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Analysis Paper: Laurie Penny

Laurie Penny is an English feminist columnist and author relatively well known for her use of “in-your-face feminism” in writing and debates. Feminists like Laurie Penny often utilize language to cause an emotional reaction intentionally- by behaving in a way that may seem bold or unusual, like being unapologetically blunt or accusatory. In Laurie Penny’s essay “What To Do When You’re Not the Hero Anymore,” she discusses the growing trend of diversity in shows and movies and makes several thought-provoking claims. In making these claims, however, she ignores or misconstrues valuable perspectives indicate that there are significant flaws in her arguments.

A large part of Penny’s essay is dedicated to her claim that there needs to be greater ethnic variety in protagonists in visual entertainment. She argues that minorities watching movies with “cis white boys” written as the heroes are required to identify with a character that doesn’t “look like you, talk like you, or fuck like you.” Additionally, she says that minorities have never been able to see their own experience reflected on the screen, and have never been able to recognise themselves in the heroes portrayed in the movies and shows they watch; the heroes are always white men. With these assertions- which seem to contradict each other a bit- she implies that one of the main reasons that people are able to identify with any hero (of any race, gender, or sexual orientation) is because they look, sound, and act like them.

While Penny is correct in saying that a variety of perspectives and windows into other cultures is almost never a bad thing, she fails to consider the fact that people are more than just their gender, sexual orientation, and even their ethnic origin. There are many experiences that people from all corners of the world and walks of life can recognize in their own lives. These universal stories tell tales of what it means to be human: grief after the loss of a loved one, jealousy, fear of the unknown, the search for happiness, and much more. Universally human experiences are what makes characters in movies and television shows believable. Characters that grow, learn from their mistakes, and realise their flaws can be understood worldwide. The race, gender, sexual orientation, or culture of those characters matters only when the viewer wants it to. And that’s okay too. However, people of different walks of life are not so dissimilar that they each need their own specific films that tell their own specific stories.

In an earlier part of her essay, Penny completely dismisses the “Hero’s Journey,” which is based on Joseph Campbell’s book, *A Hero With A Thousand Faces* by disregarding Joseph Campbell as a misogynist. The “Hero’s Journey” is a common writing template used to guide a hero through a journey of conflict and self-discovery in 12 steps, which ends when the hero returns home transformed. The model was adapted from Joseph Campbell’s theory of the “monomyth,” derived from studying mythologies from all over the world. Campbell’s version of the “monomyth” is abstract and often criticised for being too vague; he left out many differences between the myths he studied. But Campbell never intended his study to become an important and much-studied writing template that it has become today.

Early in Laurie Penny’s essay, she was quick to dismiss the entirety of Campbell’s theory of the “monomyth” by misinterpreting a quote from Joseph Campbell. She wrote that Campbell reportedly told his students that “women don’t need to make the journey. In the whole of the Mythological journey, the woman is there. All she has to do is realise that she’s the place that people are trying to get to.” This, instead of going into any deeper thought into what Campbell’s reasonings for this were, she interpreted as “get back to the kitchen.” Without fully understanding Campbell’s research or of what he studied, one could easily construe this just as Penny did. Using this reasoning, Penny decides that women had no place in the “Hero’s Journey.”

Joseph Campbell based his theory of the “monomyth” on observation and was meant to be used for comparative mythology. He compiled his steps of the “Hero’s Journey” based on what he saw in world mythologies including the Bible, Buddha, and Greek and Roman myths, among many others. Because his theory was based on observation, it is clear that his intention behind his statement that the woman is the place people are trying to get to is also based on observation. If a person asked if it were the women or the men that were going on the adventures in *The Iliad* by Homer, no one could claim that it was Achilles who stayed home while the women went off across the sea. His statement was not one of sexism; his statement was a conclusion based on a large number of examples.

There are several famous examples of stories with a female protagonist that followed the “Hero’s Journey.” Several examples stand out: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* with Rey as the protagonist. Penny used Rey as an example of the improving portrayal of women in films and called her “a new kind of hero on a new kind of journey.” Rey, however, is an example of the classical hero on the traditional hero’s journey. Rey had a humble upbringing: her parents abandoned her, and she grew up alone on Jakku. She had strong abilities: she could fly as well as Han Solo, and she knew multiple languages (including Wookie). She had an emotional quest: she didn’t know why her parents abandoned her and had a hard time leaving Jakku, where she was waiting for them to return. Her journey, while obviously on the path of a hero, will be split between a trilogy of movies, so we’ve seen only part of it so far. We see her ordinary world on Jakku, her call to adventure with the appearance of BB-8 and Finn, her refusal of the call when she refuses to take Luke’s lightsaber, and at the very end we see Rey meeting the mentor, Luke Skywalker. Rey, while she is a new kind of protagonist in the *Star Wars* universe, is not a new form of hero and nor does she embark on a new kind of “Hero’s Journey.”