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ELLE WOODS, LEGALLY BLONDE, AND THE HERO'S JOURNEY: WHAT, LIKE, IT'S HARD?

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"I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?" asks Elle Woods, dressed in hot-pink fishnet tights, a playboy bunny costume, hot pink peep-toe wedges, and matching satin bunny ears. Elle commands the attention of any and every room, but in this instance, she commands the attention of a room full of people who want nothing to do with her. They are wearing cable knit sweaters featuring varying shades of beige and eggshell white, pantyhose, collared shirts, and pleated skirts ending just above the knee. They are glancing at each other while sipping glasses of hundred-dollar Merlot, tightly crossing their legs, sitting up straight, and smirking at Elle. She holds her ground, throws an insult or two at the ring leader, and sashays out of the room, heading directly to collect what she came for. She sees him, talks to him even, but her face begins to change. She loses the signature light in her eyes, the gold radiating off of her person dims, and she shrinks into herself. She has lost, and they, he, has won; unsurprisingly, she is not content with this outcome, and she is prepared to fight.

Elle Woods, a Bel-Air native and daughter of two very successful parents, is quite accustomed to standing out in a room full of people who are dulled by her radiance. She is not, however, accustomed to standing out in a negative context; in fact, humiliation, especially socially, is a phenomenon completely foreign to her. She is excluded not only physically, but in every aspect of her life: her presence is unwanted, she is gazed at under disapproving eyes, and she is regarded across the room as a simple, air-headed blonde with no substance to her whatsoever. Elle has no allies: she is alone in this battle, despite the fact that she worked just as hard as every other player to make it to the field.

Elle is a seasoned player, however, and she remains unscathed when faced with humiliation on the grounds that she is dressed completely differently than everyone else in the room; it is not until she is rejected that she truly begins to falter. It is quite clear that Elle, especially in this situation, is the underdog. She is put up against the judgmental, clique-ish Harvard Law students, and no one truly expects her to even make it through a semester at Harvard, let alone somehow come out on top. It is this very attitude, this preconceived idea that, based on her appearance and her different socialization, she will completely and utterly fail at Harvard, that causes her to transform motivationally and intellectually in a manner consistent with underdog heroes.

OVERVIEW OF HEROISM SCIENCE

Heroism science is a relatively new field in psychology. Focused primarily on determining the journey of a hero, motivations of a hero, the impact of the hero, and the transformation of the hero as well as other facets, heroism science aims at analyzing the plethora of heroes both past and present. Based largely on Joseph Campbell's (1949) hero monomyth, which describes the prototypical heroic path of departure, initiation, and return, the hero's journey is one that is largely subject to various interpretations and has been debated among researchers ever since the emergence of the field (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). The heroic actor, described as "a functioning biological organism that can perceive, move within, respond to, and transform its environment", is a fairly broad definition that is applicable to a wide variety of situations and people, thus leading to the overall study of heroism science to be extremely subjective (Johnson, 2008).

This subjective definition allows for the argument to be made that nearly any person can be a hero, so long as someone, somewhere, believes that they did something heroic. Regardless of the specifics of the heroic act, however, there are constants in this field that apply to nearly every single heroic story: the hero is summoned on a journey, is missing some sort of inner quality, experiences sets of trials and tribulations, receives assistance from others, finds the missing quality, successfully completes the mission, and returns home in order to bestow some sort of boon to better the community from which he/she came (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). In the case of Elle Woods, these constants are extremely applicable.

Elle Woods' Hero's Journey

Elle's story begins in Los Angeles, California, where she is in her senior year at the California University of Los Angeles, is the president of her sorority Delta Nu, and is expecting a proposal of marriage by her longtime boyfriend Warner Hunnington III. Her world is turned upside down, however, when instead of proposing, Warner ends his relationship with Elle on the grounds that he needs someone more "serious" if he plans on attending Harvard Law School in the coming fall and becoming a senator by the time he is thirty. It is this rejection, this romantic failure, that causes Elle to undergo her first motivational transformation and sets her on the path of her hero's journey. Characterized by Allison and Goethals to be brought about by tragedy, this type of transformation can "beget motivational changes in people who heroically use these tragedies to transform entire societies" (Allison & Goethals, 2017). In Elle's case, her tragedy in this instance is simple: her heart is broken, her world ripped from under her feet, and her character utterly destroyed by the notion that she is not serious enough to support her partner in a stressful career path. At this point in her journey, Elle is completely dependent on Warner for her sense of self-worth, and when he so blatantly rejects her, she is completely lost.

