

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of Superheroic Great Mothers

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Abstract

This article contributes to cultural studies on media narratives by introducing an original and still underexplored analytical perspective. Cultural studies have traditionally examined how the media imaginary is shaped by hegemonic discourses that reproduce inequalities and render marginalized subjects and claims invisible. Within this framework, feminist cultural studies have analysed representations of female agency across media genres, highlighting their increasing entanglement with postfeminist and neoliberal rhetorics.

The Author proposes to integrate the perspective of the archetype into the critical analysis of media narratives, arguing that it offers a valuable tool for assessing their symbolic efficacy—that is, their capacity to symbolically nourish audience experience. Archetypal images function as powerful symbols insofar as they articulate the affective link between embodied and “lived” experience and its representation within the collective imaginary.

The study is based on a textual analysis of female superhero figures that may be understood as contemporary actualisations of archetypal images of the Great Mother within a transmedia corpus of North American superhero comics and films. The research examines both the potentials and the limitations of these representations of female power and agency. The analysis first shows how the superhero universe ambiguously reconfigures female power, which is simultaneously acknowledged and continuously constrained within contemporary narratives. It then demonstrates that even a particularly challenging figure such as Dark Phoenix fails to generate a genuinely alternative imaginary of female power, thereby revealing the persistence of symbolic containment strategies even within media representations commonly regarded as progressive.

Keywords: archetypal images, Great Mother, media imaginary, superhero films and comics, postfeminism, female agency.

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1. Introduction: archetypes, archetypal images, and media imaginary

This article is situated within a research programme on the media imaginary that has now been ongoing for more than a decade (Bartoletti, 2012, 2015, 2023; Bartoletti et al., 2020). This programme is grounded in what we term an “archetypal perspective” and motivated by the need to understand whether media narratives can—and intend to—offer stories and images capable of symbolically nourishing the experience of viewers and audiences. It also asks under what conditions this may occur, what limitations are imposed, and what—albeit marginal—forms of progression may be identified with respect to the dominant canons of contemporary cultural industries, which operate under the combined pressures of market constraints and hegemonic cultural representations.

As is well known, the concept of the archetype originates within analytical psychology, where it was developed in response to epistemological and practical questions related to the understanding and treatment of the individual psyche. Within that same disciplinary field, it has also been the object of severe criticism¹. Despite this origin outside the domain of the social sciences, we argue that the archetype represents a concept of a particular analytical power for the study of the contemporary imaginary from a cultural and social perspective, both theoretically and in applied terms.

By imaginary we refer to the content of symbolic imagination in its various forms (Durand, 1999), encompassing symbols, images, myths, and representations. Its relevance as an object of study derives from its nature as a “dynamic system for the organization of sense-generating instances, which enables the necessary relationship between human beings and the world,” of which images constitute the minimal unit (Grassi, 2006, p. 14).

Research on the contemporary imaginary cannot avoid a close engagement with media. Scholars who have approached media from the perspective of mythology (Abruzzese, 1979; Colombo, 2010; Curtis, 2019; Frezza, 1995, 2023; Gemini, 2018; Leonzi, 2010; Morin, 2005) have prepared a fertile ground for testing the notion of the archetype—or, more precisely, that of the archetypal image. In fact, myth constitutes an exemplary symbolic form insofar as it is both collective and effective, a quality that derives in part from its deep roots in emotional structures (Bartoletti, 2007; Caillois, 1998; Grassi, 2012).

If myth is social in substance, Caillois (1998) emphasized its affective innervation because, alongside external determinations—natural, historical, and

¹ For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Domenico Secondulfo’s contribution in this same issue.

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

social—, myth is shaped by internal necessities, by unconscious determinations of human affectivity. This entanglement of individual and social dimensions closely resonates with the characteristics of the archetype and its images².

We argue that the heuristic strength of the archetype lies precisely in its capacity to illuminate the connection—mediated by the symbolic dimension—between subjective and social life. In other words, through its images, the archetype connects the symbol as it is innervated in human life—embodied, lived, and therefore subjectively “true”—with the symbol as it is represented in the multiple forms of the collective imaginary, where it necessarily acquires a degree of autonomy from individual life. When we turn our attention to the imaginary produced by contemporary cultural industries, the efficacy of this connection cannot be taken for granted and must instead be critically examined. This constitutes the primary objective of the present article and of the broader research programme in which it is embedded.

