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With the Screenwriter's Pen: An Analysis of the Representation of Gifted Children in the Family Film

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Kennesaw State University

With the Screenwriter's Pen: An Analysis of the Representation of Gifted Children in the Family
Film

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PRWR 7960 – MAPW Capstone

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Preface

Representation is important to media, especially film. Film is constantly evolving and the populations that are able to be seen on screen are expanding. One of the most important populations to receive representation on screen is that of gifted children. Gifted children are often misunderstood and feel alone because of various circumstances. For them to be able to see themselves on screen, they can realize their potential by witnessing these characters in action. It does not matter what form their gifts take, intellectual or magical. Everyone deserves to be seen on screen.

The idea for this study came about when I was in the early stages of developing this capstone. When I first started thinking about the possibility of analyzing screenplays centered around gifted children, all of the screenplays I considered shared the theme of identity in some way. It was not until rewatching the Masterpiece Theater version of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* (2021) that the concept of what I was writing about fully clicked. Seeing the story of a character start off as simply a face in the crowd and end as a confident hero inspired me to incorporate an overall theme of identity and discovery of identity into the piece. Discovering identity and embracing it is important in telling a story about a gifted protagonist. The magic of it is witnessing a wonderful protagonist discover who they are using their gift and forming their identity around that.

Screenplays are often overlooked due to audiences primarily viewing the finished product on screen without seeing the story written out. Screenwriters are vital to the success of the story. They are responsible for creating each moment by providing the characters with unforgettable dialogue and describing each motion through words. For this specific piece, I chose to adopt a screenwriter's perspective on the screenplays of four films that highlight four amazing

protagonists in beautifully told stories. It was important for me to do so by observing two kinds of gifted protagonists, intellectual and magically gifted, to have a variety of heroes instead of limiting myself to one kind of gift. Seeing how screenwriters handled these stories and protagonists allowed me to properly analyze the representation of gifted children on screen.

I would like to acknowledge my committee members and thank them for their wonderful support. First, Professor Anna Weinstein for reigniting my love for screenwriting. Her classes inspired me to better understand screenplays and how to become a better screenwriter myself. Secondly, Chris Palmer for growing my interest in dialects and language. His mentorship and instruction have helped develop my writing into the best it can be. I greatly appreciate everything that you two have done in the process of writing this capstone. It would not be at this point without you two.

Table of Contents

Annotated Bibliography	5
Abstract	19
Introduction	20
Screenplays as Texts	22
A Wonderful Gift	23
A Mental Role Model	32
Equally Gifted	36
Conclusion	47
Works Cited	49

Annotated Bibliography

Screenplays

Haimes, Marc, and Chris Butler. *Kubo and the Two Strings*. Laika Entertainment, 2016.

Set in a quasi-ancient Japan, the screenplay tells the story of young Kubo, gifted with a magic shamisen and aided by a monkey and a humanoid beetle, as he searches for the lost armor of his father, Hanzo. This specific screenplay discusses a gifted individual with disabilities. Kubo has only one eye, which the screenwriters make sure to let their audience know. Haimes and Butler demonstrate that Kubo's character brings forth the truth that experiencing high emotion in crisis and coming to terms with a legacy can be a huge advantage to a gifted protagonist.

Kloves, Steven. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Warner Bros, 2001.

An adaptation of the 1997 children's novel by J. K. Rowling. This specific screenplay is a conglomeration of different drafts written by Steven Kloves. There are many differences between the screenplay and the final product. Both feature the same idea: the story of a child who discovers himself through a fantastic world. This specific screenplay works well for this article due to Harry's discovery of his giftedness through various tests and interactions with children like him.

Selick, Henry. *Coraline*. Laika Entertainment, 2009.

Coraline is based on a children's book written by Neil Gaiman. It revolves around a young girl named Coraline who is bored with her current world. She discovers another world in the walls of her own home. This other world is

different from the one she's used to: all inhabitants have buttons for eyes. Is this new world everything she wanted? Coraline's natural world fails to stimulate her, which echoes the experiences of real-life gifted children. This is what pushes her to turn to another world. Her story fits in with this article because she has a different way of thinking. She may not be magically gifted but others do see her as different.

Smith, Charise Castro, et al. *Encanto*. Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2021.

Giftedness is the theme of Disney's *Encanto*. It centers around the "fantastical and magical" Colombian family The Madrigals. One of the youngest members, Mirabel, did not receive a magical gift and it is up to her to use her gift of empathy to discover why her magical paradise is crumbling apart. This screenplay works perfectly for this article due to Mirabel's status of being an outsider in her own family. She has to use her intellect instead of relying on super strength or growing endless flowers to get the job done.

Introduction

Brown, Noel. "The 'Family' Film and the Tensions Between Popular and Academic

Interpretations of Genre." *Trespassing Journal*, 2013. Accessed 2022.

Genre is important, especially with family films. Brown breaks the family film down in this article. "The 'Family' Film and Tensions Between Popular and Academic Interpretations of Genre" defends the "family" film as a genre. By highlighting genre, Brown is able to pick apart what a "family" film means. What are the qualities that make these films suitable for the family and how do others

perceive these films? One example he notes is *Star Wars*. He uses it as a way of saying that a film can be considered family-friendly but can still be grouped into other genres. This is where my definition came in. Brown's explanation solidified my thinking. A film can be suitable for children and also incorporate complex themes. He also takes a look at how others define films like these in order to strengthen his own argument. These arguments can help the reader, and have helped me, discover what family films mean to them.

Whitley, David. "Learning with Disney: Children's Animation and the Politics of Innocence."

Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society, 2013,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43049666>. Accessed 2022.

Disney films seem to be the epitome of innocence as their young protagonists seem to inhabit worlds of wonder. This article discusses how an older audience can learn from these Disney heroes. Whitley takes his readers through a theory of innocence throughout these classic films. He also questions whether or not innocence is a good quality to have. He uses the ultimate innocent hero, the first Disney Princess, Snow White as an example of how these kinds of characters are seen through various lenses in and out of the film. This source took a look at an idea that most would not think of as a good enough research topic. Whitley expertly examined the topic of innocence in Disney films through the use of theories and a close analysis of Disney's first animated film.

Screenplays as Texts

Korte, Barbra, and Ralf Schneider, "The Published Screenplay – A 'New' Literary Genre." AAA:

Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2000, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43023768>.

Accessed 2022.

This article defends screenplays as works of literature. There is so much to learn from screenplays. Since not all of them are published, screenplays do not seem to count as literature in the minds of others. Korte and Schneider use this article as a way of saying they are literature. Some of these examples in the article are concepts I did not think of. For instance, how screenplays overpower the novel they are adapting when published. This particularly appealed to me because *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Coraline* are adaptations of novels. They are adaptations but also their own entities. Their article indicated how important all drafts of the screenplay were. There is so much to learn from reading these films and so much more story.

Morsberger, Robert E, and Katherine M Morsberger. "Screenplays as Literature: Bibliography and Criticism." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1975, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43795384>.

Accessed 2022.

As the name suggests, this article defends the use of screenplays as works of literature. It discusses topics like adaptation, criticism, and audience perception. This is important as it allows for multiple different readings of the text. Having only one reading of a text can weigh it down and force people to only look at it through one lens. When there are multiple read-throughs, a reader can look at the text through several different lenses and have a greater appreciation for the work

as a whole. Robert and Katherine Morsberger understand the struggle that screenplays go through in becoming valid literature. They are knowledgeable about the history of using this medium in an academic setting. This article allowed me to fully understand why it has been so hard for screenplays to be found and studied. The observation of adaptations in particular was especially important. It made me read the adapted screenplays even closer as I thought about how the two screenwriters took the source material and turned it into another form of literature.

