

Bowling to Fate, Growing into Destiny:
A Look at Women's Themes through Film
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[Published in the *Sentient Times*, May 2007]

“Film is one of the three universal languages, the other two: mathematics and music.” – Frank Capra

Sometimes we find insights in literature or film which have escaped us even through self-help books or therapy. Seeing ourselves in the characters and what they are going through can map things out for us, in ways that can be clearer to see and feel.

Jungian analyst and author James Hollis says that we can bow to our fate – acknowledge and accept what cannot be changed, our “givens” such as parents, background, conditioning, early wounding and so forth. Beyond that, we can grow into our destiny and become all that we can become. Today, long after the advent of the liberation movement, women are still seeking their destinies, both personally and in the larger world. The series of films presented below describe a certain arc of female psychological evolution, mapping a part of the territory of both the individual and cultural journeys that some of us may take.

The first film, “Darling,” (1960) stars Julie Christie as beautiful model Diana. As we get to know her, we see her emptiness, and her lack of a sense of self except as reflected back to her by men. We see her narcissism, not only as evidenced by her focus on her looks and image but, more poignantly, on her reliance on male reactions and attention as proof to her of her own existence. The most painful scenes reveal her alone, with no inner resources to draw upon. We can imagine the sense of annihilation that she might be feeling with no outside mirror to let her know that she is alive. At the end, she has literally married “Prince Charming” (an Italian aristocrat), the stereotypical pinnacle of a woman’s dream. Yet it brings her neither happiness nor peace; she does not live happily ever after.

One of the foundations of developing a sense of self, or even reestablishing a new sense of self, is the ability to turn loneliness into a pleasurable solitude. Clark Moustakas, in his book “Loneliness,” beautifully and simply points out the nobility of exploring our own loneliness as opposed to running away from it through addiction, distraction, or busy-ness. In this way we get to know ourselves intimately, and have the opportunity to become our own favorite companion. Ultimately, this reduces the need for either external validation or escapism. Had Diana been able to experience her pain and loneliness in a conscious, productive way, things might have turned out much differently for her.

The second film, “Madame Bovary” (c.1950), is based on Flaubert’s classic 1857 novel. Jennifer Jones plays our heroine, Emma, whose overriding dream is to live out the myth of romantic love. Flaubert presents her in a compassionate light, believing that her plight could be that of many women of that time, if they only had more courage to try to break free of their dissatisfaction.

Emma goes through many steps in trying to find her happiness: marriage, a home, a child, her image in the community, self-value through her husband’s accomplishments, being attractive, having affairs, material possessions, religion, and charitable deeds. If

these steps come from the “outside-in” instead of the “inside-out” they will have no inherent meaning; they will be used to fill an emptiness or void rather than as a way of expressing our aliveness, what is ultimately within us. As each element fails her, she misses the opportunity that disappointment affords to look deeper into her inner dynamics. Instead, Emma continues to do the same thing over and over again, in different guises, hoping for a different result. She is mistakenly looking for aliveness outside of herself, vitality through drama, nourishment through “junk food,” stimulation through distraction, self-expression through acting out.

Some women go through these steps (as Flaubert calls it, substituting “new dreams for old”) and, upon reaching mid-life, they wonder what is wrong with them. They may have all of the above ingredients – the “right” things, the recipe for happiness, but are still unhappy and dissatisfied with life. Part of Emma’s problem could be boredom. She has a greater capacity, intelligence, and creativity than there is room for in her life. She also never internalizes the beauty she frantically searches for outside; she never realizes that she is that which she seeks. Emma’s tenacity and tremendous energy is admirable. Imagine if she had aimed that energy in a different way: towards insight and creativity instead of grasping for the attainment of the impossible.

Although she gives birth to a daughter, Emma wants a son, saying a boy “can be free.” As a man, he will be able to do what he wants to in the world. She wants her offspring to be able to live the life that she wasn’t able to live, due in large part to the time and place in which she was born, when men held most of the power. This belief, in my view, is still present to some degree in our collective male and female consciousness.