To cope with this tragedy, Elle completely shifts her focus. Instead of pursuing a career with her major (fashion merchandising), she decides to attempt to prove to Warner that, contrary to his belief, she can be serious, and she makes plans to attend Harvard Law with him and become a lawyer as well. Here, her motivation is driven still by her dependence to Warner; she yearns for his approval and is continuing to base her self-worth on it. This decision to move from her friends, family, and home, which is linked directly to her romantic failure, marks the beginning of the first phase of her hero's journey: departure.

Departure

As mentioned previously, Elle's departure is clear cut: she picks herself up, prepares to leave her family, friends, and the safety and support she has known her whole life, to pursue a career in which she had originally no interest. While the departure itself is self-evident, the process leading up to it was not; consistent with her underdog status, she was doubted the entire way by those around her. The underdog, described by Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) as "individuals who overcame handicap or adverse conditions and succeed in spite of such negative circumstances", and the underdog described by Vandello et al. (2017) as "disadvantaged parties acing advantaged opponents and unlikely to succeed" describes Elle perfectly. After first making the decision to pursue Harvard and after purchasing books on the LSAT, Elle informs her parents of her decision. At this time, Elle is swimming in her family's pool, talking to her father, who is standing up outside of the pool and looking down at her as he speaks. After telling him that she plans to go to Harvard, and that Harvard is a "perfectly acceptable place", her mother first responds with "honey, you were first runner up at the Miss Hawaiian Tropics contest... why are you going to throw that all away?" (Legally Blonde, 2001), thus exemplifying just how little her parents expect of her based solely on her appearance.

To make matters worse, her father follows up with "sweetheart, you don't need law school. Law school is for people who are boring, and ugly, and serious. And you, Button, are none of those things" (Legally Blonde, 2001), illustrating even further how little Elle's parents truly think of her. Additionally, the positioning of Elle and her parents is significant to the scene in that her parents are physically looking down on her as they speak, which simply exemplifies even more so how she is being looked down upon.

Elle's parents are very clearly unconvinced that she is capable of not only being admitted to Harvard, but also that she is capable of being "serious". These sexist views are consistent with what Crystal Hoyt (2014) describes in her analysis of gender stereotypes: "The particular stereotypes that influence the perception and evaluation of individuals in leadership are those maintaining that 'women take care' and 'men take charge'." Elle is an attractive, charismatic, intelligent young woman, but it is these very characteristics that lead those around her to assume that she will fail in a position where she must take charge and be a leader: for instance, a lawyer.

Initiation

Once she is accepted into Harvard, Elle experiences what is perhaps the most difficult and trying time of her life. She is completely unaccustomed to the life of the east coast: she arrives to her new school in a black convertible with two moving trucks following closely behind, dressed in hot pink leather, with her dog Bruiser wearing a matching outfit. Unsurprisingly, she is judged immediately. As Elle attempts to navigate Harvard and become re-socialized to the social norms of her new school, she experiences a number of failures that push her along her motivational transformation. One such repetitive failure is her failure to make friends and establish a social life, which proves to be one of the most damaging issues for her. She is not well-liked at Harvard; she is excluded from groups, picked on, and judged by everyone around her for sticking to herself and refusing to completely surrender her individuality to the east coast. It is these failures, however, that push her to undergo her second motivational transformation.

Her second, and most important, motivational transformation is brought about yet again by romantic failure. Elle's beloved Warner is at this point engaged to a snobby New England girl named Vivian who does everything in her power to make Elle's life a living hell. After inviting Elle to a "costume party" which is really just a typical party hosted for the purpose of humiliating Elle, Vivian begins to go out of her way to dehumanize Elle. It is not this, however, that catalyzes Elle's transformation; rather, it is rejection, once again, from Warner. After discussing with Warner her concerns about balancing a summer internship with the well-regarded Professor Callahan, Warner tells Elle, "oh you'll never get the grades to qualify for one of those spots...you're just not smart enough, sweetie" (Legally Blonde, 2001), thus prompting Elle to finally see the reality. Despite the fact that she was accepted into the same law school, is taking the same classes, and is engaged in the same workload as Warner, she is forced to accept that she will never be good enough for him. It is this realization that not only catalyzes her second motivational transformation, where she shifts from being motivated primarily by her need for Warner's approval and acceptance to her desire to prove to everyone "just how valuable Elle Woods can be" (Legally Blonde, 2001), but also marks the beginning of her transformation from dependence to autonomy.

Once Elle makes the conscious decision to put no further stock in the opinions of Warner, her transformation of dependence to autonomy is complete. Autonomy is defined by Phil Zimbardo as the idea that “heroes are people with the ability to resist social pressures that promote evil, and that such resistance requires the moral courage to be guided by one’s heart rather than by social cues” (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Such autonomy is reflected by Elle Woods in her newly acquired ability to stand her ground against the many, many negative social pressures at Harvard and remain true to herself, an idea that also coincides with Dik et al.’s (2017) social cognitive career theory.