A Wonderful Gift

Maznichenko, Marina A, et al. “The Potential of Motion Pictures as a Non-Traditional Form of Pedagogical Information Relating to Working with Gifted Children.” *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 2021, <https://ejce.cherkasgu.press/>. Accessed 2022.

A study about using film to teach. How is it useful to utilize such a unique medium? One of the most important parts of this study was how teachers and outside audiences were affected by these films. Even though it is very important for gifted children to see representation of themselves on screen, it is also important for the world to see these children. Part of this study focuses on how people surrounding these children see them from the outside. All the protagonists I studied are outsiders of some kind. This helped my analysis as I was able to think about how some of the surrounding characters saw the protagonists studied. How could a screenwriter portray not only the leading characters but those around

them to create an enjoyable experience for a viewing audience and then have their work be used as teaching material?

Sobeih, Soraia Mohamed. "The Role of Identity of an Animated Character in the Story Line."

The Academic Research Community Publication, 2017,

<https://press.ierek.com/index.php/ARChive/article/view/130>. Accessed 2022.

A short article discussing the role of identity in various animated movies. How are these identities discovered throughout the film? What is the turning point for these characters? By looking at heroes from both Disney and Pixar films, Soraia allows the readers to take a look at heroes from two different studios with different ways of storytelling. This source was an extremely short read, the shortest of the sources I read. As I read, it proved to be an excellent source as I could see how Sobeih picked apart each of the films and analyzed how identity played a part in the story, i.e. how identity was used as a theme weaved through the story.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 3rd ed., Michael Wiese Productions, 2007.

A text written by Vogler that details the hero's journey. He takes his audience through the archetypes and steps of the journey made popular by Joseph Campbell. He uses *The Wizard of Oz* as a primary example. This particular book will be an excellent source as it takes a deep dive into this timeless structure.

Vogler's explanation allowed me to carefully analyze each screenplay and decide what the most important scene is for each of the protagonists in terms of shaping who they are as a character. The steps that intrigued me the most are The Meeting with the Mentor step and Crossing the First Threshold. They seemed to be the

most important steps in the journey as he took time to explain the necessity of these steps. He explains how the mentor is a source of wisdom for the main protagonist or how the approach to the threshold prepares the protagonist. This published textbook perfectly illustrates how Vogler understands the hero's journey. He takes such an incredible deep dive into the structure that at the end of the book, I could see each step in each film perfectly. His filmmaking history allows him to properly dictate the steps and why they are important.

Vogler, Christopher "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative." *Journal of Genius and Eminence*, 2017, <https://icscpress.com/>. Accessed 2022.

After giving a brief history of his work with Disney, Vogler uses this article as a means of saying why this format is so popular with films. He dives in a little more here than in his text about the overall use of it in screenplays. Each step of the hero's journey is detailed throughout the article. Vogler goes through the steps of The Ordinary World, The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting with the Mentor, Crossing the First Threshold, Tests, Allies, Enemies, Approach, The Ordeal, The Renewal, The Road Back, Resurrection, and Return with Elixir. Much like *The Writer's Journey*, uses popular films and television series to explain these. He uses films like *Star Wars* and *The Lion King* to describe steps like Meeting with the Mentor and The Ordeal. Vogler has enough professional experience in the field that this article can act as a class lesson. It is not as long as the textbook-length version of it, but by the end of it, the reader has a much better

understanding based on learning from a professional who has seen this structure multiple times.

A Mental Role Model

Hébert, Thomas P, and Kristie L Spiers Neumeister. “Guided Viewing of Film: A Strategy for Counseling Gifted Teenagers.” *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, vol. 12, no 4, 2001, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.4219/jsge-2001-669>. Accessed 2022.

Herbert and Neumeister’s article helps to create a plan for teaching gifted teenagers to embrace their gifts. They begin with a few situations where a gifted teenager is having problems embracing what makes them special. They proceed to explain why these situations are important to address before showcasing examples of protagonists in films that are similar to the ones in their opening situations. For my piece, I used this source since it was quoted in another article from the authors that I found. The authors have an excellent understanding of gifted teenagers. As a reader, it is obvious that they care about this topic and have carefully crafted their article to demonstrate the importance of these protagonists.

Hébert, Thomas P, and Kristie L Spiers Neumeister. “Fostering The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children Through Guided Viewing of Film.” *Roeper Review*. Vol. 25, no. 1, 20 Jan. 2010, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02783190209554192>. Accessed 2022.

This article begins with a quick anecdote regarding a teacher deciding to show his class the 1996 Danny Devito-directed film *Matilda* to encourage a young student. The rest of the article makes a solid argument about the use of film as a style of

therapy. This concept is extremely important due to the potentiality of young gifted children seeing someone like themselves being portrayed on screen. With these viewings, gifted children can both have fun and have a learning experience at the same time. This is where representation is important. For instance, a child who loves music can see themselves on screen in the form of a character like Kubo who sees the world through song. This source is an expansion of their original research. The two authors took what they originally sought out to research and proceeded to take a deeper dive into the world of gifted children, presenting readers with an argument that is sound when concerning the use of film to showcase the importance of gifted children.

Perez-Guerrero, Ana M, and Andres Forero-Serna. "Between Reality and Fantasy: The Narrative Strategies of the Horror Genre in Productions by Laika Studios (2009-2015)." 2019. Accessed. 2022.

This article in particular was an important one to include in my article. It reminded me that a majority of films produced by Laika feature some kind of child protagonist, until the release of *The Missing Link*. Their films toes a fine line between fantasy and horror while showcasing a child who believes that they are simply ordinary being thrust into an extraordinary situation. This article discusses how Laika is able to adapt the tropes of horror to appeal to a child audience. Building a horror story is what Laika seems to do best. Their use of stop motion animation helps to highlight these aspects of the story as well as offer a fantastic element about it. Perez-Guerrero and Forero-Sena observed a studio's filmography and analyzed what made their storytelling so special. They were able

to pick apart the strategy and apply it to Laika's films in a way that will allow an audience who has read their article to appreciate the films through a new lens.

With a narrowed analysis, I was able to dive deeper into the worlds that Laika had created and how horror worked with their characters.

Şentürk, Ridvan, "Anxiety and Fear in Children's Films." *Educational Science's: Theory and Practice*, 2011, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ936301>. Accessed 2022.

A study about how the concept of anxiety and fear is utilized in films geared towards children. How are these two emotions connected and how do films portray them? Why is it important that both of these are present in films with a generally young audience? Şentürk takes the time to define anxiety, fear, and children's films to better understand the study. This was important in my capstone as the emotion of fear was present in all the screenplays I read. It helped me realize how integral a trait these two emotions are for screenwriting. A screenplay should contain a vast variety of emotions to make an interesting and compelling story. Şentürk's obvious understanding of how these intense emotions work helped me to examine scenes and get into the minds of the protagonists in their specific situations. It made me ask: "How would someone with this special mind or special talent feel in this scenario?". Şentürk presents his findings in a way that is easy for a person with little knowledge about how the mind works to begin to see films through the eyes of a child who is suffering from anxiety and fear.

Equally Gifted

Emerson, David. "Innocence as a Superpower: Little Girls on the Hero's Journey." *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 2009, <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss1/9/>. Accessed 2022.

Emerson takes a look into what a female version of a hero's journey might be, by analyzing Dorothy (*The Wizard of Oz*), Lucy (*Chronicles of Narnia*), and Chihiro (*Spirited Away*). He examines what makes them memorable protagonists. The qualities that make them female and what is typically associated with females are studied throughout the article. Emerson's understanding of the female hero and examination of what makes them special allowed for me to examine my young female heroes and some of the supporting characters in a manner that I could read some of these iconic women better myself. His choice of three popular little girls as heroes shows that he has an incredible understanding of the topic that he is pursuing as he is shown to have a firm grasp on the stories that they tell.

