

Perspectives on the Catwoman Character

By Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

As a psychologist, I treat people who want to create change and enjoy healthier relationships. I am particularly committed to helping women move from emotional submission towards empowerment and healthier relationships: $1+1=3$. To do this, we look at the life stories and the belief systems that keep one locked in old, destructive patterns. To change the future, change the story. We live and build our lives by stories, including those handed down over multi-generations. Some are silently incorporated into the ways we treat the self, others, and color our perspective of how we view the world.



With this preface, I offer my take, my analysis, of Julie Newmar's character as the original Catwoman, which I view as relevant to modern day women who seek more than facial cremes or a youthful outward facade; they seek awareness and change on an internal level. Catwoman is the eternal story of patient, nurturing women living a life of tolerance and humility. They have learned to survive in a patriarchal society by masking the true Self. In this case, Patience Phillips, a timid, sensitive artist, learns to stop apologizing for her own existence. What dies is her need to please others in order to gain acceptance or a sense of belonging. The lead character, a beautiful, but emotionally submissive woman, is an expendable nothing. She becomes privy to information meant only for corporate ears. That knowledge, like Eve's bite into the proverbial apple, changes her life. Knowledge can be lethal killer or used to create change, to turn life crises into an event rather than one that perpetuates destruction and chaos. To dramatize her internal shift, her turning point, Patience creates a strategic maneuver: she cuts her hair. The clip of her prized tresses symbolizes the dramatic "heaven quake" in Catwoman's internal sense of identity. Historically, hair, one's crowning glory, is an indicator of power. Delilah clipped Sampson and took away his power; Catwoman's cut concretizes an embodiment of the strength inherent in the feminine. Empowered, she uses it to benefit others.

Like so many women, patience Phillips suffers from low self-esteem. She is dissatisfied with her life of unmet expectations, and she believes herself stuck, empty inside, and powerless to bring her inner passion to life. We need not be held captive to the ways of our own, or family's or even our cultural creation. This is a story of dignity and of one woman going against the grain. Catwoman's image serves as a catalyst, a metaphor, and an inspiration for change. Without a trace of regret over the death of the old self, the old role, she shows that change occurs for those who get up the courage to learn new tools, use them to take charge, and embrace authority for one's own life.

Therapeutic Implications

This character serves as a catalyst for change in the therapeutic process, so, I use the film with my Women's Empowerment Groups to epitomize victim/victimizer positions and build a dialogue to address dysfunctional emotional positions. For centuries women have been objectified, victimized, used and abused. We live in a patriarchal society. Whether in the realm of marriage, parenting, education, politics, or the legal system, society sends a clear message about the value of power over others, not empowerment and shared responsibility. For centuries, women have been held emotionally captive by the will of the masculine (world) where women's worth is measured by their ability to serve or be treated as objects for abuse. Advancement in technology does not necessarily equate with advancement in emotional growth or in thinking. With each act of emotional and physical abuse, the self-esteem is lowered until an invisible protective shell is created. Emotionally submissive women, even those who are successful in a man's world, have learned to endure abuse, and that learned behavior, that way of being in the world, gets passed down through the generations.

Caught in our top dog/ underdog society, children and adults enter the correctional system because they have defied authority, fought the system, or rebelled out of anger at the domination of others. In their reactive fear to

an abusive system, they perpetuate a multigenerational destructive family system where they, too, then dominate and control according to the pecking order of the victimizer. Drowning in rage, in a perpetual state of confusion and fear, those who are victimized by a callous and unjust parental system can resonate with the positive aspects of Catwoman's character. For those who have an intellectual firepower, who desire to be more than a troublemaker, it promotes insights and hope about what makes people change. For women who believe themselves powerless in a man's world, talent is not the challenge. The challenge is life transformation and Catwoman offers insight and impetus towards creating that change.

I hope this offers you my thoughts as how this character is used to raise awareness. I welcome your feedback.

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