Frances Ha*, *Bling Ring*, *Stoker*, *Carrie*...

Delusional alcoholic shrew, vengeful addict shrew, manipulative martyr shrew, selfish technological shrew, uptight British shrew...I could go on. None of them had a female character you'd want to spend much time with, much less be friends with, date or marry.

Were some of them complex characters? Sure. Did some of these characters lead to amazing performances? Absolutely. But are any of them characters that you want to see much MORE of or feel like women you'd want to know? Not really. The "girl next door" role of the 90s seems to have been replaced with "the bitch banging on the door" role of the 2010s.

Even the films where women did shine and were likable and strong, in only *Philomena*, *12 Years a Slave* and *Hunger Games Catching Fire* did the lead female character have a motivation, backstory and emotional gravitas that grounded the film. Sure, *The Heat* and *Gravity* had strong female roles (both played by everyone's favorite movie star Sandra Bullock), but they weren't exactly deep character studies. And *Gravity* technically does not even pass the Bechdel Test.

The Bechdel Test has been around for a while, but didn't really come to light (or become used in regular vernacular) until 2013, when the Swedish Film Institute released a study that made everyone take notice. To pass the Bechdel Test, a film must:

1. Have at least two women in it
2. Who talk to each other
3. About something besides a man

Perhaps the fourth point on this list should be – 4. And feels like a real life woman you might want to know. But of course, that is subjective.

I think one of the reasons we see less female protagonist films is because women are generally more complicated and complex than men. They just are. I dare say there's an easier shorthand with male archetypes that allows readers to connect and understand them quicker. And in a world where execs only read 10 pages and readers need to know who their hero is almost immediately, sometimes female characters take a little bit longer to fall in love with and they aren't given enough of a chance. This isn't a problem with female characters, per se, but with the shorthands writers are using to introduce their female characters (and also with exec's attention spans).

If you were to do a character study of most scripts and films, you might find that there are about 15 archetypal female characters repeated over and over. I'm not saying you should avoid these archetypes – it's almost impossible to – but you should be aware of them to know if you're writing an original character. The 15 archetypes, in no particular order, are:

1. The Alpha Bitch/Queen Bee – *Mean Girls, Easy A, Bring It On, Clueless, Heathers, Grease, Young Adult, Legally Blonde*
2. The Damsel in Distress – *Wizard of Oz, King Kong, James Bond Films, Sleeping Beauty, Spiderman, Princess Bride, Halloween, Scream, The Bodyguard, Kiss the Girls, Sleeping with the Enemy, Enough*
3. The Boss or Woman in a Man's World – *Broadcast News, Fargo, The Paper, Erin Brockovich, The Proposal, Silence of the Lambs, Working Girl, Devil Wears Prada, The Contender*
4. The Unflinching Warrior Bad-Ass – *Alien(s), Terminator(s), Kill Bill, Salt, Joan of Arc, Resident Evil(s), Kick-Ass, Star Wars, Brave*
5. The Rape Victim – *The Accused, Girl w/the Dragon Tattoo, Teeth, The Brave One, Irreversible, Hounddog, Monster, Dogtooth*
6. The Obsessive or Vengeful Psycho – *Misery, Basic Instinct, Fatal Attraction, Single White Female, Kill Bill, Mommie Dearest, All About Eve, Monster, Natural Born Killers, Carrie, The Crush, Eye for an Eye, First Wives Club*
7. The Spinster – *The African Queen, Marvin's Room, Baby Boom, Julia & Julia*
8. The Quirky Misfit – *Juno, Amelie, Garden State, Breakfast Club, Ghost World, Annie Hall, Secretary, 500 Days of Summer, Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind, Beetlejuice*
9. The Girl Next Door – *Almost every role Meg Ryan, Sandra Bullock, Reese Witherspoon, Doris Day, Katie Holmes or Emma Stone have ever played*
10. The Hopeless Romantic – *Titanic, Bridget Jones Diary, The Notebook, Romeo & Juliet, Sleepless In Seattle, Amelie, When Harry Met Sally, Shakespeare in Love*
11. The New Girl in Town/Ingénue/Virgin – *Mean Girls, Boogie Nights, Grease, Funny Girl, Lost in Translation, Black Swan, most female characters in animated films and Musicals*
12. The Martyr – *August Osage County, Silkwood, Norma Rae, Rocky, First Wives Club, Philomena*
13. The Reluctant or Unlikely Mother – *Raising Helen, Baby Boom, Knocked Up, Mama, Adventures in Babysitting, Life as We Know It, She's Having A Baby, Baby Mama*
14. The Best Friend – *My Best Friend's Wedding, 27 Dresses, any role played by Judy Greer, Joan Cusack, Rosie O'Donnell, Ginnifer Goodwin, Ari Graynor, Katheryn Winnick, etc.*
15. The Seductress/Femme Fatale – *Lolita, Cleopatra, The Graduate, Basic Instinct, Last Seduction, To Die For, Jawbreaker, Mini's First Time, Thirteen, Jennifer's Body, The Paperboy, The Professional, Fish Called Wanda, Double Indemnity, Foxy Brown, Nikita, Catwoman, American Pie*