Serelle, Marcio, and Ercio Sena. "Critique and Recognition: The Struggle for Identity in Media Culture." *Matrizes*, 2019, <https://www.revistas.usp.br/matrizes/article/view/148793>. Accessed 2022.

This article is a take on identity from a cultural lens. How can it be viewed through the eyes of a foreign filmmaker? Serelle and Sena examine this through critical views. Having a critic's view is a good concept considering it gauges how the concept was seen by the outside world. By looking at identity through another culture, one can begin to see different aspects of identity brought out that a culture that is not your own would see. Serelle and Sena use two films, *Vazante* and

Gisberta, as an example of how the concepts are used. The two authors have taken their findings and applied them to films that they know. They obtained their research and then put their findings out there. There is a clear understanding of identity in film from the authors. This clear understanding of identity helped me to further understand how identity could be used in my own analysis. Three of the four protagonists studied are stationed in different countries and that made discovering identity through the eyes of a person not from my home country so intriguing to read.

Shapiro, Brooke. "Examining Portrayals of Female Protagonists by Female Screenwriters Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis." *The Young Researcher*, 2017, <https://www.theyoungresearcher.com/shapiro.html>. Accessed 2022.

Shapiro's article highlights the struggles of being a female screenwriter in a primarily male-dominated world. Oftentimes, female protagonists are not written as women through a male screenwriter. Occasionally, male screenwriters do not seem to understand how to write for a female protagonist as they do not have the experience of being a woman. This can help my article since half the protagonists I am analyzing are females. Only one of them, Mirabel, has any input from a female screenwriter. This adds to the theme of identity as she was written by someone who has had the experience of being a woman. She is able to have all the true quirks of being a female, making her story more relatable to female audiences. Shapiro clearly put many hours of research into this and her findings are a clear representation of the overall world of female screenwriters. I was glad to have found an article that was able to emphasize the importance of the female

screenwriter. It put into perspective for me how Charise Castro Smith went about writing for the character of Mirabel in her contribution to the *Encanto* screenplay versus how Henry Selick personified Coraline.

Sutherland, Jean-Anna, and Kathryn M Feltey, “Here’s Looking at Her: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Power and Feminism,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, 2017, Accessed 2022.

A study focusing on how women are represented in media. It takes a look at common tropes among films with female protagonists. These tropes include the action heroine and the revenge story. Though not all female protagonists are subject to these tropes, they are still an important aspect of some of their stories that need to be discussed. Sutherland and Feltey’s main question in this study was how are female protagonists seen by society? Even though the films studied are not family-oriented films, the analysis is primarily focused on how female characters are portrayed, which can be from a wide variety of lenses. This article can help with my writing by applying some of the tropes to the two female lead screenplays I have read. How do they fall into these tropes? How do they differ? What about looking at both Mirabel and Coraline through a feminist view can help an audience understand the uniqueness of both characters? These are the important questions that this study can help audiences ponder during later watches.

Wendell, Susan. “Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability.” *Hypatia* , 1989.

Despite not being a screenwriting-centric article, it brings to light how important it is to acknowledge disabilities. Wendell brings her own disability into the public eye and uses it as an example to explain the impact that a disability can have on one's life. One item that seems to be of utmost importance is the concept of the Other. This will be especially important when discussing *Encanto* since the only character without a gift is the protagonist, Mirabel. Mirabel is also treated as an Other even by her own family. This could also be applied to Coraline as she is also an Other, and even ventures into The Other World. What makes Wendell's source perfect is her personal experience with it. She is clearly passionate about the representation of this kind that she took it upon herself to highlight it. Her article feels authentic.

Abstract

Family films are something that have been enjoyed for many decades. They often create a fantastic world that will enchant audiences and eventually become beloved stories. A big aspect often seen in these films is a protagonist that possesses some kind of gift. Where does this gift come from? How does it grow? Most importantly, how do the screenwriters who are responsible for bringing these gifted heroes to life go about it?

Using the screenplays of *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Encanto*, and *Coraline*, I take a deep dive into the portrayal of gifted children. The gifts that these protagonists have range from inherited magic to psychological ones focusing on curiosity and being able to appreciate the oddities of life. Analyzing a screenplay allows an audience to learn more about the inner workings of the story and provides glimpses into the thoughts of the screenwriters. For instance, some of the lines of character description and certain wording in the action can allude to why a character behaves a certain way. By analyzing screenplays to better understand the gifted hero, it helps bring a portion of the population to light, a population that many look over. What can the screenplay do that, when the film is fully produced, can make an audience member look at the hero and go "I see myself in them." That is why it is important to study screenplays. Despite not being a traditional medium, screenplays are a form of literature. There is much more beyond the finished product that a film can offer. Family film screenplays can showcase their journey to strengthen their give through intense emotion and a gendered lens to show how extraordinary these children are. Utilizing shooting scripts and final drafts, the powerful lines of action, and what was cut can help bring these protagonists to life.

Introduction

Imagine this: It's Sunday night. You, a six-year-old child, have finished having a nice dinner with your family. Your grandparents have left for the night and the people who remain in the house are you, your parents, and your siblings. However, your mother noticed that during dinner that you were not quite yourself. You are secretly dreading going to school the next day because of the threat of being bullied or cast out for the fifteenth week in a row. Your mother does not know this but can sense that you are uncomfortable. To lift your spirits before bed, she suggests a family movie night. She pulls out a mystery movie. You watch in amazement as the film begins and it's Disney's *Lilo and Stitch*. The beautiful scenery and fun aliens have the rest of the family's attention. Yours, though, is centered on Lilo, a young girl who, like yourself, has been having trouble fitting in. You hold tight to her at every moment. If someone like Lilo can eventually find her place in the story, you can too.

Representation in films is vital. It is the screenwriter's job to craft the world on their own and inhabit it with characters from various populations. In this essay, the population that will be highlighted is gifted children. Gifted protagonists can range from being intellectually gifted to being gifted with a magical power. Through the use of screenplay, I have examined two unique types of gifted protagonists, the fantastic and the intellectual. These gifts are developed through themes of gender and intellect and story elements such as plot structure and supporting characters. I will demonstrate the importance of the representation of gifted children as protagonists in family films. Using various screenplays by writers of different backgrounds, I will look at how the stories of gifted protagonists can change how audiences see themselves.

The family film as a genre offers material for everyone and does not have to feature a family as the focus. There is a variety of these films that feature a group of friends or a person

and their animal as the leads. Noel Brown defines *family films* as “a term of generic orientation in industry and popular discourse” (27). He states “the family film is particularly associated with Hollywood cinema, whose vast resources and global distribution avenues dating back to the 1910s demanded universalistic modes of address to appeal to mass audiences” (27). David Whitley adds the following in “Learning with Disney: Children’s animation and the politics of innocence”: “No doubt children learn something different from watching the films adults have made for them than adults will take from the same films. But it is worth remembering that, in many of the most significant narratives involving child protagonists, the adult learns as much from the child as the child does from the adult” (77). I define family films as a universal medium for all ages that allow each viewer to gain something different from. They are stories that audiences of all kinds to observe and enjoy. Family films are important because everyone can learn from them. Watching a family film allows everyone to have a different experience. A child could watch one and feel stronger afterwards having observed a young protagonist take on a dangerous task. An adult could watch one of these films and understand their family dynamic more than they did before. Family films often have more intense themes and scenarios that the protagonist must face. A family film contains themes like identity and coming into one’s own. The protagonists that family films house are as amazing as the stories that are being told. Having a mass audience to showcase these wonderful characters lets the family film present themes that can appeal to adults and children alike. In order to have a better understanding of the process and thoughts of the screenwriters, I will examine the text of the screenplays rather than the completed films.