At the theoretical level, we therefore identify in the category of the archetype, and in its operational translation as archetypal image, a productive perspective for reflecting on the symbolic efficacy (Douglas, 1970; Lévi-Strauss, 2002) of contemporary media narratives. With this concept we refer to their capacity to nourish experience, and to do so according to their specific hallmark, namely ambivalence. When we search for archetypal images in media texts, we are not referring to mere stereotypical representations of major archetypes—such as the hero, the double, or the Great Mother—but rather to images capable of containing the irreducible ambivalence of human life without resolving or neutralising it. These are potentially unsettling images, which may prove uncomfortable even for the cultural universes that host them.

From a phenomenological and practical standpoint, cultural industries themselves create universes that are conducive to the production of images inspired by archetypes, insofar as they draw extensively on the mythic imaginary—modern, premodern, and archaic alike. This constitutes an immense and inexhaustible reservoir to which media industries continually return in order to produce stories, images, and figures shaped both by the spirit of the time (Gemini, 2018; Gill, 2007; Morin, 2005) and by the specific logics and grammars of different contemporary media (Colombo, 1998; Frezza, 2023). Archetypal images produced within the framework of cultural industries must necessarily confront hegemonic narratives (Hall, 1973), either by challenging them or by being domesticated in turn.

² While criticising the interpretation of myths proposed by psychoanalysis—particularly in its Jungian variant—Caillois nonetheless acknowledges this discipline’s merit in having addressed myth in connection with deep psychological variables.

In the following sections, we will first outline the general characteristics of archetypal images and then focus on the images associated with a specific archetype, that of the Great Mother. We will subsequently apply this theoretical and analytical perspective—which, in our view, remains yet insufficiently explored—to a media imaginary that is at once particularly promising and profoundly disappointing. This is the transmedia superhero universe that emerged in the United States from the 1930s onwards and that today constitutes a privileged observatory for examining the symbolic status of global cultural industry products. This universe is increasingly densely populated by female heroic characters, some of which are clearly inspired by archetypal figures and symbols; as we shall see, however, this inspiration does not in itself guarantee their symbolic efficacy.

2. The archetype and its images

Archetypes may first be defined as the contents of the collective unconscious, which Carl Gustav Jung (2008) distinguishes from the personal unconscious. The latter consists essentially of contents connected to individual biography that were once conscious and were later repressed or forgotten. The collective unconscious, by contrast, constitutes a component of the unconscious psyche that cannot be reduced either to personal experience or to the specific culture of a given community. Archetypes, according to Jung, therefore form a universal heritage of the human species, insofar as they are connected to the fundamental conditions of human life on Earth.

At the individual level, within the framework of Jungian analytical psychology, the archetype may be defined as a structural element of the psyche, representing “the true invisible roots of consciousness” (Jung & Kerényi, 2003, pp. 121–122), and serving as the basis for the transformation of psychic processes into images (Jacobi, 2004). It is precisely these images that constitute our object of inquiry. Our focus, therefore, is not so much on the idea of the archetype—or the “archetype in itself”—as on archetypal images or representations. The archetype, in fact, corresponds to a disposition to produce images of a certain kind and always exists as a potential symbol that, given an appropriate state of consciousness, is ready to be actualised and manifested (Jacobi, 2004). The term archetypal image, by contrast, refers to this expression once it has been actualised and represented in symbolic form. While the archetype in itself is conceived as immutable, archetypal images—though deriving from a common matrix—are perpetually mutable and destined to evolve over time.

Consistently with this conception, in his studies on the imaginary Gilbert Durand identifies the archetype as “a dynamic form, an organising structure of

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

images that nonetheless always surpasses the individual, biographical, regional, and social concretisations of image formation” (1999, p. 66). Archetypes may be understood as structuring imaginative activity at both the psychic and collective levels, including modern cultural production—from poetry and literature to artistic forms and, in particular, the contemporary audiovisual media products analysed in this article.