Social Cognitive Career Theory and Elle Woods

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) consists of three person variables: self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one’s ability to successfully execute particular tasks), outcome expectations (i.e., beliefs regarding the results of successful completion of particular tasks), and personal goals. The theory describes how these three person variables’ interactions “influence the development of vocational interests, educational and career choice, and work-related performance”, all of which translate fairly clearly to Elle Woods’ hero’s journey (Dik et. al., 2017). In terms of self-efficacy, Elle never once wavered in her own personal confidence in her ability to not only be admitted into Harvard Law, but also in her ability to succeed there, despite everyone else’s doubts of her doing so. Elle’s outcome expectations were originally that if she succeeds in going to Harvard, Warner will realize his mistake and take her back; however, after undergoing her second motivational transformation, her outcome expectations shift to instead focus on becoming a successful lawyer. While it is true that her outcome expectations shift, her personal goals do not change; rather, they remain the same throughout her journey. Whether it be in the form of Warner’s acceptance, or whether it is quantified into a grade point average at Harvard, or it is measured simply in the looks of those around her, Elle, above all else, just wants to be taken seriously.

Initiation as a Serious Law Student

Once Elle becomes fairly well-acquainted with law school, and once she is able to successfully thrive without Warner’s (or anyone’s) approval, Elle embarks on the second part of her initiation: her initiation as a serious law student. At this point, Elle has experienced two motivational transformations as well as a

transformation from dependence to autonomy, and she is well-versed and prepared to fight for a spot in Professor Callahan's internship. This internship, different from a position as a summer associate, is being offered to four first year students on the grounds that he has too large of a case load to handle with his more seasoned graduate students only. After studying relentlessly, actively engaging in class, and impressing Professor Callahan with her resume, Elle earns a spot, along with Vivian and Warner, in Callahan's internship. At this point, Elle has begun to befriend Vivian, despite the fact that Vivian had spent so much time attempting to ruin Elle's Harvard experience. It seems, to a third-party observer, that Elle's success in securing the internship was well deserved, and that she is finally on the path to succeeding as an underdog. However, it soon becomes clear that the opposite is actually at work.

During a late night working on the case, and after a successful day of Elle proving herself to be an excellent law student, Professor Callahan reveals that he is both sexually and romantically attracted to Elle, and makes it clear that she will be able to secure a summer associate position if she has some sort of sexual intercourse with him. Callahan turns out to be a sexual predator (Beggan & Allison, 2018). Disgusted, and humiliated, Elle decides to quit; she has just been dehumanized and objectified, and it has been made known that all of her hard work in class was nothing compared to the pull of her appearance. This failure, however, is unlike other failures experienced by Elle over the course of her journey. This time, instead of being motivated to work even harder and to prove that she is capable of being taken seriously, she resorts to quitting and wallowing in her suffering. Consistent with the underdog hero is the presence of a mentor; in this case, Professor Callahan represents the dark mentor who attempts to lead the hero, Elle, astray. Fortunately, however, a bright mentor places Elle on the right track.

One of the ten dimensions of transformation is external situational forces; one such external source of transformation is a mentor (Allison & Goethals, 2017). According to Joseph Campbell (2004), "the mentor may be some little wood sprite or wise man or fairy godmother or animal that comes to you as a companion or as an advisor, letting you know what dangers are along the way and how to overcome them." For Elle, this mentor is Professor Stromwell, a female professor who until this point had not shown any particular interest in her. At the point of her advising, Elle is in a nail salon, saying her final goodbyes to her friends before leaving to go back to Los Angeles. Professor Stromwell, who

is also in the nail salon and coincidentally (and fortuitously) overhears Elle's rendition of the happenings between herself and Professor Callahan, tells Elle, "if you're going to let one prick ruin the rest of your life, you're not the girl I thought you were" (Legally Blonde, 2001).

This simple vote of confidence, this simple reassurance that someone in an authority position, and especially a woman, believes in her, is enough to transform Elle once again, but this time, it is intellectual. An intellectual or mental transformation is defined by Allison and Goethals (2017) as "featuring a change in mental abilities or fundamental insights about the world". Professor Stromwell's words allow Elle to have the realization that there will always be people, and especially men, that will refuse to take her seriously because of her appearance; however, once that fact is accepted, it can be overcome. Professor Stromwell is the quintessential example of a mentor who helps heroes "become transformed", thus allowing those transformed heroes to later help other heroes, specifically other underdog heroes, transform as well (Rohr, 2014).

