

Stage 2 Women's Studies
Assessment Type 4: Issues Analysis
Student Response

How is Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) gender represented within a science fiction context?

Lieutenant Ellen Ripley's character in *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) is an example of an imperfect marriage between Regan-era Second Wave Feminism and enduring patriarchal ideals. Patriarchy's influence on the construction of fictional female characters, the influence of Second Wave Feminism and the combination with patriarchal ideals about women, on the *Alien films* will be examined in detail. Ripley along with other female characters in both films will be analysed and deconstructed in order to better understand how why and how popular film continues to reinforce traditional gender role ideology.

As a cultural artefact, film has the power to shape, reinforce and change cultural perceptions about ethnicities, gender, class and sexuality (Sims, 2006). In recent years as reproductive technology has improved the science fiction horror film has become preoccupied with imagery connected with the female reproductive cycle (Kuhn, 1990). This is certainly evident in the films *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986). Science fiction films have typically been produced for an intended male audience in addition to westerns, war movies, spy movies, martial art films, gangster and road movies (Schubart, 2007). Therefore, Lieutenant Ellen Ripley, the lead character in both movies *Alien* and *Aliens* was written, directed and produced predominantly for male enjoyment. The same may be said of Trinity, the female character from the *Matrix* and Sarah Connor from *The Terminator* series (Melzer, 2006).

The science fiction genre has traditionally held male characters in leading roles, whether intelligent scientists or heroic astronauts it is *Man* who has been brave, strong and intelligent enough to travel through space and time. Females have largely been designated to complementary roles in the form of the love interest, the nurse, teachers, and lower ranking officers (Gillardo and Smith, 2004). The *Alien* films branched out from the norm to embrace a female leading character in Ripley. Gillardo and Smith suggest in the book *Alien Woman: The Making of Lt. Ellen Ripley* that even though she was a product of masculine discourse, in that the role was originally written by males for a male actor, she was nonetheless a product of the 1960's and 70's Second Wave Feminism. Women after the Second World War began to question the notion that females are naturally not aggressive and therefore not capable of handling the same physical challenges as men. They began seeking new "tough and aggressive" roles in the workplace that had previously been held solely by men. The rise of the female action figure was reflective of the different roles available to women (Inness, 2004). The tough female action heroine comes across as positive and empowering for women by being demonstrative of their physical abilities and shedding their traditional emotional roles but on the other hand it may be argued that she is merely hiding, not changing sexist attitudes toward women for a predominantly male audience. Patricia Melzer suggests in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* that it is within science fiction,

both film and literature that gender roles are reimagined most radically, thus creating blueprints of social theory.

Sigourney Weaver is tall, white, muscular, agile and strong. She doesn't appear to wear makeup and is unconcerned with her hair. She wears traditionally masculine clothes, is confident, in a position of authority over her male counterparts, and is quick thinking, calm under pressure and intelligent. In both films Ripley is undermined and underestimated by her male colleagues. Both films have her working in a male dominated environment although not many references are made to gender in *Alien*. In *Alien* she has one female colleague in Lambert and in *Aliens* she is joined by more female characters. In *Alien* she is overruled firstly by Ash (Ian Holm) who allows the alien infected colleague onboard the spaceship. She is then disrespected by Captain Dallas (Tom Skerrit) when he allows Ash to transport the alien carcass to Earth following her strong reservations. After out living everyone and demonstrating her strong survival instincts the only 'feminine' trait the audience is witness to, is when Ripley rescues and cuddles Jonesy the ginger cat. In *Aliens* some fifty-seven years later she finds herself in a predominantly male board room where her account of what happened in the first film is largely discounted and again she finds herself undermined by patriarchy. She is punished by having her flight license revoked and sentenced to months of medical evaluations. It is revealed for the first time in this film that Ripley is in fact a mother and her only daughter is now deceased. Both Ripley and her young daughter are dealt the consequences of what happens when a mother's position is taken away from the family and refocused on work and a career. The first time the audience sees the character of Ripley 'breakdown' and cry is when she realises that she missed returning home for her daughters tenth birthday after she had promised her. Her need to nurture is further revealed when she rescues and adopts Newt (Carrie Henn) the sole surviving female child on the planet. She is coerced to return to the alien infested planetoid by a money hungry executive from The Company, only to be teamed up with a group of disrespectful, sarcastic, HI prepared misfit marines.