Within the broader universe of symbols, archetypal representations have a special status because, as Jung emphasises, they cannot be interpreted simply as literal signs of conscious content. Rather, they allow for the expression of unconscious contents that are intuited but still unknown and never fully intelligible. Archetypal images preserve a complexity of meaning that can never be entirely simplified: they are symbols that are polysemic, charged with allusions—in short, inexhaustible—and paradoxical (Jung, 2008). They may therefore be regarded as the highest and most powerful form of symbolic production, autonomous from any practical function (Cassirer, 1992; Durand, 1999; Piazzzi, 1985) as well as from the concrete referents to which they appear to allude. Archetypal images cannot be reduced to verbal language or to an exhaustive conscious explanation, which they always exceed. As Durand clearly states, the symbol is “a representation that makes a secret meaning appear; it is the epiphany of a mystery” (1999, p. 22). In the case of the archetype, what appears is an unconscious meaning, deeply rooted in the mysteries of human life and manifesting itself to consciousness.

The source of the symbolic efficacy of archetypal images can be traced to the emotional dimension that is inseparable from their meaning. Jung repeatedly stresses that psychic phenomena in their totality are composed not only of intellectual meaning but also of value, which depends on the intensity of the accompanying affective tone: “affective value, that is, provides the measure of the intensity of an idea or representation, and intensity in turn expresses its energetic tension, its degree of efficacy” (Jung, 1997, pp. 27–28). Emotion—or feeling—is central to the efficacy of an archetypal image and to the meaning it contains (Durand, 1963)³.

The close connection between archetypal image and emotion points to what may be described as a primacy of the image. Archetypes may in fact be understood as the source not only of images but also of ideas. According to Jung (1993), archetypal representations make it possible to unite idea and feeling and, through this union, to translate ideas into action. Following Jung’s intuition, Durand argues that images are not degraded signs but rather

³ In this sense, Durand (1963) takes up and further develops Gaston Bachelard’s insights on the imagination. For a discussion of Bachelard’s still under-recognised relevance to the sociology of the imaginary, see Camorrino and Pannofino (2024).

constitute a rich and complex form of metaphor-based thinking, of which rational thought and verbal language represent a derived simplification and restriction⁴. Archetypes thus function as a point of articulation between the imaginary and rational processes (Durand, 1963), and for this reason they play a crucial role in the generation of ideas and in the connection between emotional and cognitive processes.

In conclusion, from a Jungian perspective, we can identify multiple dimensions of the symbolic efficacy of archetypal images. These images sustain a connection between consciousness and the unconscious by representing unconscious psychic processes—unknown yet intuited—to consciousness in imaginal form, thereby conferring order and meaning upon them. By maintaining this connection, archetypal images present themselves as unifiers of pairs of opposites. More precisely, the symbolic efficacy of the archetype manifests itself in the controlled expression of the disruptive forces of the unconscious through the incessant production and transformation of symbols. Within the framework of analytical psychology, the aim of the symbolic process is an illumination, or a heightened level of consciousness, through which the initial situation is transcended on a higher plane—one that may concern both collective and individual life.

Archetypes are therefore also factors of both individual and collective transformation. This allows us to identify what is at stake in the symbolic quality of figures and stories produced by contemporary media.

3. The archetype of the Great Mother: characteristics and meanings

Within analytical psychology, several fundamental archetypes have been identified, each capable of generating a constellation of interconnected images that refer to a specific domain of meaning. From a Jungian perspective, archetypes as a whole constitute the structure of the unconscious (Jung 2006). They are intrinsically related to the process of individuation, through which the ego (consciousness) gradually approaches the Self, understood as the totality of the psyche. These include archetypes such as the Shadow, the Anima and the Animus, the Wise Old Man, and the chthonic Mother, culminating in the archetype of totality, or the Self (Jung 1997).

It is within this context that the archetype of the Mother is identified (Jung 2006, 2008), from which the archetype of the Great Mother is derived. Jung argues that the images associated with the mother archetype function as

⁴ On the importance of metaphorical thought in the production of meaning and in the ordering of human experience, see Douglas (1970).