Return

After completing her initiation, Elle is finally tested one last time, and at this point the stakes are high. After bringing to light the disgusting actions of Professor Callahan, his client, Brooke Taylor Windham, who is accused of killing her husband, fires him and hires Elle to represent her in his place. Here, Elle has replaced Professor Callahan as the leading defense attorney and is attempting to prove that the defendant, Brooke Taylor Windham, did not shoot and kill her husband, Hayworth. While cross examining a witness, Chutney, who is Windham's step-daughter and biological daughter of the deceased, Elle uses her Cosmopolitan knowledge of hair care to find the hole in Chutney's story, exploit it, and prove that it was she, not Windham, who killed Hayworth.

The fact that Elle won the case based on the conjunction of her newly acquired law skills and her previous knowledge of hair care brings Elle's transformation into full circle: she has transcended herself in the sense that she is no longer concerned with needing the approval of men (or anyone), and she has gained an entire new set of skills and knowledge, but she has not let go of the old Elle Woods, the one who thrives on knowing obscure facts about beauty; Elle has transcended herself, but included her old self, and both parts were necessary in order for her to successfully complete her hero's journey. Campbell (1949)

would describe Elle as have been transformed to the point of being the “master of both worlds”, and she is now capable of promoting well-being in both worlds (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018).

One of the most significant facets to the hero’s journey is the hero’s return to his/her old world, accompanied by a ‘boon’ or reward to bestow on the community. In this case, Elle’s boon is that she has demonstrated to everyone that a person, let alone a female who already has gender stereotype-related odds stacked up against her, can successfully integrate into a new world, experience dozens of failures, and still succeed. Elle’s journey, simply put, is inspiring, and that alone is a great enough boon that Elle’s best friend, Paulette, vows to name her unborn baby Elle in her honor. Elle graduates Harvard Law with honors, with offers to join one of Boston’s most prestigious law firms, and with a boyfriend (not that she needs one). Her astounding accomplishments, her overwhelming overcoming of all the odds that were stacked up against her, lead to her journey being the quintessential underdog story.

An Analysis of Elle Woods’ Heroic Transformation

There is no doubt that Elle Woods, while completing her hero’s journey, experienced suffering. This suffering, however, leads to beneficial consequences. According to Allison and Setterberg (2016), there are six benefits to suffering: suffering is redemptive, suffering signifies a crossover point in life, suffering encourages humility, suffering stimulates compassion, suffering promotes social union, and suffering instills meaning and purpose. For Elle Woods, nearly all of these six are relevant. Elle’s extreme suffering during the initiation phase most certainly signified a crossover point in life: by the time she had completed that phase, she had been “through the fire”, and her motivational and intellectual transformations that came about during this phase speak to the wisdom and maturity gained.

Additionally, even though Elle was being personally attacked by Vivian, her suffering left room for learning and love, thus allowing her to forgive Vivian and eventually befriend her, therefore encouraging humility and stimulating compassion. Elle’s suffering also instilled meaning and purpose into her life: she was determined to not let her suffering control her life; instead, she took her suffering in stride and used it to propel her forward into her transformations, which ultimately led to the completion of her hero’s journey.

Despite her heroic transformation, Elle Woods is a reluctant hero. Originally, she did not choose to change, but was instead cast onto the track by her romantic failure with Warner. Aligning with the stagnation to growth transformation, Elle naturally resisted the change, and was perfectly comfortable remaining in stagnation (in her fashion merchandising major, studying the history of polka-dots and living in LA), but was forced to change when she failed romantically (Allison & Goethals, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Elle Woods, throughout her hero's journey, transforms both motivationally and intellectually in a manner consistent with underdog heroes. Throughout her heroic quest, she experiences suffering and failure, both of which aid in her transformations both from dependence to autonomy and stagnation to growth, along with receiving help from a mentor along the way. Her story speaks to the very real, very painful issues of sexism that were present in the early twenty-first century, but also to the sexism that is present even today. It is still remarkably difficult for women to be taken seriously in leadership positions, and especially for those women who align closely with Elle's personality or appearance. Additionally, the issue of needing approval from another person is extremely relevant for people of all ages, but specifically for the adolescents who are most likely to watch this film. Elle Woods' story teaches adolescent children that anything is possible, and that, most importantly, no approval is needed in order to be successful. This powerful message undoubtedly speaks to kids and teenagers all over the world. Elle's story is one that is inspiring, thought provoking, and important, and emphasizes to everyone who witnesses it that just about anyone can wake up and say, "I think I'll go to law school today" (Legally Blonde, 2001).

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