Having read thousands of scripts (amateur and pro) and having heard over 3,000 pitches, I have found that even with these 15 archetypes, both male and female writers have an even more limited range of go-to characters traits, goals or backstories for their female characters with each gender relying on two, over and over. The genders do differ on the traits they use, but seldom are any of them executed well.

Men seem to over-use the following two traits:

#1 – The Rape Victim. If I had a dollar for every script or pitch I've gotten where the female protagonist gets raped or was raped when she was younger, I'd have... a lot of dollars. Most (I'd say 75%) of these are written by men. The ones written by women are usually true stories. None have been developed, sold, or produced. But when male writers want to make a female character feel afflicted, damaged or deep, rape is their go-to backstory. As if women can only seem afflicted or affected when they've been violated by men.

Almost consistently, when men write about rape, it's glossed over. It's just something they throw out in a quick scene or flashback that just happened to occur to their protagonist. "Oh yeah, I almost forgot to mention, I was viciously gang-raped when I was in high school. No biggie." This is not "a little backstory" to be mentioned off-handedly – it's a major life event that forever changes a person! It is something that not only changes a character, but also makes an audience and reader look at, and respond to, a character very differently. It also greatly changes how an actress might portray her. Your scripts are not the place to explore your rape fantasies. If it is not absolutely germane to your concept, plot and the character's immediate arc – cut it out!

#2 – The Clumsy Sweetheart. The second most used trait is featured more in comedy but seems to be the go-to trait to make an otherwise dislikable female character relatable and friendly. Just make her fall down a whole bunch. I understand that comediennes over time have relied on this to launch their careers, from Lucille Ball to Sandra Bullock. But can't male writers come up with something – anything (!) – else to make their women funny? So that an audience feels like they might want to laugh WITH them instead of AT them? Men, if you saw a woman constantly falling down, would you think she's sweetly relatable and fun – or would you think she's an alcoholic who's too stupid to know how shoes work? Please, stop using this character trait.

Now for all you female writers out there – you're not off the hook either. Because consistently, the two character traits you use to create dynamic female characters are:

#1 – Obsessed with success/work or being better than men. Fuck that glass ceiling, take over that boardroom, win that case at all costs, crush those men and don't look back because you are one SERIOUS woman who is at the top of her game. Women writers often think by making their female characters BETTER than the men around them, they will seem stronger and more likable. But it doesn't usually work. It usually just makes a woman seem like a cold, bitter man-hater and pretty stereotypical. It's great to have a goal and a motivation to be the best at what you do, but this alone does not create a well-rounded, three-dimensional, likable character. Plus, women with this characteristic often have to be "changed" by a man to make her more likable, making her less of a strong character.

Remember – one of the reasons studios don't make more movies with female protagonists is because most female protagonists aren't women men would like to watch.

#2 – Desperate for love/family. The other characteristic I see constantly is women who overlook logic, consequence, or act completely out of character to follow their heart for the chance at "true love." They will listen to psychics, believe in a fortune cookie, cling to a message written in a high school yearbook, and give up their life or goals to pursue what must be their last chance at love (at age 34). Because apparently if you're not married with kids by 35, you're actually not alive anymore. And this mindset doesn't come from men – it comes from women. My college friends are all 34 – believe me, I

know. Once again, it doesn't make your female characters likable – it makes them desperate. And desperation is only an attractive quality at 2am.