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

symbols of the unconscious, understood as the matrix of all images and symbols, and ultimately as the matrix of consciousness itself. The mother archetype can manifest itself in both positive and negative aspects, since ambivalence constitutes the defining feature of archetypal images. This ambivalence is expressed through the two opposing figures analysed by both Jung and Erich Neumann (1981): the “loving” or nurturing mother, who feeds and protects, and the “terrible mother,” who engulfs and devours. These are not necessarily distinct images, but rather aspects that may coexist within the same figure, as is typically the case in representations of archaic Great Mothers (Gimbutas, 1989, 1999) and may also occur, albeit less expectedly, in contemporary images of the Great Mother (Bartoletti, 2012, 2023).

The essential aspects of the mother archetype thus extend from nourishing goodness and protection—embodied in the various figures of the nurturing mother, both human and animal (such as the Virgin Mary or the she-wolf who nurses the twins Romulus and Remus in the foundational myth of the city of Rome)—to orgiastic emotionality and infernal darkness, which manifest themselves in the figures of the terrible mother, such as the destructive nature or the divine dyad Demeter/Persephone. The relationship with the unconscious as a source of life, death, and regeneration, together with the inescapable bond of human life with the earth and with matter, thus emerges as a core meaning of the mother archetype.

These aspects are transferred to the Great Mother, which articulates them in a specific way through the adjective, or epithet, “Great,” expressing a superiority “with respect to everything that is human and, more generally, to everything that has been created” (Neumann, 1981, p. 22). In this sense, “great” are the figures of particularly powerful, and archaic mothers, such as mythical ancestors, great goddesses and mother goddesses, fairies and witches, and ultimately the archetypal “Mother Nature” (Jung, 2006).

Multidisciplinary scholarship analysing millennia of representational history, encompassing the diverse symbolic and imaginal forms produced by human cultures across time, suggests linking figures of the Great Mother to the mysteries of life and to the transformation that is intrinsic to life itself (Durand, 1963; Gimbutas, 1989, 1999; Jung, 2006, 2008; Neumann, 1981; von Franz, 1969, 1972/1983, 1980). More precisely, the central meaning of archetypal representations of the Great Mother refers to the mystery of life as a paradoxical and complementary cycle of life, death, and regeneration, a cycle that finds expression in natural life, in the rhythms of vegetation and agriculture, as exemplified by the symbol of grain in the myth of Demeter. According to Neumann, the essence of the “secret meaning” that figures of the Great Mother have sought to make manifest is even more radical, insofar as her mysteries

include “her capacity to protect life *only* through death, and development toward a new birth *only* through suffering” (1981, p. 278, emphasis added).

The central meaning of archetypal images of the Great Mother thus corresponds to the essential nature of the living. As Edgar Morin (2002) emphasises, the biological order stands in radical opposition to the physical order precisely because of its intrinsic relationship with death, which is characterised simultaneously by complementarity, co-presence, and antagonism. Within the biological order, life and death do not stand in opposition but rather imply one another, and this does not constitute a weakness of living systems, but rather their very strength. Degradation becomes the source of continual renewal, just as disorder nourishes ongoing reorganisation and the progressive evolution toward more complex forms of life (Morin, 2004).

The question, then, is how much of this profound and tragic meaning of archetypal images of the Great Mother—encompassing both individual and collective life—survives in contemporary representations within modern cultural industries.

4. Great Mothers in the superhero imaginary: characteristics and limitations of female power

The representations we intend to analyse through the archetypal perspective are the female figures populating the North American-based superhero universe. Its characters and storylines began to take shape in the 1930s and today sustain one of the most significant transmedia cultural industries with global reach (Cocca, 2016; Frezza, 2023; Scolari, Bertetti, & Freeman, 2020).

We have chosen to focus on this universe because, at least in principle, it appears particularly promising as a media imaginary. First, superhero sagas—developed within the two major mainstream production systems, DC Comics and Marvel Comics—display a clear debt to classical mythologies of the hero, especially in their masculine formulations. Second, their imagery has become increasingly densely populated by female heroic figures, some of which are clearly inspired by archetypal symbols, even though their actual symbolic efficacy remains to be tested.

