

# The Brightest Shadow: From Fighting Darkness to Seeking it

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**Abstract:** This paper explores whether Darth Vader (in both the original and prequel trilogies) and Kylo Ren (in *The Force Awakens* and *Bloodline*) exemplify Joseph Campbell (and Carl Jung's) shadow archetype. I argue that Kylo Ren does not provide us with a satisfactory shadow figure, which could mean one of two things: Either he is not the shadow, and we can look forward to another villain; or, he is the shadow, but a very disappointing one. This latter possibility has extreme consequences since Campbell argues that the confrontation and assimilation of the shadow by the hero is essential not only for their successful journey, but also for allowing us, as individuals invested in this myth, to successfully navigate the transitions and transformations in our lives.

## Myth and Personal Transformation

Joseph Campbell's seminal studies of mythology argue not only that myths are characterized by a universal structure and archetypes, but also that they have a universal function. Incorporating Jung's work, Campbell argues, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the hero's journey is meant to demonstrate the transformations (conscious and unconscious) that all human beings must undergo in order to live successful, well-balanced, and mentally healthy lives.

In the best cases, failure to effectively experience these transitions can lead to an inescapable feeling that we have missed something in our lives, that we are somehow not on the right path or have missed our "calling." In the worst cases, it can lead to neurosis associated with

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 11.

not having successfully navigated the different phases of life, from childhood to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> The urgency to effectively navigate these phases is attested to not only by the universal nature of myth, but also by the fact that in the absence of myth (or a meaningful myth for the individual), other sources, such as psychoanalysis and popular culture, provide the means that help human beings experience and undergo their own calls to adventure, initiations, and returns.<sup>3</sup>

### The Mythic Archetypes and the Shadow

One of the primary ways that myths accomplish this is by presenting a series of characters, or archetypes, that represent aspects of the persona that are repressed and unintegrated into the consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In encountering these externalized (usually personified) aspects, the hero is able to confront and integrate the archetypes throughout their journey. Perhaps the most important of these archetypes, and also the most difficult to integrate, is the shadow. The shadow is also, however, usually the easiest archetype to recognize, as it takes the form of the villain, the ultimate foe or nemesis of the hero that needs to be defeated if the hero is to complete their journey.

In reality, however, this externalized version of the shadow represents the aspects of the hero that are buried the deepest, they are nestled into the dark recesses of their unconscious, “the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*, 131-2.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 5.

blind spot in your nature,” “the backside of your light side.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in confronting the shadow, the hero is really confronting themselves, and also unearthing the “other side” of their potential. For this reason, the goal is not really to defeat the shadow, but to assimilate it, to embrace it.<sup>6</sup> What the hero seeks is an authentic confrontation and mature assimilation of these previously unrecognized (although dark) aspects of themselves. In doing so, they unlock their full potential. The danger, of course, is that confronting the shadow can also lead to being consumed by it.

### Darth Vader as Shadow: Episodes IV-VI

Because we know that George Lucas wrote episodes 1-6 in consideration of the monomyth,<sup>7</sup> it should not surprise us that the main villain, Darth Vader, corresponds to the shadow archetype perfectly. In the original trilogy, we see the hero and the shadow as two separate characters, Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. This definite distinction between hero and shadow, good and bad, dark and light, creates what seems at first to be a highly dualistic universe. Overall, the original trilogy contains much less ambiguity about good and evil than we find in the prequels and *The Force Awakens*. The fact that the light and the dark result from the dual potentials of the Force is downplayed in favor of a dualistic, black and white universe.

Even though the original trilogy represents the hero and shadow as two distinct characters, it is possible to find indications that in confronting Darth Vader, Luke is really

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 80; Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, “A Myth for Our Time,” 78.

confronting his own shadow. Perhaps the most striking of these is, of course, the revelation that Darth Vader is his father, which forces Luke to realize “that he and his opposite are not of differing species but of one flesh”<sup>8</sup> We also see traces of this throughout Luke’s training. On more than one occasion, Yoda warns him of the dangers of his impatience and anger, suggesting that even our hero is imbued with the characteristics that drive our shadow. In addition, when Luke enters the Cave of Evil (otherwise known as the Dark Side Cave),<sup>9</sup> a space that contains a projection, or representation, of his worst fears, he does in fact encounter Darth Vader. However, after defeating and decapitating this apparition in a light sabre duel, the shadow’s helmet explodes, revealing none other than our hero’s face.<sup>10</sup>

Darth Vader’s ultimate redemption can be interpreted as the result of Luke’s success in confronting the shadow by acknowledging its identity as his father, and therefore, as a part of himself, “Luke does not try to escape his destiny. He knows that his life is linked with his father’s. But instead of accepting his fate and joining the Sith, Luke chooses to use his connection with Darth Vader to bring his father back to the light side of the Force.”<sup>11</sup> It is therefore Luke’s commitment to his relationship with the shadow that moves Darth Vader to save Luke’s life and fulfill the prophesy by killing the Emperor and restoring balance to the force. What really signifies Darth Vader’s redemption, however, is his removal of his helmet in order to

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> This is what the cave is referred to on the Wookieepedia page, [http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Cave\\_of\\_Evil](http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Cave_of_Evil). In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda only tells Luke that the cave is “strong with the dark side of the Force,” and “A domain of evil” which contains “only what you take with you.”

<sup>10</sup> *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1:04:35-1:05:37.

<sup>11</sup> Last, *Beware the Sith*, 85.

show his face to his son. Because, as we shall see in the following section, this helmet represents Anakin's embracing of his own Shadow, removing it allows Anakin and Luke to truly encounter one another, an encounter that signals Luke's success in confronting and assimilating his shadow.

