

**The Hero's Journey: A Jungian  
Analysis of a Documentary Film *Murderball***

**By  
Iman Adawy Ahmed Hanafy  
Associate Professor of English Literature, English Department,  
Faculty of Arts, Benha University**

رحلة البطل: تحليل يونج للفيلم الوثائقي *كرة القتل*

إعداد  
إيمان عدوى أحمد حنفى  
أستاذ مساعد قسم اللغة الإنجليزية كلية الآداب جامعة بنها

كرة القتل هو فيلم وثائقي أمريكي حول الرياضيين المعاقين جسديا الذين يتحدون الإعاقة ويلعبون الرجبي على كراسي متحركة. ويكشف الفيلم كيف أن تمثيل الشخصيات ذات الإعاقة يتحدى التعريف السلبي للشخصيات المعوقة. في هذا السياق، فإن الدراسة هي محاولة لتحليل ظهور النموذج المعوق الإيجابي في ضوء نظرية كارل يونج للوعي و اللاوعي الجماعي. فيمكن القول أنه من الممكن تغيير النموذج الأصلي لمفهوم الإعاقة عندما يصبح الشخص واعيا وينظر إليه. ووفقا ليونج، فمن الضروري تماما للشخص أن يدرك اللاوعي الجماعي ودمج محتوياته في وعيه قبل أن يتمكن الشخص من إكمال رحلته إلى "تحقيق الذات"، و في أثناء الرحلة يواجه البطل نماذج مختلفة، من بينها "الظل"، "الحكيم العجوز"، و "الأم". هذه الأشخاص الثلاثة هي بعض الأشخاص الذي يقابلها البطل في رحلته لتحقيق الذات والهدف النهائي من هذه العملية هو الوصول لشخصية متكاملة تحافظ على توازن بين الوعي واللاوعي.

**الكلمات الداله:** الإعاقة، كارل يونج، الفيلم الوثائقي كرة القتل، اللاوعي الجماعي، تحقيق الذات.

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### *Murderball*

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Iman Adawy Ahmed Hanafy

Associate Professor of English Literature, English Department, Faculty of  
Arts, Benha University

*Murderball* (2005) is an American documentary film about physically disabled athletes who challenge disability and play wheelchair rugby. The film reveals how the representation of characters with disabilities deviates from stereotypical and past negative identification of disabled characters. In this context, the study is an attempt to analyze the emergence of the positive disabled archetype in the light of Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. The use of archetypes in understanding the human condition, arguably made famous by C.G. Jung who considers the archetypes as contents of the collective unconscious, a deep layer of psyche not derived from personal experience. The archetype is changed when it becomes conscious and is perceived; it becomes colored by the person in whose consciousness it appears. According to Jung, it is absolutely necessary for a person to realize the collective unconscious and to integrate its contents into his consciousness before a person can complete the journey to "self-actualization." In his journey, the heroes confront various archetypes, the chief among them, "the Shadow", "the Wise Old Man", and "the Mother." These three figures are some of those typical stages in the journey of the hero. The ultimate goal of this process is a whole, fully integrated personality that maintains a careful balance between the conscious and the unconscious.

**Key words:** disability, C.G. Jung, archetypes, collective unconscious,

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Associate Professor, English Department, Faculty of Arts, Benha  
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In 2005, MTV Movies and ThinkFilm released *Murderball*, an American documentary film about physically disabled athletes who challenge disability and play wheelchair rugby. When *Murderball* was introduced at the Sundance Film Festival, it won the American Documentary Audience Award and the Special Jury Prize for Editing, besides, best documentary awards and an Academy Award nomination. *Murderball* traces the rivalry between the United States and Canadian quadriplegic teams in international competitions, interspersed with stories of the athletes' everyday lives and personal relationships. The film reflects on the disabled hero's journey to achieve himself. In this context, the study analyzes the hero's journey in the light of Carl Jung's theories of archetypes and the collective unconscious. The ultimate goal of this journey is a whole, fully integrated personality that maintains a careful balance between the conscious and the unconscious.