Indeed, while female characters were rare and marginal until the 1960s and 1970s—albeit in some cases remarkably powerful, as in the figure of Wonder Woman—their numbers subsequently increased, accompanied by a greater variety of representations over time. Among the more innovative figures, which depart from the intensifying tendency toward sexualisation from the 1970s

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

onward, are the young mutants Rogue and Kitty Pryde, both created by the influential Marvel author Chris Claremont (Cocca, 2016). In more recent years, a series of “solo” films within the superhero cinematic universe has been devoted to both long-established and more recent female figures, such as Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Black Widow (Kent, 2025; Taylor & Glitsos, 2023). This development may be read as a signal of increased female protagonism.

These characteristics of the transmedia superhero universe have been extensively analysed within cultural and feminist studies, which have interrogated female agency and the differing representations of male and female power (Cocca, 2016; Curtis, 2020; Kent, 2021). Our aim here is to critically examine representations of female power by integrating an archetypal perspective. We therefore ask whether, and in what form, the actualisations of Great Mother figures within superhero media products retain the symbolic efficacy of archetypal images—ambivalent and paradoxical symbols capable of bringing to the surface meanings that are intuited but not yet fully known, and of offering audiences an experience that may question and unsettle them, fostering transformation. Such an experience would thus go well beyond mere reassuring entertainment or the reaffirmation of hegemonic culture.

We begin with an overarching analysis of representations of female power—its emergences, specificities, and limitations—before focusing more closely on a figure that may constitute, at least potentially, a privileged site for the work of archetypal images in contemporary media narratives: Dark Phoenix from the Marvel universe.

Cultural and feminist studies have long critically observed how the media imaginary is shaped by hegemonic rhetorics that reproduce inequalities and render marginalised subjectivities and claims invisible (Hall, 1973; McRobbie, 2004). From this perspective, they have analysed representations of female agency across media genres—from fiction to news and hybrid formats (Dillman, 2014; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2022)—which are today strongly influenced by postfeminist and neoliberal hegemonic rhetorics (Ghigi & Rottenberg, 2019; Gill, 2007; Kent 2021, 2023; McRobbie 2004, 2009; Rottenberg 2018), recognisable as hallmarks of the contemporary spirit of the time. These rhetorics shape female representations in the new millennium, simultaneously legitimising and frustrating emancipatory possibilities for both female characters and their audiences.

Postfeminism constitutes a cultural sensibility that articulates both feminist and anti-feminist positions, while displaying a clear affinity with neoliberal ideology. It cannot therefore be understood simply as a rejection of feminism, but rather as a contradictory reconfiguration of it, in which “feminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed” (Gill,

2007, p. 163). Postfeminism appropriates feminist claims while simultaneously declaring their historical fulfilment, as if they had already been achieved for all women. It becomes ideological insofar as it frames female agency as taken for granted and unproblematic, as a natural outcome of individual will and effort, while attributing failure to individual deficits rather than to the persistence of cultural and structural barriers. Such narratives do not support audiences in grappling with the contradictions of contemporary life, nor with the ambivalence inherent in symbolic life.

The superhero imaginary of recent decades offers a fertile terrain for observing these dynamics. In this domain, new representations of female power emerge recurrently, yet are accompanied by equally persistent and innovative strategies of containment. Female agency thus appears as simultaneously present and absent, as the outcome of an unresolved tension between pressures toward recognition—driven by successive feminist movements, including the intersectional sensibility of third-wave feminism (Curtis & Cardo, 2018)—and a recurrent counteroffensive aimed at limiting, delegitimising, or even annihilating it. We therefore ask whether the mobilisation of archetypal symbols in representations of female power can make a meaningful difference in the outcome of this ongoing tension between opposing forces.

In order to assess the symbolic efficacy of representations of superheroines as archetypal images of Great Mothers, we have identified a set of key variables emerging from the dialogue between the literature on archetypal Great Mother images and cultural studies of the superhero universe: the origins of superheroines; the specific characteristics of female power, also in relation to and in contrast with male power; relationships with male figures within the narrative, oscillating between autonomy and dependence; the memory of one's own history as a resource⁵; and narrative endings. If these aspects define the contours of female power and agency, it is precisely along these dimensions that recurrent strategies of containment are deployed.