So knowing this, what can a writer do to help change the current state of female characters and their lack of representation in today's cinema?

Again, the aforementioned archetypes exist for a reason – they work. It's your job to bring them to life in new ways. Go deeper with your characters and explore WHY your characters are those archetypes and write their dialogue as genuinely as possible. Best way to do this, especially for male writers, is to observe and LISTEN to women and how they speak (without seeming like a creepy stalker). Try to get into their head instead of just viewing them through your own eyes. This isn't just advice for writing another gender, but any type of character that might not come naturally to you.

Realize that no matter what type of archetype you might be writing, that women aren't that ONE type at all times. It's by blending the archetypes in interesting ways that you create new types of characters. Show range in your characters, and in your writing, as long as the blend connects well with your plot.

Figure out great triggers that cause your complex character to vacillate between the different sides of their personality. This is a great exercise that could also help you plot out your story and the obstacles your characters might face as each obstacle could connect with one of their triggers.

Give your female characters a strong moral dilemma and a great 'WANT' that isn't simply to find a man, have a baby, or be the best in their career. Thelma and Louise were not seeking any of these. Ripley, Sarah Connor, The Bride (in *Kill Bill*), Lisbeth Salander, Dorothy Gale...all iconic characters with different 'wants' – BIGGER wants. 'Wants' that men can also connect with; to save the world, to seek vengeance, to find the truth, to get home to one's family.

Your job as a writer is either to find new archetypes or take these aforementioned archetypes and find a new entrée into them or a new combination that creates an original, castable character – and then find the perfect story in which that character and their arc will shine (or vice versa depending on your process). Again, it's not that you shouldn't use these archetypes – it's that you need to find new ways to use them, new ways to make them connect with an audience, and make your characters endearing in some way instead of repelling.

Ask yourself – are they people you'd want in your life for more than an hour? If not, why would audience members pay to see them on screen for two?

Part of this business is knowing which type of female protagonists work best for which genres, and which genres can actually sell with a female protagonist. Unless you have a mega-star attached to your project, female-lead films sell most overseas when it's a genre film – horror, thriller or a big visual action movie like *Resident Evil* or *Hunger Games*. It's not selling out your female brethren to write female characters men would pay to see.

As you can see from the list of films above, the archetypes that sell best to broad audiences and overseas are the Damsel in Distress, the Warrior Bad-Ass, the Hopeless Romantic (if you have a major star or it's based on an international best-seller), and the Seductress/Femme Fatale. Why? Because psychologically, these are female archetypes that men understand. They are the types of characters men are more willing to pay to see and perhaps feel more comfortable writing.

Maybe the best way to get more female protagonists on screen is to start with the genres and roles we KNOW sell with female leads, and once there are enough of those types of films making tons of money studios may begin to take more chances on other genres. I think this has already begun with many of the upcoming franchise action and YA films having female leads and the announcement of the *Expendables* film, which basically defines my point exactly.

Another way to get more female leads on the big screen is by writing more *novels* with female leads. Out of the Top 125 highest grossing movies of all time, worldwide, *Gravity* and *Twister* are the only ones with a female lead that was an original screenplay.

Maybe instead of trying to write great female characters, just try writing great ICONIC characters. As the story goes, the role of Clarice in *Silence of the Lambs* was originally written as a man (as were two other Jodie Foster movie roles). So was Angelina Jolie's character in *Salt*, Rosalind Russell's role in *His Girl Friday*, Glenn Close's role in *The Paper*, and Sigourney Weaver's role in *Alien* (and two other films she starred in). Look at your male protagonists and contemplate whether making them female would take the story to a whole different level and make that character and their journey all the more complex.

Create roles that great actresses will fight for. Don't just make them emotional, make them emotional with a reason. Not just passionate, but passionate with a purpose. Not just headstrong, but headstrong with a relatable goal. Not just sexy, but sexy in their own skin. Find new ways to give your female characters depth while keeping them commercial and castable, and producers won't be able to say no.

The tides are changing, albeit slowly. But if writers take these few steps, perhaps 2015 can be the year of the new female protagonist film.