Disability has long been associated with loss, abnormality, and fragility. It has heavily loaded with cultural meaning, indicating an impairment and individual deficit. The presence of disability in films and other media is overwhelmingly negative, it is associated with disabled characters as a maladjusted people and being a burden on society. Cameron argues that the personal tragedy model is the cultural expression that normality is good, abnormality is bad; that "able-bodiedness" is

valued, impairment and disability are the shameful marks of inferiority (17). This identification creates a corresponding archetype which is projected onto living people and institutions. These collective patterns through which archetypes emerge are established throughout time and across cultures. This archetypal image is “archaic patterns inherent to the collective human psyche ... which may be expressed through recurring figures and motifs in mythology, literature and, in a more contemporary context, the cinema” (Gunther 84).

Carl Jung divides the human psyche into three layers: The immediate consciousness, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The immediate consciousness is the ego to which Jung denoted the term, “persona, the mask of the actor” (43), which is the face an individual presents to the external world. While the personal unconscious is the forgotten and repressed psychic content which is related to the person himself, the collective unconscious is “a psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals” (43). This collective unconscious consists of “pre-existent forms, the archetypes...which give definite form to certain psychic contents” (Jung 43). These forms are types of situations, figures and patterns of functioning, which are peculiar to and typical of the human species. They are the human quality of the human being. Carl Jung believes that they were primordial: that is, we, as individuals, have these archetypal images ingrained in our understanding even before we are born (Jung 78).

According to Jung, the archetypes are “forms which are unconscious but nonetheless active-living dispositions... that perform and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions” (78). All

archetypes give rise to “similar feelings, thoughts, images, mythologems, and ideas in people, irrespective of their class, creed, race, geographical location, or historical epoch” (Stevens 48). Jung’s theory of archetypes is not a representation of abstract images, but ones that emerge in specific situations. Disability representations involve the endless repetition of a small number of images: the poor, pathetic victim, dependent on others for pity and charity. They are individualized characters that represent the archetypal idea of disability. What is ultimately observable is a personalized manifestation of the universal. The archetypes become the parameters by which Jung interprets the actions of humanity. Jung argues that humans have unconscious contents imprinted upon their psyche from their conceptions.

In this sense, the archetype serves the function of synthesizing sense material into a comprehensive image which triggers the meaning to emerge in the unconscious. Through the synthesis of symbols and meaning the archetype emerges as an identifiable form “into which desires are fitted to create fantasy images held in common” (Bates & Garner 144). The shared image which “synthesizes” content “into a single powerful mental entity” traverses cultural boundaries explaining the existence of archetypes (Lindenfeld 223).

These archetypes can take the form of figures the chief among them, “the shadow”, “the wise old man”, and “the mother” (Jung 309). The shadow archetype takes its manifested form from the dark repressed feeling of the personality; those characteristics or traits that a person refuses to acknowledge about himself. The shadow usually appears as the dark side of the hero. This dark side might be an obstacle for the hero to perform his heroic function. The confrontation with the shadow is a must

for man's integration. The hero should accept his shadow as part of himself. Accordingly, all future choices of the hero will be based on a better understanding of his shadow. This understanding might be described as "own[ing] one's shadow" (Stevens 67). Once the shadow has been made conscious, its negative effects are minimized, and it becomes possible to learn from it. But if the shadow remains unconscious and only gives rise to feelings of shame and inferiority, "much Self potential and instinctive energy is locked away in the shadow and therefore unavailable to the total personality" (Stevens 67). Therefore, being aware of one's own shadow means that one is able to make decisions rather than the blind, compulsive decision often caused by upbringing and society. The archetype of the wise old man represents "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition" as well as "moral qualities such as goodwill and a readiness to help" (Jung 222). The wise old man is the guidance and advice needed when personal experience and the consciousness are insufficient. Jung argues that the wise old man appears when "insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc. are needed but cannot be mustered on one's own resources" (216). His appearance can rescue the hero in his journey, to help him to look within himself, reflect on his own identity and find an answer to his dilemma. The wise old man is the archetype that uses the rational consciousness to achieve self-realization. Moreover, the mother archetype may be projected onto any woman with whom a relationship exists; any figure that fulfils the collective unconscious's expectation of the role of a "mother" and "mothering" in the development of the hero's personality (Jung 81).