Screenplays as Texts

One common theme in these family tales is that the protagonist exhibits a sense of wanting to belong and being accepted for who they are. These heroes are blessed with a gift to show the world. They use their gift, either an intellectual gift or a magical one, to go on journeys of discovering identity. The concept of identity is important because these protagonists are presented as outcasts in some form that usually results from their gifts. Using their gifts and growing into their own creates an intriguing character to follow in a story. Gifted outcasts can be seen in the four screenplays I have chosen for this study: *Encanto* (2021, written by Charise Castro Smith and Jared Bush with songs by Lin-Manuel Miranda), *Coraline* (2009, written by Henry Selick), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2015, written by Marc Haimes and Chris Butler), and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001, written by Steven Kloves). All these heroes are in some way or another outcasts. Having to read an animated screenplay versus a live-action screenplay allows for different perspectives, especially regarding these fantastic realms. Reading screenplays from both of these mediums allows for certain aspects to emerge in each one. Live-action allows the story to take over and bring the protagonist on a smooth journey. Animation allows for the visuals to be at the center, creating beautifully rich environments and exaggerated action to allow the gift to guide the protagonist along the way.

Watching a film only scratches the surface when it comes to understanding the characters and plot. Digging deep into a screenplay allows a reader to fully grasp the entire story. Some items might have become scrapped while in the process of being transferred from script to screen. For instance, the screenplay for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is a conglomeration of multiple drafts that screenwriter Steven Kloves worked on through the course of the writing process. As a result, the screenplay offers more into the minds of characters

inhabiting Harry's wondrous world. Barbra Korte and Ralf Schneider make an argument for this in "The Published Screenplay - A New *Literary* Genre?": "Very few screenplays in fact reproduce the actual film version. Most book editions of screenplays on the market today are *shooting* scripts, i.e. they represent the last phase of writing before photographic production of the film actually begins" (95). Sometimes, the shooting script can be vastly different than the final product. As Robert E. Morsberger and Katherine M. Morsberger point out in "Screenplay as Literature: Bibliography and Criticism," "A major problem with film scripts is establishing a text. Even the final shooting script may not be absolutely final, as revisions are improvised during the filming. But sometimes the only surviving copy of an unpublished scenario is an earlier draft than the shooting script" (50). This is the case with *Sorcerer's Stone* as well. Multiple sequences occur in the screenplay but are not seen in the final product. One example, in particular, is inside Ollivander's Wand Shop. The half-giant Hagrid ushers Harry into the shop and states: "Only place for wands is Ollivander's. You go inside. I got one more thing I gotta do" (Kloves 23). Once in the shop, the action states: "Harry and Hagrid stand in a very narrow shop where thousands of slender boxes are stacked to the ceiling" (23). Hagrid is obviously in the same room, as opposed to the film. After "the wand that chooses the wizard" (24) claims Harry, Hagrid is seen outside. "Harry looks out the window, sees Hagrid standing there, holding a cage with a snow white owl inside" (26). This inconsistency is welcome in screenplays as it shows the process of how the story evolved.

A Wonderful Gift

When someone thinks about a gift, there's typically an item in a box with a large ribbon over it. In terms of gifted people, it is an ability that they have been blessed with that makes them stand out among others. When selecting the screenplays to be analyzed, the gifted individual had

to have some kind of magical power or a different way of thinking than other members of the cast. That is how Harry Potter, Kubo, Mirabel Madrigal, and Coraline Jones became the select few. Harry is gifted with magic that is natural to the world he inhabits and Kubo is the proud owner of a magical shamisen that belonged to his mother. Their gifts are the typical ones that are seen in family films, a protagonist with magic that stands out among the others in their world. On the other hand, there are Coraline and Mirabel. Neither of them have magical powers, but their stories take place in an environment where magic exists. Mirabel's family all have powers that are referred to as gifts throughout the film. She exists in a world surrounded by magic. She wishes she could be one of them, evident by the lyrics in her solo number "Waiting On A Miracle": "I WILL STAND ON THE SIDE AS YOU SHINE. . . Mirabel stands trying to be strong, singing to her family, but: I'M NOT FINE. I'M NOT FINE" (Smith et al. 24). Coraline sees things in her world a little differently and her natural curiosity makes her stand out. When she discovers the door to The Other World, the screenwriter makes certain to describe her call out to her mother as "intensely curious" (Selick 14) and then her behavior turns into "giddy with anticipation" (15). These intellectual gifts are as important as magical gifts in film. By reading the screenplay, an audience member is able to dive deep into the internal state of the protagonist. It provides the necessary implications and inner workings of the character that the transition to visual medium can only do to a certain extent.

The protagonists who have intellectual gifts provide representation for audience members who share similar characteristics. However, the magically gifted protagonists are often presented as outcasts, Harry being shunned by his biological family, The Dursleys, and Kubo being isolated in a cave during the night only to emerge to the town to make money to support his mother. They represent those who feel they might not fit into a community and need to find their

place. Despite magic not existing in reality, protagonists like them allow for an escape for children who may feel that they don't belong and need a hero to comfort them. Screenwriters need to create believable characters for this situation and a protagonist to relate to who has been gifted with the abilities they need to overcome their challenges.

A large part of a gifted protagonist is discovering who they are through the course of a journey. Screenwriter Christopher Vogler writes in "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies" about the hero's journey, "Because the hero's journey drew from psychological and biological elements common to all humans, stories cast in this mold could speak universally to the desires of audiences everywhere" (10). The hero of the hero's journey is supposed to be the everyman. A relatable protagonist takes their audience on an adventure that starts in a very ordinary world and transports them into the world of the unknown for the hero, and the audience, to evolve as the story goes on. Vogler proceeds to expand upon this idea in his book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*:

They deal with the childlike universal questions: Who am I? Where did I come from?
Where will I go when I die? What is good and what is evil? What must I do about it?
What will tomorrow be like? Where did yesterday go? Is there anybody else out there?
(5).

The screenplay of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is a great example of this. Harry spends a majority of the film figuring this out. It starts in the famous "Yer a wizard" (Kloves 15) sequence, when Aunt Petunia reveals why Harry was living with them: "Harry: Blown up? You told me my parents died in a car crash" (15). From this scene onward, Harry's entire identity is put into question as he discovers this new world. His identity is later on cemented when he's

made seeker of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. It is Hermione who tells Harry “It’s in your blood” (35) and who proceeds to show him the display case of past teams:

Hermione leads Harry and Ron to a DISPLAY CASE. Inside is a history of Quidditch at Hogwarts, with ancient brooms, strange equipment, and various TROPHIES. She points. Etched upon a SILVER TRAY, below a GRYFFINDOR LION, one name shines: **James Potter. Seeker.**

RON

Harry. . . you didn’t tell me your father was a seeker too.

HARRY

I...didn’t know (53).

Ron addresses the discovery of Harry’s notable lineage prior to the group meeting Hagrid’s three-headed dog, Fluffy: “RON: I’m telling you, it’s spooky. She knows more about you than you do” (54). Both of Vogler’s quotes apply to Harry. His own journey is making him think about who he is and where he can go. Harry’s gift influences who he is as a person. When he first discovers it, his Uncle Vernon berates him. Harry proclaims “One minute the glass was there and then it was gone. It was like magic” (8). This revelation of his gift leads to an incredible journey, including learning that he inherited his quidditch ability from his father, which will help him discover his identity to grow even more. Throughout the film, the protagonist hesitantly accepts the quest, afraid of what might happen. Something along the way, a magical MacGuffin or a self-realization, changes the protagonist for their betterment. This specific structure is important because of the word *hero*. Having an exceptional protagonist

going on a journey out of the normal and into a fantasy world that is unknown to them allows their gift to become their strength. The hero's journey allows them to step out of their comfort zone and strengthen this gift that has been bestowed upon them.