The figure of Wonder Woman represents an exemplary case of this tension and of the ambiguous strategies through which female power is represented in both progressive and regressive terms. Although she is not historically the first superheroine, Wonder Woman is undoubtedly a foundational figure. Alongside

⁵ This is a motif that we have not found explicitly addressed in the scholarship on superhero cultural products, yet we believe it deserves further investigation. The memory of one's own history as a symbolic resource and a source of power is in fact a characteristic feature of Great Mother figures—for instance in the case of the Sibyls among ancient figures (Lussu, 2008) —, but also in representations of ancestral Great Mothers in modern narratives, such as those found in the films of Hayao Miyazaki (Bartoletti, 2023).

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

Superman and Batman, she is the only woman to whom some of the longest-running and most successful storylines have been devoted. She was also the first to receive her own series for what would later become DC Comics (Cocca, 2016). She therefore occupies a privileged position from which to observe dominant tendencies within the superhero universe.

Diana Prince, a.k.a. Wonder Woman—the Amazon princess endowed with a magical lasso—was created in 1941 by American psychologist William Moulton Marston with the explicit aim of attracting a female audience, and she represented a highly progressive female character for her time. The Amazons constitute a matriarchal myth, and Wonder Woman's origins are therefore essential in defining her as a powerful superheroine and as a potential modern Great Mother. Indeed, the Amazon princess is generated by her mother, Queen Hippolyta, without male intervention (Curtis, 2017), in a manner reminiscent of parthenogenetic myths of the archaic Great Goddess. It should be emphasised that reproductive power is a fundamental dimension of female power, long an object of envy, fear, and repeated attempts at expropriation by male power, whether through imagination or science and technology (Bartoletti, 2015; Di Nicola, 2024). Matriarchal descent is thus effective in signifying radical autonomy.

If Wonder Woman's extraordinary origin is a crucial component of her power, it is no coincidence that an effective containment strategy consists precisely in revising her birth. In 2012, Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang deprived the Amazon princess of her defining matriarchal lineage in favour of a more reassuring, direct filiation from Zeus (Curtis, 2017, 2020). The great patriarch of Greek mythology is renowned for his desire to appropriate female generative capacity and features in a myth of male parthenogenesis characteristic of archaic Greek culture, yet continuously reactivated in Western imaginary (Bartoletti, 2015). Similarly, the historical repositioning of Wonder Woman's origins may also be interpreted as an additional containment strategy (Kent, 2023).

The domesticated rewriting of origins constitutes a first containment strategy of superheroines' agency and can be linked to another recurring motif in female-centred superhero storylines. We argue that just as connection to a mythic past provides a source of agency, the loss of memory functions as a mechanism of disempowerment. We found an exemplary case in the recent *Avengers: Endgame* saga in the Marvel universe, featuring an all-female team of Avengers protecting the Battleworld region known as Arcadia. Following a battle, all protagonists lose their memory of life on Battleworld, the team ceases to exist, and Singularity—the character who had saved their lives—is forgotten and left to wander the cosmos in a desperate attempt to remind them of the solidarity that once bound them together (Curtis & Cardo, 2018).

Superheroines' agency is also typically compromised by widespread representations of their power as "out of control," a trait framed as typically feminine (Kent, 2021; Prater, 2012) and one that renders them dependent on male intervention to restore order and balance. Equally pervasive and historically entrenched is the strategy of reducing female power to sexuality and seduction, a trope with deep roots in Western culture (Abruzzese, 1979; Bartoletti, 2012; Madrid, 2009; Neumann, 1981). As Prater (2012) argues, the sexualisation of power plays a key role in constructing heroines' uncontrolled power and their perceived danger to men—a dynamic clearly visible in the figure of Dark Phoenix, discussed in the following section.

Superhero sagas not only represent female power as imperfect or limited in comparison to male power, but also recurrently depict superheroines as undergoing a reduction or even total loss of their powers, resulting in their temporary or permanent demotion within the superhero universe. Comic book author Gail Simone famously coined the expression "women in refrigerators" to describe these cases of containment of female power, drawing on the paradigmatic example of Alex DeWitt, the girlfriend of DC Comics' Green Lantern, who is murdered, dismembered, and hidden in a refrigerator in a mid-1990s storyline (Cocca, 2016). Such female figures are sacrificed at a certain point in the narrative—killed, raped, mutilated, or stripped of their powers—in order to propel the male hero's action and character development.