These three figures are some of those typical stages in the journey of the hero; these figures that the hero has to confront or depend upon

during his journey are archetypes. According to Jung, it is absolutely necessary for a person to realize the collective unconscious and to integrate its contents into his consciousness before a person can complete the journey to “self- individuation” or “self-actualization” (Jung 70). The hero’s goal is “the complete realization of the blueprint for human existence within the context of the life of the individual” (Stevens 61).

The present time, with its emphasis on audio-visual communication, films have played a vital role in perpetuating dominant image of people with disabilities. O’Flaherty argues that “films provide an important ritualistic arena for an encounter between myths and the lives of people in our culture at large” (125). Several authors have written about the stereotypical portrayals of disability and the use of disabled characters as abhorrent and vilified (Darke, 1998; Meekosha, 1999; and Sutherland, 2009). These depictions of disability have been used to create metaphors of terror, pity, and ridicule. Looking at people with disabilities as unlucky individuals seem to suggest, “if you don't stage a dramatic comeback (including a mandatory, climactic attempt to get up out of the chair and walk), you are a failure” (Norden 196). The presence of wheelchairs are rarely intended to blend into the normal conditions of life. This is opposed to portrayals of abled characters that are regularly the center of the scope of the camera’s lens for numerous dramatic and symbolic purposes. The relationship between disability identity and heightened use of image when it comes to disabled characters suggests that disabled life is not worth living. These films become the medium in which the archetypal images of human existence that are part of the collective unconscious are actualized. Therefore, films are considered “our counterpart to mythological re-enactment” (Campbell 21).

In contrast, *Muderball* constructs new myth that subverts the old image of disability. It demonstrates that it is possible for people with quadriplegia to live fulfilling lives. All of the characters in *Murderball* are top athletes in international competitions. They are energetic and powerful. The featured personalities and their stories defy any notion that a person with a disability is necessarily weak or helpless. Their athletic bodies and competition are obvious throughout the film. Indeed, the negative conceptions of disability in which people with disabilities are perceived are criticized by a player in the film who says, “when people see you in a wheelchair they kinda treat you like you are made of glass, and you’re fragile and things like that, but in wheelchair rugby its just kinda nice to be like bumper cars, it’s a different way of thinking about it” (*Muderball*, 2005). The quad rugby “is a communicative act that sends a message to the community of sport and beyond challenging ableist assumptions about disability, masculinity, and ability” (Lindemann and Cherney, 120).

Furthermore, *Murderball* is told by quad rugby players who have suffered injuries that have left them with limited function in all four limbs. The directors of the film Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro give an informative look at the daily lives of a group of quadriplegic athletes. Despite their disability, none of them is represented as crippled, defective and object of pity. Rather, they are represented as confident, powerful, and outspoken. Whether by truck crash, fist fight, childhood polio, or motocross accident, quad rugby's athletes have found their lives dramatically altered.

In their journey of self-realization, the characters have to face their “shadows”; the fact of being quadriplegic. Their struggles to face and come to terms with the shadow side of their personalities mirrors their own difficulties when they have to confront this shadow in their journey for personal development. Mark Zupan, the USA coach and the key figure in the film, says, “The majority of people that play wheelchair rugby have broken their necks, so we have rods, plates, screws, inside” (*Murderball*, 2005). A close up shot of the back of a players’ neck fades into an animation showing a skeleton and the angle of the camera focuses on the spinal column. Screws, plates and bolts float into the picture and affix themselves to the spinal column to show the medical interventions that accompany impairment for these players. The camera moves to another animated skeleton as Zupan describes spinal injuries and the quantification of players based on their level of function related to the injuries. Andy Cohn states, “My hands don't close, they only open. So kind of like spatulas, for like pancakes or flipping people off” (*Murderball*, 2005). Scott Hogsett talks about becoming quadriplegic after being injured in a fist fight. He tells the camera, “I got injured eleven years ago, it was a freak accident out at a lake cabin. I got pushed off the balcony and I broke my neck” (*Murderball*, 2005). Another player, Keith Cavill is shown first learning about wheelchair rugby in a rehabilitation hospital after motocross accident, he sits in a rugby wheelchair and says that he feels “like battering ram,” then he taps on the wheel and says, “Feel how rugged it is? I can run into anything” (*Murderball* 2005).