Mentor figures often teach the protagonist how to become an integral part of their new world. They are the ones who push and train the protagonists throughout the screenplay. During times of crisis for the hero, it's the words of the mentor that ring in their mind to give them the ultimate strength. In Campbell's structure, their introduction has an individual step in the process. The meeting of the mentor section of *Kubo and the Two Strings* introduces a crucial character into the story: Monkey. The introduction of this character allows for a common theme from Joseph Campbell's monomyth to emerge: the theme of identity. Soraia Mohamed Sobeih describes identity, as it pertains to an animated character, as “. . . a building block of the personality of a character in a way that connects it with the surroundings. It lets the audience feel the character's characteristics, his motives, and his fears- which are derived from him- that gives him credibility and trust” (2). When Monkey is introduced, it is obvious that her identity is in question. Despite being Kubo's mentor, she also evolves and learns along the way herself. Monkey's dialogue mentions “Your mother used the last of her magic to save you and bring me to life” (Haines and Butler 27). Monkey evolved from a small charm that Kubo's mother, named Sariatu on page 14, used to keep him safe. Throughout the entirety of the meeting the mentor scene, Monkey is protective of Kubo, almost a mothering instinct. An audience member might think at first that this is due to Sariatu bringing her to life. Towards the end of Act 2, it is revealed that she is Sariatu reincarnated, which explains her instincts. This revelation is brought on by Monkey herself when she's engaging in battle with one of Kubo's aunts:

Sister

It's pathetic what happened to my sister. I looked up to her. She was so strong. Love made her weak.

Monkey

No. It made me stronger

(63).

This is an important piece of dialogue since, not only does it reveal her identity, but it also ties back into Sobeih's quote. Her identity as Sariatu gave her the instincts to protect him and, once the revelation happens, the audience understands her motives and can fully credit her for her actions. Sariatu's spirit reincarnating into Monkey was not only a gift to Kubo but she helped him to grow his gift through motherly instincts. Kubo's identity sprung to life as he learns from Sariatu. Together, Kubo and Sariatu consolidate Kubo's gift to be the best it can be.

The other example of an important moment of the hero's journey in relation to a gifted protagonist is when a young Harry Potter steps through the passageway to Diagon Alley. This scene holds the honor of being a crossing-the-threshold moment:

Hagrid gives the wall one last TAP and the bricks QUIVER, wriggling and jiggling until an ARCHWAY appears, giving out on a COBBLED STREET so long and twisting it seems never to end. As Harry's jaw drops, Hagrid grins.

Hagrid (CONT'D)

Welcome, Harry. To Diagon Alley.

EXT. DIAGON ALLEY - CONTINUOUS - MORNING

As Harry steps through, the archway SHRINKS INSTANTLY into a solid wall. All around him, Harry sees mothers and

fathers with children in tow, clutching LISTS similar to his own (Kloves 20).

Hagrid literally takes Harry through a threshold. Harry goes from one world to another, from The Muggle world to The Magic One. Once he goes through the passage into Diagon Alley, Harry's life is officially changed. He is able to start using his gift of magic. He's in the correct place to come into his own. His identity went from outcast to an incorporated member of wizarding society. This is evident as the guests of The Leaky Cauldron encounter Harry for the first time prior to crossing the threshold: "The pub goes quiet. Then. . .everyone is up and around Harry, holding out their hands and gabbling, while Hagrid looks on, beaming" (19). This is the first moment where a group of people treat Harry as an equal. He is special to them, despite none of them knowing the boy personally. All they know is that there is something special about this young boy who survived being killed off by one of the darkest wizards of all time. He is a gifted child and it took the right people surrounding him to come to terms with his gift and his identity. Harry was held back by the Dursleys. They did not allow him to experience any happiness or grow as a person. It is not until this moment in the screenplay that Harry's journey into wizardry begins.

These two occurrences are vital moments in the stories of both these two characters. They are the first steps. Without these sequences, Harry and Kubo would not realize how special they are. Because of encountering Sariatu's spirit as a monkey, Kubo has a mentor whose teachings manage to come together in the end to make his gift all that it can be. Towards the end, Kubo battles his grandfather's spirit. He is able to bring together his mentor's strength in the following action: "Kubo plucks the final string, producing a NOTE that echoes endlessly, and the Moon Beast stares down with an expression of shock" (Haimes and Butler 87) and "But his fanged

head lunges at Kubo's army, it is deflected by a field of blue light that has appeared around them, just like the glow that protected Mother's boat in the prologue" (87). Harry's journey completes during his final confrontation with Professor Quirrell (and to an extent Voldemort) when he defends himself against the opponent. Kloves writes:

He bolts forward, reaches up with both hands and . . . presses them to Quirrell's face. Quirrell SCREAMS, but Harry holds tight, growing weaker as the face under his fingers begins to DISSOLVE until, finally, just when Harry looks ready to pass out. . . . Quirrell's face drops away. Harry staggers back. Quirrell's body steps forward, blindly lurching towards Harry, and then . . . crumbles to dust (107-107A).

Earlier in the screenplay, Hagrid tells Harry: "A Wizard. And thumpin' good 'un, I'd wager, once yeh've been trained up a bit" (15). Hagrid could tell that Harry was going to come into his own and exceed his gift. Hagrid was the first one to put his trust in Harry and let him believe he was more than "Just Harry" (15). Harry's journey ends when he realizes he's not just Harry but his own wizard. He took out Voldemort not once but twice within eleven years.

A gifted child in screenplay does not simply refer to one with magical powers. Sometimes, giftedness can be portrayed in a more realistic light than through the use of magical spells. These gifts highlight a niche area of this special population, which in turn creates a very special engagement for the audience. As Marina Maznichenko and et al. say, "One of the pedagogues (2.4%) provided a definition of their own - 'a child who is into a particular hobby or activity, with that benign something that thrills them.' Thus, the majority of pedagogues

associate children's giftedness with a particular type of activity, which is manifested in, as opposed to general preconditions (e.g., intellect and creativity)" (415). Giftedness is something that needs to be handled with care. These children need to be raised in an environment that will allow them to thrive. They need teaching. They need examples. That is where a screenplay can become a useful tool.

A screenwriter can present them as finding gifts through a special interest. This is especially true with the character of Coraline. Her interests are different from her parents. Coraline represents the gifted children that want to stand out and have no desire to follow a specific path. She constantly asks her parents if they want to go out and engage with their environment. Both of Coraline's parents are shown to be dedicated to their job and unable to engage with their daughter. Her interests are elsewhere and this lack of interest leaves her understimulated, resulting in her discovering her gifted potential. Early on in the screenplay, she exhibits boredom: "Pouting, she makes the door squeak, opening and shutting it till he [her father] can't take it anymore" (Selick 11). In response to this, her father, named Charlie, gives her a choice of something to occupy her time: "CHARLIE (CONT'D): Go out and. . . count all the doors and windows and write that down. List everything blue!" (12). His daughter needs stimulation throughout her day while he and his wife work. Coraline craves the odd. She could never take on her parents' jobs and write a gardening catalog. She even encourages them to get outside in the rain and get dirty. A child viewing the film who finds themselves similarly understimulated by their surroundings and curious about the unusual can begin to see themselves in her. For a child to witness this scene, Coraline's traits can be inspiring to a child who is witnessing their own emerging gift. Her special interest and affinity for the unique allow for a special reading of a type of gifted child that occasionally gets overlooked.