The only other female character in the film *Alien*, navigator Lambert (Veronica Cartright) displays more emotional traits than Ripley in that she cries, screams and appears more frightened than some of the male workers. Lambert's vulnerability for being female is made apparent when the alien's tail suggestively snakes its way up her leg before killing her. In *Aliens* (1986) Ripley is joined by a few other female characters but the cast remain nonetheless predominantly male. Ripley's character doesn't have a lot to do with ultra-masculine Rambo lookalike Vasquez who is teamed up at a vital stage of the film with the wimpy male Lieutenant Gorman. After the death of the other marines, Vasquez and Gorman assume more of a leadership role. Vasquez's character emulates that of Rambo, down to her hairstyle, speech, dress, weaponry, and overall 'butchiness'. At one stage of the film, male character Private Hudson asks her jokingly if she's ever been mistaken for a man to which she wittily replies, "No. Have you?" This is an example of patriarchal values during the Regan era, that if a female wishes to do a 'man's' job she must be somewhat mannish herself (Gallardo and Smith, 2004). Following Vasquez's demise in the film Ripley picks up the super tough female leadership role by bravely and expertly using the grenade launcher. Ripley's agenda differs from Vasquez in that her new boost of toughness comes about after having to save the child Newt from impending danger. Ripley's *Aliens* character labelled by

Yvonne Sims in *Women of Blaxpoitation* as a 'Mother Warrior' was followed up some years later by Linda Hamilton who played Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* movies. She writes that Hamilton, as Weaver did before her did help to transform the action heroine landscape. Ripley's character within a science fiction context allows for radical ideas regarding gender roles being that the film is set into the future; it is therefore socially acceptable to be ahead of her time (Goren, 2009).

Much criticism of *Alien* (1978) came about when Ripley was filmed in a medium shot from a low angle in her white underwear and singlet. In the shot, believing that she has killed the alien, she undresses out of her clothes in preparation for sleep. The audience take on the role of the voyeur as Ripley's vulnerability is exposed. In the context of action films it is to be expected that the heroes are subjected to physical violence. Graeme Turner writes in *The Film Cultures* that "For women, this physical vulnerability is easily mapped into the sexualised violence of rape. The possibility of violent rape is generally only implied but images of bodily penetration abound". This is evident earlier on in the film when Ripley discovers Ash's hidden agenda he becomes violent, roughly throwing her across the room before attempting unsuccessfully to plunge a rolled up magazine down her throat simulating oral rape. She is again vulnerable to oral rape in the *Alien* sequel when she and Newt are locked in a room with an unsecured face-hugger alien who reproduces its spawn in that manner. The threat of rape or sexual violence in film is a reminder to women that should they transgress the boundaries that patriarchal society have set, they face possible consequences, thus bringing them back down to a state of vulnerable passivity (Turner, 2002).

Although she is tougher in *Aliens*, reconstructed for the 'hard bodied Regan era', she manages to centre her gender as she becomes a surrogate mother figure and rescuer of the orphan, Newt. Ripley's maternal instincts seemingly bought about since the loss of her own daughter highlights the woman-as-mother gender role. The final battle sequence between Ripley and the queen alien reinforces this. In the final showdown, Ripley now encased in a metal power loader, engages the alien queen advancing on Newt with "Get away from her, you bitch!" (Reid, 2009). Here Ripley is motivated by her strong maternal instincts as is the alien queen who is motivated to protect her incubating eggs at all cost. Good mother is therefore fighting against monster mother.

Lieutenant Ellen Ripley is a product of combined patriarchal ideals and Second Wave Feminism. Audiences were exposed to a strong, both emotionally and physically, intelligent, female action character, unconcerned with heterosexual romantic relationships and feminine beauty. She is a leader and survives the other male and the minimal number of female characters. Her successes in the film however are hindered by patriarchy as she combats not just aliens, but corporate patriarchal greed. Her character suffers the loss of her daughter as punishment for her dedication to a male oriented job that allowed her to step out from the confines of the family home. To satisfy her deep loss, the Hollywood scriptwriters conveniently provided her with the character of Newt to fill her fresh maternal void. After bonding quickly with the orphaned child Ripley's subsequent actions are strengthened and motivated by her strong maternal need to protect the girl. In Regan era terms the audience gets the sense that Ripley is "fulfilling her inner destiny" as the mother who destroys the alien threat to her family (Gallardo and