The relationship between superheroines and male characters is thus crucial in defining their agency and autonomy. Regressive cases are those in which female power requires male legitimation, while progressive cases are those in which superheroines do not need recognition, permission, or approval to act. Examples include the rewriting of Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel and the evolution of characters from villains to anti-heroines, who manage to assert autonomy and agency—including in the domain of sexuality—as in the case of Harley Quinn as reimagined by writer Amanda Conner (Curtis & Cardo, 2018).

Finally, close attention must be paid to the endings assigned to superheroines. Their elimination from the narrative functions as a further containment strategy, and the way it occurs—and by whose hand—matters. The exemplary case discussed below is that of Dark Phoenix.

5. Dark Phoenix: an archetypal image of (denied) transformation

Within this ambivalent framework, we focus on Dark Phoenix in the Marvel transmedia universe. She appears particularly promising for exploring the re-emergence of archetypal images of the Great Mother—perhaps second

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

only to Wonder Woman—yet, for this very reason, also particularly disappointing

Dark Phoenix can be understood as part of a triadic configuration, together with the mutant Jean Grey and the cosmic force known as the Phoenix. Jean Grey first appears in 1963 as the sole female member of the original X-Men team, and her fusion with the Phoenix Force in a 1976 issue gives rise to one of the most beloved sagas in superhero comics. The *Dark Phoenix Saga*, developed by the authorial duo Chris Claremont and John Byrne in 1980, has since been reworked through multiple transmedia iterations. Our textual analysis is based on the original 1980 comic saga (#129–138), the two cinematic adaptations—*X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006) and *Dark Phoenix* (Simon Kinberg, 2019)—and considers the set of endings produced in the comic medium from the mid-1980s to the present⁶. Endings are particularly revealing for grasping the overall meaning of a narrative (Bartoletti et al., 2021) and for understanding the effective role played by superheroines within imaginary worlds.

Jean Grey is portrayed as an exceptionally powerful mutant, yet she is also marked by conventionally feminine traits, such as her romantic relationship with a fellow team member, Cyclops, and her interest in conventionally feminine domains such as fashion (Cocca, 2016). The classic trope of power out of control recurs across different versions of the Jean/Dark Phoenix storyline, while the framing of female power as mere sexual or seductive power is not always central—being prominent in the 2006 film adaptation, but largely absent from the 2019 version.

While Jean's characterization reflects the canonical features and limitations typically assigned to female protagonists in the superhero universe, her fusion with the cosmic Phoenix Force introduces a theme of strong archetypal relevance, fostering expectations of significant symbolic efficacy. The phoenix is a legendary and sacred figure, linked to the Egyptian cult of the sun god Ra, and typically represented as a large bird (Grimal, 2005)—a visual motif frequently evoked by Byrne, who often depicts a massive fiery bird in the background of Dark Phoenix's manifestations.

The symbolism of the phoenix is rooted in death and rebirth, and different versions of the myth converge on its mode of reproduction: as a unique being, it cannot rely on sexual coupling. When sensing its end, it prepares a nest in which it lies down and sets itself aflame, or impregnates the nest with its own seed, from whose ashes it is reborn. The phoenix thus embodies a myth of

⁶ See “The full Dark Phoenix Reading Guide” on Marvel's official website, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/comics/>, accessed 21 November 2025.

parthenogenesis, or self-generation—a recurring theme in figures of the Great Mother, already encountered in Wonder Woman's matriarchal origins.

Moreover, the phoenix represents the cyclical continuity of birth and death, condensed in the image of the nest-tomb—a symbol typically linked to the archaic Great Mothers (Gimbutas 1989, 1999). It functions simultaneously as an ascensional symbol and as a symbol of transformation (Durand, 1963). Linked to the cult of the dying and resurrecting god, the phoenix evokes solar and fiery imagery as forces that are at once life-giving and destructive, profoundly ambivalent like all natural powers (Jung, 2006). As such, the phoenix emerges as a powerful symbol of psychological transformation.