A Mental Role Model

Films can be an excellent source to teach by example that gifted children are not alone. In the article “Fostering the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children Through Guided Viewing of Film,” Thomas P. Hébert and Kristie L. Speirs Neumeister help to explain this: “A film creates an understanding between the facilitator and students as well as those students who experience the film together. According to Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch (1990), a film provides meaningful therapeutic metaphors that help children understand issues that may be troubling them. The film may help gifted children view their issues through a more positive lens, enabling them to appreciate humorous aspects of the situation and see alternative solutions for addressing their problems (Hébert & Speirs Neumeister, 2001)” (18). By seeing a protagonist like them, gifted children can view themselves on screen as a hero and not as an outsider like they might see themselves on any ordinary day. These sorts of characters can give a child who’s feeling alone confidence to go about their day. To use the other female protagonist as an example, a viewer could watch *Encanto* and identify with Mirabel as she struggles to fit in with her family, who all seem to share something in common. These audience members could struggle with identity and start to feel safe as they have a protagonist that they could turn in times of hardship.

The effects of media on the minds of children is a concept that has been going around for a while. What is suitable for the young mind? The four screenplays examined have some sort of mature theme or terrifying moment. This could be an important detail in family films, especially with gifted protagonists. To have an intense moment with a gifted protagonist could aid the viewer in thinking “If x character can do THIS, then I can overcome my situation.” Ridvan Şentürk expands upon this in “Anxiety and Fear in Children’s Films.” He states: “It seems

possible to define anxiety and fear as a state of excitement and nervousness that arise in case of danger or an internal and external threat that may occur, whose source is known or unknown. Anxiety and fear are the essential features that determine man's ontological meaning, and in this context, anxiety and fear should be accessed as ontological experiences that influence the types and features that accompany man from his birth to his death" (1126). In screenwriting, incorporating strong emotions like anxiety and fear into a sequence provides the leading character with a choice. Haimés and Butler perform this exact concept perfectly in the screenplay for *Kubo and the Two Strings*. Towards the end of Act 1 and the beginning of Act 2, there is a sequence that features Sariatu defending her son against her sisters and starting his magical journey. Screenwriters Haimés and Butler embrace the "show don't tell" principle at this moment. They embrace the use of fear and anxiety to present a relatable obstacle for Kubo to face. This is prevalent in the screenplay:

She gives him the shamisen and smacks the beetle crest on the back of his robe, causing two flapping beetle wings to emerge magically from the robe's folds!

The wings pump furiously, lifting Kubo up into the air!

Kubo clutches at his mother, accidentally tearing out a few strands of her hair as he rises up into the sky.

The flapping wings take him higher and higher, away from the village and towards the ocean. All Kubo can do is watch as below, the two masked aunts advance on his mother, one

pulling a bladed chain from her robes, the other drawing a menacing sword (24).

He is scared and that fear is shown in the screenplay. He doesn't want to look away as Sariatu sacrifices herself for her only son. At this point in the screenplay, Kubo was used to tending to his mother due to a past brain injury that when she comes back to life, he does not know how to cope. He becomes frightened and he refuses to let her go despite this magical gift that he has, powers he inherited from Sariatu's side of the family, a mystical power from the Moon King. Haimes and Butler use harsh verbs like "smacks," "tearing," and "clutches" and adverbs like "furiously" to convey the anxiety and fear of the moment, properly showing the audience why Kubo refuses. The sequence in both the film and screenplay occur at a quick pace, both being only a matter of seconds. Kubo is forced to look on and refuse so that he can grow in his gift. He needs to see what is at stake. What he is fighting for is the gift to evolve.

Two of the screenplays for this piece have a common studio. Both *Kubo and the Two Strings* and *Coraline* were produced by Laika. They share disturbing imagery, yet the storytelling is powerful enough that an audience member could easily look past the frightening moments. Horror and unease can be seen as great tools for the screenwriter when trying to convey a sense of hopelessness. Ana M. Perez-Guerrero and Andres Forero-Serna write in "Between Reality and Fantasy: The Narrative Strategies of the Horror Genre in Productions by Laika Studios (2009-2015)":

The language of animation enables the enhancement of plastic and formal aspects such as the design of characters and scenes and the creation of the rules of the universe based on the emotion-stirring techniques used in the production. All this can contribute to creating the disturbing atmosphere that we have been discussing and that must viewed as

beginning with writing the script. The most distinctive element of stop-motion animation is found in how such films are made (17).

Horror played a large part in three of Laika's early films (*Coraline*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, and *Paranorman* - 2009, written by Chris Butler). The way that they present horror in a family-friendly environment is astounding. Primarily, this aspect of their filmmaking is in the action with the most memorable of the scenes happening towards the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3. For *Coraline*, this moment is when The Other Mother shows her face as The Beldam for the first time: "Her voice sounds dry and tired. She turns her face towards Coraline. It is a WHITE DEATH MASK, cracked and peeling - her true face" (Selick 97).

In *Kubo and the Two Strings*, the menacing Moon King's transformation into The Moon Beast holds this honor:

Grandfather throws open his arms and his entire body breaks apart like a cocoon. We see the blur of a hideous head trailing a long serpentine body as it launches a hundred feet into the air. Seeming smaller than ever, Kubo stands there looking up at this towering beast (Haines and Butler 84).

The visuals described in the actions are incredibly horrific. They make their respected protagonists small. When Haines and Butler state it in the screenplay, a reader can perfectly envision a little boy being towered over by a massive creature. Henry Selick describing The Other Mother's face as a death mask brings to light The Other Mother's true intentions. Coraline heeds the words of the ghost children from earlier on, who were all victims of The Other Mother's trap. Since Coraline has a gift of a different view of the world and relies on her

intelligence, she does not fully give in to the illusion, going back to her line from earlier about how everything is not better and everything is a trap. Kubo's encounter with The Moon Beast allows him to psychologically prepare with everything he learned from Monkey. Both Coraline and Kubo use their gifts to overcome the fears and anxieties that they encounter, providing a strong example of embracing a gift to become stronger in the mind.

Equally Gifted

What is interesting to note, though, is how the gifts are separated through gender. If one looks carefully at the four gifted protagonists, there is a clear divide. Two distinct categories. Both male protagonists have a magical ability as their gift, whereas, the two female protagonists lack any magical ability. Yet, these two leading ladies inhabit a world that plays host to those with magical abilities. Mirabel's sentient home Casita is a safe haven for her "fantastical and magical" (Smith and Bush 6) family. Coraline's is secretly a trap to another world where her Other Mother, actually a witch called The Beldam, manipulates the world into a perfect place for her next unsuspecting victim. It is certainly eye-opening when this concept is looked at through this lens. Why do these female protagonists have to rely on their wit more than a magical spell to save the day?

Being able to break free from the stereotypes of gender can contribute to the creation of a character more relatable to everyone. It should not matter if the audience member experiencing the film is a boy or girl, a relatable protagonist should appeal to everyone. A relatable protagonist features traits from all walks of life. David Emerson states in "Innocence as a Superpower: Little Girls on the Hero's Journey": "We generally consider such traits as physical strength, courage, independence and self-reliance, and the tendency to use force as 'masculine' traits, as opposed to traits identified as 'feminine' such as empathy, nurturance, connection with community and

negotiation” (132). However, recent cinema and screenplays have been making a change for their portrayal of a female hero as more than a pretty face who needs to mother the first child they see or a little girl who runs around plucking flowers to give to the first young boy she sees. That is why independent Coraline and courageous Mirabel are important protagonists. They show that their gift of intelligence or ways of looking at the world can have a positive influence on their surroundings. Before diving into what makes these leading ladies as unique as they are, it is important to look at the background of those who bring them to life.

