

Do You Really Need Love to be Strong?

By: Julie Timm

Women are wonderful. They are versatile, caring, wise, and loving and the list could go on. But all these wonderful traits are hidden in literature because women are often seen only as the love interest of the hero or, even if the woman is the heroine of the story, she still needs the love of a man in order for her to be complete. Is love really all women need to be seen as strong? Absolutely not! Women can be strong without the love of a man. This does not mean that they should not be shown in loving relationships, it just means that they should be shown to be capable of their great feats of courage and heroism without the male character constantly showering them with advice or compliments. There are several female archetypes that come up again and again in literature, but this article will only be focusing on three. These archetypes prove that often the female characters need the complimenting male character in order to be seen as a complete person. Jennifer Ellis put together a list of female archetypes that I will be using to make my point.

The first archetype is that of a Spinster or Librarian (Ellis, 2015). This woman is perpetually single, whether or not by choice is sometimes left up for discussion. These women are often portrayed as helpful yet weak. They need the male character to go out and do the hard work while they stay behind and provide support. Sometimes they are shown to have fallen madly in love with the strong male lead and they will do anything to earn the approval of the hero. If the story is a romantic one, the spinster sometimes gets to finally marry the man of her dreams and live happily ever after. The second archetype is the Amazon (Ellis, 2015). This woman can kick some serious butt and she is not afraid of anything. Yet, even this powerful female sometimes needs the help of man and, once the man has helped her, they usually start falling in love and find happiness together. Now, there is nothing wrong with finding love and living happily ever after, but why does the strong female lead need help from a man and why can't she be shown finding a solution to her own problems or saving herself. Even if the female character rejects the help of the other characters, she is seen as selfish or flawed for not wanting help. The third archetype is the Matriarch or Queen (Ellis, 2015). How many fairy tales have you read where there is a good and helpful queen instead of an evil one? These women are often portrayed as having gone mad from power or from being rejected by someone they love. These

otherwise accomplished women are put into the uncomfortable position of having to rule with an iron fist just because they are women. This trend is slowly changing, and women are slowly being allowed to be in positions of power without being seen as evil or rejected.

So, what does all of this mean? Are females going to forever be needing, lacking, or rejecting the love of the heroes and then being seen as incomplete? Maybe not. According to Jennifer Ellis (2015):

Instead of the traditional weak females in need of rescue, who have dominated many of our stories historically, writers, particularly screenwriters, are now electing to create female rocket scientists, who look like models, are trained in hand-to-hand combat, can fix cars and fall in love with the plucky, but mediocre, “everyman” in the opposing role.

Women are now being seen as strong and capable, right? Well, even these beautiful superwomen are falling short, because as Ellis explains that although “the writers may have had good intentions in creating these ‘strong female characters’, they feed male fantasies and create unrealistic images of women. While ‘strong’, they are not good female characters. Good female characters are nuanced, flawed and real, like good male characters. Good female characters are interesting and have agency i.e. they have motivations, make decisions, take action and affect the story” (2015). All of the archetypes discussed above are the woman that are feeding the fantasies of men. Those are the women who deserve love and need it. They are already so beautiful and now all they need is the love of a man to make them whole. That is the narrative being shown to young adults every day. Women need love to be strong, if they aren’t loved or in love, then something must be wrong. But this narrative is not the whole story, women can be strong without love:

This advice should be kept in mind in relation to the archetypes as well. While they can serve as a useful guide in shaping female characters, real women are often a combination of archetypal characteristics or are different archetypes in different settings. A woman could be The Boss at work, The Nurturer at home, the Crusader when it comes to issues of importance to her. So go write good female characters, and badass female characters and young and old female characters, with cats, and babies, and bad habits, and passions, and hang-ups and attitude, and whatever it takes to make them real, make them talk to each other about something other than men (the Bechdel test) and for God's sake, give them something to do.” (Ellis, 2015)

We are the ones who need to change the story and break the mould. Young writers and librarians and readers need to change what the world produces and sells as strong females. Because women can be strong without love.

References

Ellis, Jennifer. (2015). *Female character archetypes and strong female characters*. Jennifer Ellis – Writing [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://jenniferellis.ca/blog/2015/4/1/female-character-archetypes-and-strong-female-characters>