In experiencing the unconscious aspects of the psyche and recognizing their presence as such, the shadow forces an individual to confront the negative side of the personality, the sum of all those

unpleasant qualities the one likes to hide. In effect, all players feel conscious of their disability and take the first step to confront it. Andy Cohn humorously begins to equate his arms and hands to instruments. Zupan's independence and athletic body has been clear in the first shot of the film. In spite of his quadriplegia, Zupan is clearly capable of dressing himself. His strength, his ability to perform complex technical tasks self-sufficiently are representative of a strong masculine physicality. Zupan faces the camera in the similar way he faces his shadow. He says, "I've gone up to people, start talking shit, and they are like 'oh.' I go 'what you're not going to hit a kid in a chair, fucking hit me, I'll hit you back'" (*Murderball*, 2005).

Zupan's remark and defense is at once an aggressive denial of those that do not seek confrontation with their dark shadow. When his suppressed fears become too strong to remain unconscious, it is precisely this desire to control things, that result in his first meeting with the dark side as part of his psyche. This means that "some content, an idea, or a part of the personality, obtain mastery of the individual for one reason or another. The contents which thus take possession appear as peculiar convictions, idiosyncrasies, stubborn plans, and so forth" (Jung 122). Therefore, their anger is justified while confronting the contemptuous attitudes about disability. It functions more as an assertion of their power over others that are threatened by athletes' aggressive and frightening behavior. Marty, one of the crew mechanic for the wheelchairs of USA team says about Zupan, "Just to see him out on the court with the tattoos up his arm, with the goatee, he is intimidating. He is one of these players that people just try to stay away from" (*Murderball*, 2005).

Aggression, violence and antagonism are mainstay of the film's representation of these disability sport athletes. As the title suggests, *Murderball* implies a celebration of violence in the context of sport. Through the narrative there are extensive scenes of violence while Canada team plays against USA team. During the scene Joe yells, "Watch Zupan, watch Zupan... Attack, attack, attack, attack" (*Murderball*, 2005). Another Canada player blocks Zupan dramatically and scores the ball. Joe is shown on the side of the court; he pumps his fist and yells, "Boom." Throughout the rest of the game, several more hits are shown (*Murderball*, 2005). Besides, the yelling that is interspersed with game description illustrates the intensity of the aggression in the game. His use of the words, "kill the man," echoes the film's title (*Murderball*, 2005). The film "deploys notions of violent, powerful masculinity to portray empowered disabled men" (Shupe, 2012, p. 24). The Canada coach, Joe Soares, in his first appearance on screen voices his anger against the USA coach Zupan without a clear reason, the rivalry and antagonism between Joe and Zupan are fully explored, both of them are represented as tightly aggressive personalities. While shaking hands at the end of the game, Zupan says, "I'll remove you from my face if you yell at me again," Joe Soares counters, "Uh, man if you think you are man enough. OK" (*Murderball*, 2005). Such state occurs particularly in situations where strong emotion is concerned, since "emotions are instinctive, involuntary reactions which upset the rational order of consciousness by their elemental outbursts...In a state of affect a trait of character sometimes appears which is strange even to the person concerned, or hidden content may interrupt involuntarily" (Jung 279). In this case, the characters are not able to confront their shadow and overcome it, instead, they allow it to take control of them.