Before the analysis, it is important to discuss the significance of female screenwriters. Despite having an even divide among the gifted heroes, only one of the four screenplays featured a woman screenwriter. Charise Castro Smith wrote the screenplay of *Encanto* alongside Jared Bush. She was also part of the story team with Nancy Kruse and served as co-director of the film with Bush and Byron Howard receiving primary credits. Despite her name being first on the actual screenplay, there was primarily a male dominant story team. As Brooke Shapiro states in the article, “Examining Portrayals of Female Protagonists by Female Screenwriters Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis,” “In part, the reason that females are misrepresented and underrepresented is because of the lack of females in the off-screen sector of film” (39). A male screenwriter will write from a man’s perspective. Henry Selick, Steven Kloves, Marc Haimés, Chris Butler, and Jared Bush have never experienced what it is like being a female. They only have the women around them as influence. Shapiro also states that “These expectations form the basis of traditional feminine ideology, which describes the attributes, behaviors, and roles traditionally and stereotypically associated with girls and women” (38). Kloves and Selick had their female characters mapped out for them as their screenplays were adaptations, whereas Haimés, Butler, and Bush have created their female characters from scratch. What is interesting

about the character of Coraline is that she's a little odd, even for her normal world. Selick introduces her playing in the bushes: "She reaches into the shrub and breaks off a FORKED BRANCH. She removes the stick's red leaves, aims it like a DOWSING ROD and heads into the garden" (3). She already stands out from the rest of the world. Despite the apartments The Jones family moves into being called The Pink Palace, they are anything but. In the action, Selick describes the day as "late winter, the sky a damp, grey sponge" (1). The next line of action introduces "MR. BOBINSKY - a seven-foot-tall blue-skinned man" (1). Despite being an oddly skinned man, Mr. Bobinsky blends into the background. That's what makes Coraline's introduction that much more important: "CORALINE JONES, 11, steps onto the porch in a YELLOW RAINCOAT with a shoulder bag. WE - SPY'S POV - CLICK to a CLOSE-UP to find this new tenant has BLUE HAIR and a skeptical face" (2). This description is there to illustrate and set up how different Coraline is from the rest of her world. Having her in a bright yellow raincoat and emphasizing her blue hair helps her stand out from the background and highlights her differences and defiance of gender norms.

In the world of *Encanto*, Mirabel is shown grabbing "a self-decorated dress off a sewing table" (Smith and Bush 4). She also has some more physical tasks to accomplish. When Mirabel enters Bruno's room, she "takes a breath. . .then removes a rope railing on and throws it over a boulder above an anchor" (42) and then "goes to swing across, slips, loses her balance, but . . . somehow makes it across. Stunned she succeeded, Mirabel pumps her fists" (42). Since Bruno's room is abandoned, Mirabel taking on these physical challenges of trekking through his room is a way of saying she's worthy. She's more capable than the other members of her family due to breaking gender stereotypes. She's used her intellect to figure out how to get across the harsh environment of Bruno's room. Mirabel does not conform to gender norms and that makes her a

great role model. This idea is expanded upon in Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn M. Feltey's article "Here's Looking At Her: An Intersectional Analysis Of Women, Power, and Feminism": "In our analysis we found that films presented stories of women's lives where power became manifest through actions, decisions, hopes, and dreams, and relationships" (622). Mirabel and Coraline are not the stereotypical female leads. They are strong and break gender norms. They even make themselves look different from others who inhabit the world they're in, making themselves stand out to showcase how special they are. Mirabel and Coraline bring representation to the traditionally male-dominated world of gifted protagonists, bringing comfort to young girls who do not conform to gender norms.

The analysis of strong female characters in gifted stories does not simply apply to films starring a gifted female. Plenty of strong women appear in both *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Kubo and the Two Strings*. Another quote from "Here's Looking at Her: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Power and Feminism" comes into play here and states that "Strong women who do not also radiate traditionally feminine characteristics such as compassion and sensitivity may be portrayed as successful in nontraditional roles, but they also pay the price in loneliness and isolation" (Sutherland and Feltey 619). Despite not being female-led films, both *Kubo* and *Harry* have strong female characters that their leads interact with. These female characters play a vital role as they help their gifted heroes come into their own. They have extreme influence on the male characters who save the world. Since Monkey has had her time in the spotlight, it's time to highlight one of the most important female characters from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Hermione Granger. Hermione is the complete foil to Harry's other ally, Ron. She is introduced in a huff. Her introduction in the action consists of more sentences than Ron's, who's described with only a few lines. She is a known bookworm and an

overachiever. When she sees that Ron is about to do magic, she observes, waiting to see if it needs any corrections. His spell fails and Hermione's reaction is "Are you sure that's a real spell? Well, it's not very good, is it? I've only tried a few simple ones myself but they've all worked for me" (Kloves 35). She proceeds to show young Harry real magic:

Hermione

(raising her wand)

Oculus Reparo

Instantly, the cracked bridge of Harry's glasses is mended (35).

Even though she is mostly his peer, Hermione in *Sorcerer's Stone* falls into the mentor role for Harry. She has done intense research into the wizarding world due to her blood status, a witch born to non-magical parents, making Hermione gifted in her own way. She properly shows Harry how to use magic and does so later with Ron, after about two attempts. She, like Ron, becomes a powerful ally as she helps him grow his gift. If Ron teaches Harry about how the wizarding world works, Hermione is an ally for intellect and proper spell technique. One of the most important scenes with Hermione is towards the end of the screenplay. She and Harry have witnessed Ron almost die during a game of larger-than-life Wizard's Chess, sentient chess pieces. She pushes Harry to go on to bring the stone to safety.

HARRY (CONT'D)

If you can, go to the Owlery and send a message to Dumbledore. Ron's right. I have to go on.

Hermione turns, her eyes glittering. Without warning, she rushes forward, embraces Harry.

HERMIONE

You're a great wizard, Harry Potter! You are, you know!

HARRY

(a bit embarrassed)

Not as good as you.

HERMIONE

Me! Books. And cleverness. There are more important things - - friendship and bravery and - - oh, Harry, be careful!

She turns then, goes to Ron. Harry studies his two friends, then looks away. The remaining chessmen bow, parting the way to the next door. He steps forward (103).

This scene features Hermione being the ultimate mentor for Harry. She's encouraging. She's sweet and loving. Most importantly, she's more humble now. She's been exposed to the dangers of this fantastic world. Returning to Sutherland and Feltey's quote, Hermione escapes the isolation. She expressed non-traditional traits of women, slightly aggressive and pushy. Hermione feels the need to highlight her smarts when around her friends. Seeing Hermione go from a show-off to a kind and compassionate young woman allows Harry to fully see what's at

stake and why he needs to get the stone to safety as well as come to terms with who he is and his gift. He sees the example of this new strong female and decides to go on to encounter whatever lies beyond the next barrier. Harry sees someone who was an outcast like him become accepted, becoming his friend and providing him with courage.

When discussing gifted protagonists, and especially strong female gifted protagonists, it's imperative to discuss the concept of the Other. As mentioned before, Mirabel and Coraline are considered in another category when put alongside shamisen-playing Kubo and Harry Potter, the boy who lived. The concept of the Other is intriguing, especially when it's given to the main protagonist. Usually, in these situations, the Others come from the new world that the heroes enter. While not physically disabled, Coraline and Mirabel are disenfranchised from their own worlds and otherized in a way that is similar to how Susan Wendell describes the Other in "Toward a Feminist Theory on Disability":

When we make people 'other,' we group them together as the objects of our experience instead of regarding them as fellow subjects of experience with whom we might identify. If you are 'other' to me, I see you primarily as symbolic of something else- usually, but not always, something I reject and fear and that I project onto you (117).

The Other is made immediately clear after the first song sequence, "The Family Madrigal," in *Encanto*. After desperately trying to avoid discussing her lack of a gift, Mirabel's Abuela Alma stubbornly questions the intent of the children. One of the children, a girl who is named Little Alejandra in the screenplay, responds with "She was about to tell us about her super awesome gift!" (Smith and Bush 12). In response to this, Mirabel's cousin Dolores pipes in to reveal Mirabel's secret to the children: "Oh, Mirabel didn't get one" (12). What stands out in this moment is the action that follows. The two screenwriters write: "Dolores thinking she was

helpful and heads off. Mirabel, busted, looks back to Abuela, who moves on. The kids look back to Mirabel, feeling like they've been duped" (12). With that single line of action, the children witness Mirabel's own family exposing her secret to the world.