The third film, Woody Allen’s “Alice,” made in 1990, stars Mia Farrow. Unlike Darling or Madame Bovary, Alice becomes conscious and starts growing into her destiny with the help of her guide, Chinese herbalist Dr. Yang. Many women’s journeys end up in the same place, whether single, married, divorced, widowed, with or without children: a journey to find the particular meaning of their own life. Jung believed that the first half of life is spent establishing oneself, learning how to navigate the world, and to develop ego strength. The second half presents the opportunity for real inner work. Most of us would like a Dr. Yang in our lives and sometimes we can find a guide/companion for a part of our journey, someone to offer us some tools. But in the end, we are left to our own resources, ultimately building our own psycho-spiritual muscle.

Alice initially goes to see Dr. Yang due to physical symptoms. In the Jungian view, symptoms can be a sign that there is something that the soul wants or needs and is not getting. Gregg Levoy, author of the book “Callings,” says that talents and gifts are needs that, if not met, turn into symptoms, and furthermore that “the soul doesn’t care what price has to be paid.” Material comfort and relationship do not necessarily equal happiness and fulfillment. Alice is married to a very wealthy attorney and Woody Allen pointedly shows the absurd extremes and values of this kind of life style. Sometimes to grow into our full selves, we *do* have to pay a price. We might have to give up a safe and comfortable – but stifling – outer life. The greater price of self-estrangement and not living in congruence with oneself might otherwise be paid by remaining in the status quo. As uncomfortable, or excruciating, as feeling lost and confused is, it is often a good sign: a crossroads between the old ways that don’t work any longer and the impetus to find new ones. Jung called it living in shoes that are now too small for us.

Through a series of “treatments,” Dr. Yang is leading Alice step-by-step to a greater understanding of herself. She gets to look at her shadow side, the unlive or repressed aspects of her psyche. She begins to get a more accurate view of her strengths and her weaknesses. She looks at her past, and remembers when she felt alive. She realizes that she has idealized her parents, especially her mother. She sees her friends for the shallow, backbiting people that they really are. She loses her innocence and naïveté to find wisdom, without becoming cynical. Alice understands she has been playing roles for most of her life, and starts choosing to live more authentically. She follows her dream to write and discovers that it is not for her. Closed doors are as valuable as open ones, in terms of knowing in which direction we want to move. The result is that Alice begins to live in more congruence with her deeper values, and connects with what is truly meaningful to her. Her deep admiration for Mother Teresa becomes clear to her, which eventually leads her to a deeper, richer life.

Betrayed by her husband and let down by her lover, Alice is given a love potion by Dr. Yang; she can choose which man she wants and make him love her. Dr. Yang says, the choice is hers, and she should make it wisely to get a better idea of who she is, who the people around her are, her needs, her limits, her gifts, and her inner self. She won't know all the answers but she will have a clearer idea of which road she wants her life to take.

Ultimately, Alice reclaims her own power. She opts for her deeper values and throws the potion away. She has developed enough wisdom to know that neither her husband or lover, nor any man, is going to give her the key to herself. She is well on her way to assessing herself realistically, her strengths and her limitations – necessary for self-realization. She calls her own bluff and goes to India with her children to work with Mother Teresa. Instead of searching for “happiness,” she searches for the meaning in, and of, her life, and what is truly important to her.

Ironically, an *unconscious* inner life – as we witnessed in Diana and Emma – is oriented inwardly in self-absorption, and a *conscious* inner life leads to an outward orientation, a relationship with the outside world. We clearly see this transition in Alice. At the beginning of the film, she is busy with her trainer, her acupuncturist, her hairdresser, and so forth. By the end, she is interested in finding a home for her gifts out in the world, and living her values in a concrete way. She wants to perform good deeds for the benefit of others, as well as raise her children in accordance with her true values. We see concretely how individual inner work does indeed change the world beyond just our individual concerns.

We notice here, through these three heroines, the permutations of working (or not!) with fate and with destiny. Diana, with no consciousness about her situation, stays stuck. Emma at least attempts to find her way out of being trapped. Neither of them goes further than fate allows them to. Alice, however, shows us how to diligently find our way toward living an authentic life and growing into our destiny.