The confrontation with the shadow is “the first test of courage on the inner way” (Jung 20), not only because it challenges a person’s inner strength, but also because it reminds him of his own weakness and helplessness. Despite their disability, the players cannot admit that they need help. Their experience of the shadow, only increases their determinations to control events and people. In the journey to self-actualization, the players are forced to confront their disability and evaluate their own weaknesses, which in turn will prompt a change in their personality. Bob Lujano highlights his experience of coping with his disability. “I am a thirty-three year old single male living in Birmingham, and I think I am living what every person that is a single male is supposed to be living. You know, I live independently, I take care of my self, I cook for my self, I have a job” (*Murderball*, 2005).

The players’ ability to challenge disability is perceived in the constant reiteration of the athletes' capacity for athletic competition, and this is demonstrated through their sport participation and physicality. Dutton argues that this situates the athletic male body as “a mark of power and moral superiority for those who bear it” (Dworkin & Wachs 49). In *Murderball*, the players themselves become “gladiators” who are able to compete and win. In response to Keith’s mother inquiry about the reason for not wearing helmets while playing, Zupan’s response demonstrates the discursive link between disability and undefeated physicality.

Further, Bob Lujano not only has to fight his physical impairment, he also has to face his society which constitutes the collective unconscious; the shared characteristics that a person refuses to acknowledge about himself. Bob Lujano says, “My father was very

instrumental in helping me deal with everything. I remember times, I remember kids would kind of laugh or point and he would laugh along with them and kind of joke about it. Once I saw him kind of lightening the situation, you know it didn't make me feel upset, or you know, hurt” (*Murderball*, 2005). The person is required to suppress the values which tell them that they are inferior and to smile bravely. Therefore, “Strong natures—or should one rather call them weak?—do not like to be reminded of this...nevertheless, the sooner or later. In the end one has to admit that there are account has to be settled problems which one simply cannot solve on one’s own resources” (Jung 21). The person subconsciously suppresses these socially undesired traits, since they lead to feelings of unworthiness and inferiority and therefore to fear of rejection. This is, however, not the end of the journey. The players therefore, demonstrate that they will move on to the next phase of the journey.

In this case, the father plays the role of the wise old man in his attempt to alleviate the situation. It is the archetype that appears in the life of the individual and provides an answers when the person is faced with a situation that cannot be resolved on the basis of personal experience. For Jung, the wise old man is the guide and therefore the archetype of meaning (35). This archetype appears as a person possessing authority who acts as guide or teacher, helping the person move from one sphere of being to another. Wherever and in whatever form it appears, it is a concrete manifestation of man’s collective need for answers and guidance through the difficult situations that every human being has to face during his lifetime. According to Jung, the archetype of the wise old man can only intervene when “all props and crutches are broken, and no cover from the rear offers even the slightest hope of security” (32).

In this manner, the rehabilitation hospital plays an important role in guiding people with disability to come to terms with their life. Cure, care, and therapy are regarded as appropriate social responses to what is identified as a personal problem (Edwards 15). Further, the organizational culture of quad rugby provides extensive help to the quadriplegic athletes. It helps them to empower themselves by building muscles and developing more control over the movement of their bodies. Since sport participation provides significant improvements of the body strength and mobility, people with quadriplegia realizes that it is possible to be independent and athletic. The disabled individual experiences himself as an individual within his group that he is continuously shaping himself, that he should do so. By so doing, the quad rugby culture gives the players not only a psychological care but a psychological center as well. As Elias puts it:

The individual can only be understood in terms of his communal life with others. The structure and configuration of an individual's behaviour control depend on the structure of the relations between individuals... The individual is only able to say I if and because he is at the same time able to say we.

(61)

Thus, the wise old man's intervention at this point is absolutely necessary, since "the conscious will by itself is hardly ever capable of uniting the personality to the point where it acquires this extraordinary power to succeed" (Jung 220).

In addition to stimulate resistance and empowerment, disability sport provides a defined space for social interaction that increases social

relationships. Disabled persons learn from other participants how to be physically active and what it means to be disabled. The interpersonal relationships between the players can be just as important to players' therapeutic experiences as actually playing the game. Through off-court talk, players learn better how to do everyday activities and get by in life with a disability. In effect, players learn how to live by learning the game. As such, Zupan offers Keith Cavill, one of the newcomers, the opportunity to share stories about how to "do" disability "the rugby way." Such storytelling and talk enables Keith to learn the value of the quad rugby culture. It is obvious that Zupan offers Keith Cavill guidance to improve sporting masculinity through the rugby wheelchair.