Mirabel's status of Other comes across a few scenes later when she's trying to help set up for her youngest cousin's gift celebration. While putting out decorations, the action reads: "As Mirabel lights the candles, she pulls out a DECORATION FOR ABUELA that she's worked extra hard on. Next to Mirabel are . . . pictures of her extraordinary family. She's not on that wall. Mirabel stares at it for just a beat" (Smith and Bush 16). Because of Mirabel's lack of power, she is not included in her group. Because of her lack of gift, she is not included in the family photo. Her family is called extraordinary. But not her. Mirabel's otherness shines through because of this photo. She is not seen as worthy enough to make it onto her family portrait, thus connecting to Wendell's idea that she acts as a reminder of what the Madrigals are scared of, that she triggered an entire generation of Madrigals to not receive gifts from Casita. It is not till after the magic of Casita is restored that Mirabel becomes invited in with the other members of the family. The sequence begins with Mirabel putting a doorknob to complete the house: "Mirabel turns, then places HER doorknob into the FRONT DOOR of the House and . . . WHOOSH! AN EXPLOSION OF LIGHT races over the entire Encanto, restoring its magic. . . and redefining the cracks that spread to the entire town. A new miracle" (99). It is continued with: "Watching all of this is Mirabel, Bruno and Abuela Alma who are suddenly. . . yanked off screen by the House, which grabs the entire family, placing them for a NEW FAMILY PORTRAIT" (100). Her influence and acceptance of her role in the family are the reasons she is able to repair Casita, and erase her part as an Other. Even though Mirabel lacks a magical gift, she uses her gift of intellect

and empathy to bring together a group that otherized both her and her uncle Bruno. She herself was the gift that the Madrigals were missing.

For *Coraline*, the concept of the Other is clear. The story is at its core an alternate universe tale. The alternate universe that is one of the primary settings of the story is referred to as The Other World. Every location in Coraline's normal world is referred to as Other followed by the location. The first slugline in The Other World is "INT. OTHER LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS" (Selick 19). The first time that Other is spoken is in one of the first lines from The Other Mother: "I'm your Other Mother, silly. Now, go tell your Other Father that supper's ready" (20). Though Coraline herself fits in with the normal world, she is still an outsider, an Other in The Other World. Like Mirabel, Coraline's gifted quality is that she depends on her intellect to get out of situations and she sees beauty in the weird, a perspective that a majority of characters fail to see. For instance, one sequence features Coraline going shopping for uniform items with her real mother, Mel. The piece that she wants is different from that of Mel's desires. In the action, this difference comes out: "PRESIDENT'S DAY SALE. Mel piles gray blouses, a navy skirt, white socks on the arms of a CLERK. Sitting alone on some stairs, Coraline sees a pair of fancy GREEN AND ORANGE GLOVES" (48). Mel would rather her child fit in with everyone else, evident from this line from the action: "Mel is checking out school blouses, when Coraline rolls past, first one direction, then the other, modeling the colorful gloves" (48). Selick carefully crafted a scene that otherizes Coraline visually against her backdrop. After witnessing her daughter move along the store, Mel reacts relatively harshly and the following conversation happens:

Mel

Put them back.

Coraline

But Mom, the whole school's gonna wear boring gray clothes. No one will have these.

Mel

Put them back

(48).

Similar to Abuela and Dolores, Mel alienates her own daughter and turns her into the Other. To Mel, whatever she says goes. She groups Coraline into the other annoyances in her life. Instead of a family portrait, Coraline's reminder is Mel's neck brace. When asked what the point of moving to Oregon was, Mel replies "Something like that. But then we had the accident" (9). Coraline's response is "It wasn't my fault you hit that truck" (9). Despite making it clear to her daughter that she was not blaming her for the car accident, Mel groups her daughter in with the inconvenience anyway. She does not want to take the time to understand her daughter's desires or how special her daughter is with her imagination.

Coraline's ability to use her head to think scenarios through comes in towards the final moments of Act 2. She is no longer duped by The Other Mother and is trying to explain to another resident child, Wybie Lovat, about her experience: "The Other Mother! She's got this whole world where everything's better - the food, the garden, the - - (leans in on him) neighbors (Holds her hands up) But it's all a trap" (Selick 75). In *The Other World*, which is created specifically for her and where she shouldn't feel like an Other, she discovers for herself that not everything is what she expected, and she begins to shed some light onto her own world. In one of the final moments of the screenplay, it's Mel that gives her the little light by giving her the

gloves: “Mel slips a slim box under the covers next to her daughter. She gives Coraline a ‘told you so’ look, and she and Charlie leave the room. Coraline sits up excitedly and opens the box - it’s the GREEN AND ORANGE GLOVES she’d wanted!” (105). She’s no longer persuaded by The Other World but integrated into her own natural one, showing that the journey she went on helped her to overcome adversity and come into her identity.

Both of the intellectually gifted protagonists receive some kind of reward at the end of their tale for their hard work. They participate in an important exchange. In their article “Critique and Recognition: The Struggle for Identity in Media Culture,” Marcio Serelle and Ercio Sena state: “Social life and its relations of recognition thus impact pressure for reciprocity, in which the subjects, in their interactions, recognize themselves as precarious and vulnerable beings who find constant reassurance in the other. Thus, lack of recognition can movement damage to the identity of a person who experiences situations of disrespect and feelings of demotion, with emotional reactions such as anger and shame” (153). Throughout both of their screenplays, both Coraline and Mirabel experience an unfair exchange. Their differences from their worlds make it difficult for others to fully understand them. Mirabel’s heroic duty of saving a miracle that was given to her family so long ago and Coraline saving her parents from the clutches of The Other Mother act as their transaction. Once every Madrigal has their powers restored and Mel and Charlie Jones are brought back home, Mirabel’s and Coraline’s identities begin to shine. They can embrace who they are without fear. They are no longer receiving a lack of recognition, in Serelle and Sena’s words. Both of them were disrespected and experienced emotional reactions to their problems. When Mirabel gets her part of the portrait and Coraline receives her gloves, both they and the audience can deduce that they have been accepted for who they are since their payment has been fulfilled.

Conclusion

There are a couple of communities that could benefit from reading this piece. One of them is novice screenwriters. Occasionally, it can be difficult for a screenwriter who is starting out to create compelling characters in their own stories. If this is read by a young screenwriter who is struggling to create a character as highlighted in this piece, they can see the examples from well-established screenwriters to help them make their screenplays the best they can be. Another community that could benefit from reading this is academics. Multiple people within the academic community, scholars who study film, students, and those more focused on the psychological aspect, can read this and learn about how these protagonists influence the story and how they can have a wider influence on an overall audience.

Representation is an absolutely important aspect of film. One of the most important populations to be represented on screen and in screenplays is that of the gifted outcast. Even though there are more than these few, the primary examples that audiences see in contemporary cinema are fantastic gifts and intellectual gifts. Stories along the lines of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Coraline*, and *Encanto* are excellent examples of these specific categories of gifts. They all feature a young protagonist coming to terms with their gift and growing as a person. The screenwriters expertly craft characters that can make the audience root for them. They utilize the themes of gender and intellect and storytelling conventions like key plot elements and supporting characters to help cultivate the gifts of these protagonists through the widely accessible family film. It is due to these aspects that these gifted protagonists have resonated with audiences. The screenwriters offer a unique hero that has something different to offer the world. In turn, these gifted protagonists offer a safe space for

audience members like them to forge ahead with their own path to discovering identity and community.

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