Smith, 2004). Following the success of the 'mother archetype' in *Aliens* (1986) Ripley went on to become the prototype for many other fictional action mothers, namely Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator II*, Charly (Geena Davis) in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Mace (played by Angela Bassett) in *Strange Days* (1995) and Beatrix (Uma Thurman) in *Kill Bill* (Schubart, 2007). Ripley has now achieved the goal all women according to patriarchy strive for in becoming a good mother for Newt (Hirschberg, 2009). In conclusion the marriage between patriarchy and feminism in this role is a rocky one. On the one hand Hollywood created a female character that was popular and admired by audiences worldwide. On the other she was still sexualised and 'maternalised' to cater to patriarchal ideals that have plagued Western women for years. Since Ripley's emergence in cinema, Hollywood has continued to see an increase in female action characters in movies such as the *Resident Evil* (2002) franchise, the *Underworld* (2003) franchise, *Aeon Flux* (2005) and *Ultraviolet* (2006). The aforementioned movies star female characters who are however quite different to that of Ripley in that they are highly sexualised in their costumes, highly violent and their bodies and image appear to be more important than what it was for Ripley. These characters are continuing to be made by males for a predominantly male audience. Tough women may serve to be popular and entertaining heroes amongst fans but they fail in that they are progressive or accurate representation of women. Women directors, screen writers and authors need to construct a female action hero for the purpose to empower women and accurately portray the vision for a feminist future.

References

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Assessment Comments

This response is an A+ grade.

Throughout the essay, an analytical, persuasive stance is taken, with an in-depth and astute analysis of the main character, whilst the analysis of the diversity of female characters is explored in less depth.

Communication

Perceptive use of the language of gender is evident throughout the work.
Sources are clearly acknowledged and highly appropriate forms are used.

Performance Standards for Stage 2 Women’s Studies

	Knowledge and Understanding	Gender Analysis	Investigation and Evaluation	Communication
A	In-depth knowledge and understanding of the meaning of gender and its construction.	Astute and detailed analysis of social implications of gender relations for a diversity of women across contexts, times, and cultures. Perceptive analysis of representations of women for gender bias. Discerning identification of ways of effecting change to address gender bias.	In-depth investigation and evaluation of the ways in which various social structures, cultural practices, and ways of thinking disempower women. Perceptive and insightful evaluation of a range of strategies for empowerment.	Perceptive and coherent communication of informed ideas about the diversity of women’s experiences. Perceptive use of the language of gender analysis. Discerning use of highly appropriate forms, including persuasive writing, and with clear acknowledgment of sources.
B	Some depth in knowledge and understanding of the meaning of gender and its construction.	Detailed analysis of social implications of gender relations for a diversity of women across contexts, times, and cultures. Well-considered analysis of representations of women for gender bias. Clear identification of ways of effecting change to address gender bias.	Some depth in investigation and evaluation of the ways in which various social structures, cultural practices, and ways of thinking disempower women. Well-considered evaluation of strategies for empowerment.	Mostly clear and convincing communication of informed ideas about the diversity of women’s experiences. Thoughtful use of the language of gender analysis. Well-considered use of appropriate forms, including persuasive writing, and with clear acknowledgment of sources.
C	Considered knowledge and understanding of the meaning of gender and its construction.	Generally competent analysis of social implications of gender relations for a diversity of women across contexts, times, and cultures. Considered analysis of representations of women for gender bias. Competent identification of ways of effecting change to address gender bias.	Competent investigation and evaluation of the ways in which various social structures, cultural practices, and ways of thinking disempower women. Considered evaluation of strategies for empowerment.	Generally clear communication of informed ideas about the diversity of women’s experiences. Generally competent use of the language of gender analysis. Considered use of mostly appropriate forms, including persuasive writing, and with generally clear acknowledgment of sources.
D	Recognition and some awareness of the meaning of gender and its construction.	Some attempted analysis, with mostly description , of social implications of gender relations for women. Some consideration of representations of women for gender bias. Identification and some description of one or more ways of effecting change to address gender bias.	Consideration of one or more ways in which social structures, cultural practices, and ways of thinking disempower women. Some description of strategies for empowerment.	Some endeavour to communicate basic ideas about the diversity of women’s experiences. Some use of the language of gender analysis. Some use of one or more forms that may be appropriate , and with limited acknowledgment of sources.
E	Emerging awareness of the meaning of gender and its construction.	Brief description of one or more social implications of gender relations for women. Limited consideration of representations of women for gender bias. Identification of a way of effecting change to address gender bias.	Attempted description of a way in which social structures, cultural practices, or ways of thinking disempower women. Identification of elements of a strategy for empowerment.	Limited attempt to communicate basic ideas about the diversity of women’s experiences. Emerging use of the language of gender analysis. Attempted use of one or more forms, with limited appropriateness, and limited acknowledgment of sources.