The fusion between Jean and the Phoenix Force thus lays the groundwork for the emergence of an extraordinarily powerful female figure within the Marvel universe. Yet the overarching narrative remains one of denied transformation. As stated on Marvel's official website⁷, when the Phoenix encounters a worthy host and merges with her or him, the resulting entity may become either a powerful force for good (Phoenix) or an extraordinarily destructive villain (Dark Phoenix). Within the Marvel universe, Jean repeatedly becomes Dark Phoenix, reactivating the uncontrollable potency of the orgiastic and devouring Great Mother who, once beyond control, is destined to translate into pure destruction and must therefore be eliminated from the storyline⁸. Such a polarization of evil and good, of death and birth, ultimately fails to convey the constitutive ambivalence of archetypal Great Mother imagery.

Accordingly, the multiple endings of the *Dark Phoenix* saga include Jean's suicide in the original 1980 comic storyline, the lobotomy imposed in the censored alternative ending of the same year, and a form of assisted suicide at the hands of her lover Wolverine in the 2006 film, to cite only the most well-known and mainstream variants.

The most recent cinematic adaptation, *Dark Phoenix* (2019), introduces several innovations in both character and storyline, and can be interpreted as an ambivalent postfeminist reconfiguration of Jean/Dark Phoenix. On the one hand, Jean is granted greater agency and autonomy from male protagonists, including her surrogate father Professor Charles Xavier and her long-standing partner Cyclops. Nevertheless, her emancipatory aspirations are simultaneously legitimated and frustrated—an emblematic feature of postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007).

⁷ See <https://www.marvel.com/characters/phoenix-force>, accessed 21 November 2025.

⁸ It is worth noting that the Dark Phoenix Saga represents the first depiction of the death of a central protagonist in the superhero comic genre—specifically, a female hero (Robbins, 1996).

Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers
Roberta Bartoletti

Compared to earlier, overtly regressive endings, Jean is now allowed to decide her own fate, as she explicitly states in the film's final moments, in line with postfeminist tropes of freedom and choice that, as McRobbie (2004) argues, are inextricably associated with the figure of the "young woman". Yet this decision ultimately amounts to choosing between leaving or dying. Even in this partially progressive conclusion, Jean/Dark Phoenix is removed from the story through a voluntary exile into space, where she persists solely as a cosmic force.

We may therefore conclude that not even the mobilisation of an archetypal image associated with Great Mother symbolism, such as the phoenix, succeeds in producing transformative effects within the superhero universe. The authors of Jean/Dark Phoenix—despite having imagined an extraordinarily powerful female character—fail to envision a fulfilled transformation for her, as would be expected of a genuinely archetypal hero. Dark Phoenix's destructive power never evolves into regeneration, at least not on Earth. The phoenix's symbolism of transformation is thus repeatedly neutralised, raising questions about how both female and male audiences experience and make sense of this unresolved symbolic impasse.

6. Conclusions: Archetypal Images between Promise and Containment

This article has sought to demonstrate how an archetypal perspective can be productively tested within the field of cultural analysis of media narratives. To this end, we focused on superheroines and their storylines as potential actualisations of archetypal images of the Great Mother. Our aim was to assess whether, and in what ways, the superhero imaginary—one of the most prominent forms of contemporary cultural production—nurtures or, conversely, frustrates the imagination and emancipatory potential of the audiences it addresses.

The sociology of culture and media has long acknowledged the capacity of audiences to actively appropriate the products of the cultural industry (de Certeau, 2001; Hall, 1973). At the same time, however, it is crucial to recognize that the quality of the narratives and figures currently offered to readers and viewers does make a difference. While the superhero imaginary recurrently draws upon mythic themes and archetypal symbols, reactivating them in contemporary forms, the symbolic efficacy of these cultural products cannot be taken for granted.

Our analysis has revealed moments of promise and surprise, alongside recurrent regressions and failures. Overall, the experience offered to contemporary audiences appears to remain largely shaped by conventional and

hegemonic imaginaries, only intermittently disrupted by imaginative challenges that are not always sustained over time, and by a spirit of the time that is progressive only in an ambiguous and contradictory manner. We can only hope that future heroines of superhero imaginary—and their audiences along with them—will prove more fortunate.

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Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
Superheroic Great Mothers

Roberta Bartoletti

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Archetypal Images and the Media Imaginary: Potentials and Limitations of
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Roberta Bartoletti

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