Further, the mother archetype exists in the collective unconscious as a universal image of the way a mother should be. Any woman who embodies aspects of this image, may therefore become a concrete manifestation of the mother archetype. The mother archetype has only limited appearance in *Murderball*, but when it does appear it plays an important part in the journey of self-actualization. In the film, women are consistently reduced to particular roles, usually subordinate caregivers or girlfriends, but they are always supporting the heroes in their journey. Though Mark Zupan's mother is seemingly included to offer Zupan a moral support, she only plays a passive role in his life. In one scene, Zupan is shown wheeling up to the edge of a pool in a bathing suit. His mother watches him jumping into the pool and she feels concern as he sinks under the water. Throughout the film, the mother has never been identified, she only nods in agreement but never speaks. Although she is represented offering a positive supportive role, she is almost unacknowledged in the film.

The mother archetype is again represented by the character of Jess, Zupan's girlfriend. Her role is primarily that of encouraging and supporting. In a scene she expresses the reason for her attraction to Zupan, is that she can fulfill a mothering role. She says, "I really think it is curiosity that attracts some girls to quadriplegics, and I think maybe also, to some extent, it is the mothering instinct" (*Murderball*, 2005). She is then shown tying up his shoes and then pumping gas while he sits in the car. His attachment to her is also based on the fact that she appears to have many of the characteristics that he associates with the concept of the mother. It may even be seen as an embodiment of what he would have wanted his mother to be like.

In the film, several women working as rehabilitation therapists are also represented solely as helpers, none of these women are introduced. In several scenes in the film, women who are rehabilitation therapists appear only to give support and help to the players. One of the woman therapists play card with Keith Cavill and help him perform tasks like taking off his shoes. This scene follows other scenes in which the women in the film are primarily shown as caregivers for the athletes.

The mother archetype is an important aspect of the unconscious to come to terms with. Confronting it is symbolic of the process that every individual has to go through when he moves from one stage of the life cycle to the next. According to Jung, when the son leaves his mother in order to begin his journey, she can sometimes leave him "with an emotional attachment that lasts throughout life and seriously impairs the fate of the adult" (29). For example, "Hogsett met the girl of his dreams at a bar.... They are getting married in the spring" (*Murderball*, 2005). In a similar scene, Bob Lujano expresses his love to a woman that is shown

on the screen. “She is a Paralympic gold medal swimmer” (*Murderball*, 2005). Although the girls are not identified, they are symbols of mother Archetype in their emotional and psychological supports.

To conclude, the disabled athletes’ development towards individuation consists in recognizing and coming to terms with the archetypes that represent different stages in their life-cycle. The archetypes of the shadow, the wise old man and the mother necessitate a process of harmonization and assimilation that force the athletes to acknowledge their capabilities and to confront their potentialities instead of continually repressing them. They willingly accept their current positions. Here, it is worth mentioning that Zupan, has achieved celebrity status. He says:

Breaking my neck was the best thing that ever happened to me. I have an Olympic medal. I’ve been to so many countries I would never have been, met so many people I would never have met. I’ve done more in the chair,... than a whole hell of a lot of people who aren’t in chairs. (*Murderball*, 2005)

In this moment, Zupan has completed the Jungian journey of individuation. By accepting his own status quo, he finally acquires the ability to transcend the limitations of being human. This process of individuation acknowledges the presence of a realm of psychic activity within the mind that lies beneath the persona. This leads to the understanding of dual personalities: the conscious and the unconscious which involves an encounter with the unconscious aspects of the self. The goal of individuation is to “forge into an indestructible whole, an ‘individual’” (Jung 522), achieving a status of self-hood and embracing all layers of the psyche, including both the positive and negative

attributes of each layer. Individuation became the process by which Jung promoted the idea of becoming a whole and mentally stable individu

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