### Darth Vader as Shadow: Episodes 1-3

While the shadow appears as an external archetype to in the original trilogy, the prequels allow us to see what this journey looks like when the shadow is represented as an internal foe, as the dark side within the hero. Because the struggle is now between Anakin Skywalker and the (yet unrealized) Darth Vader, two aspects or potentialities of the same person, the understanding of good and evil in this trilogy is much less dualistic. Instead, we see the full range of possibilities inherent in the Force itself, which, like Anakin, contains both darkness and light. Thus, Anakin's "most essential trait is his ambiguity, his oscillation between the poles of good and evil and the closely related extremes of free will and determination."<sup>12</sup>

The degree to which this ambiguity characterizes Anakin is made strikingly apparent in the story of his conception. As we learn from his mother, Shmi, Anakin has no human father. His conception is the result of a high level of midi-chlorians. In other words, he is born of pure Force energy. This implies not only that the force is unusually strong in him, but also that it will take extra training from his mentors to ensure that he does not succumb to the dark side. However, because Anakin begins his Jedi training quite late and, it seems unlikely that he will succeed in achieving this balance.

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<sup>12</sup> Flotmann, *Ambiguity in Star Wars and Harry Potter*, 145.

This is confirmed by the Jedi Council, particularly Yoda, who, upon meeting young Anakin, fears that he has already formed too many attachments (particularly to his mother), and is ruled by emotions, particularly fear, which leads to the dark side. Qui-Gon is the only one who seems to think Anakin's training is a good idea. Even Obi-Wan, who eventually takes on Anakin's training as a final promise to Qui-Gon, wonders why he can't sense that the boy is dangerous. Although the Council finally agrees to allow Obi-Wan to train Anakin, Yoda continues to fear that his training is a mistake, even though, "The Chosen One, the boy may be."<sup>13</sup>

As Anakin grows up this ambiguity grows with him. As is perhaps to be expected from a teenager who senses his potential for power, he is arrogant. He senses that he wants more than he should, and struggles to balance his longing for power with his training, "I'm not the Jedi I should be. I want more, and I know I shouldn't."<sup>14</sup> He begins to suspect that the Jedi are holding him back, not allowing him to reach his full potential, which, of course, would involve a confrontation with his shadow, or the dark side. Most significantly, he continues to be ruled by emotions and attachment. These are what lead him to secretly marry Padmé, to kill all the Turkish Raiders who hold his mother captive (including the children), and ultimately to seek the power to save Padmé's life. Anakin's decision to embrace his shadow is thus based on fear, the fear of losing his wife, just as Yoda predicted.

This embrace of his shadow, does not, however, lead to the balance of Anakin's light and dark sides. Instead of confronting and assimilating his shadow, Anakin is consumed by it. This is

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<sup>13</sup> *The Phantom Menace*, 2:06:52

<sup>14</sup> *Revenge of the Sith*, 53:19-26

particularly apparent when, having agreed to become Senator Palatine's apprentice, he kills an entire class of Jedi younglings.<sup>15</sup> In addition, when Anakin becomes convinced that Padmé has betrayed him by bringing Qui-Gon on her ship to confront him, he uses his power to put her in a force choke (which becomes his signature hold), placing her life, which his turn to the dark side was to protect, in danger.<sup>16</sup> It is not, however, until Anakin puts on his dark side armour, particularly the helmet, that his transition is complete. There is perhaps no scene more iconic and anticipated in the entire series than the first assisted breath Anakin takes through his new life support system. From this point on, or at least until he redeems himself and removes his helmet, he is known only as Darth Vader.

### Kylo Ren as Shadow

Whether Darth Vader is represented as an internal or external shadow, his presence in the myth of *Star Wars* is essential for the journeys and transformations of our heroes. His opposition of the hero is what allows us to navigate our own life journeys, and successfully move through the transitions and transformations our lives necessitate. It is for these reasons that the absence of a shadow figure in *The Force Awakens* is so unsettling. In fact, every aspect of our new villain, Kylo Ren, as revealed both in the film and in the novel *Bloodline* (which takes place before *TFA*), suggests that he does not conform to this archetype.

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<sup>15</sup> Last, *Beware the Sith*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Unlike Anakin, who is born of pure Force energy and whose journey is a struggle to balance both sides of his inherent potential, Ren, or should I say, Ben Solo, is the child of two heroes. The legacy of this parentage is reflected in the fact that he is Obi Wan Kenobi's namesake. It is this legacy, and not any external or internal shadow, or even a hero, that becomes his primary nemesis in the film. Unlike Luke, who fought against an external(ized) shadow, and Anakin, who fought the darkness within himself, Ren struggles against the goodness, he fights the power of the light. He wants (desperately), to be the shadow his grandfather was, and even wishes to surpass his legacy, understanding his ultimate redemption as his fatal flaw.<sup>17</sup> Despite his commitment to this goal, however, he is unable to shake his goodness, the pesky light keeps intruding. The primary conflict we see in the film is therefore not between a hero and a shadow, but between Ren's aspirations for darkness and his inherent goodness.

This does not necessarily mean that Ren only does good things or that he is a hero figure himself. After all, we know that he kills all the young Jedi training alongside him with Luke, and also his own father. However, even these two evil deeds, which would seemingly signify his initial and final transition to the dark side, or confrontation with his shadow, can be interpreted as failed attempts at extinguishing his inherent goodness.

Because we only see Ren's murder of those training alongside him in Rey's vision (when she touches Anakin's lightsabre), we don't really learn why he perpetrates this deed. *Bloodline* provides some clues here, revealing, or at least suggesting, that this action is Ben's response to learning that Darth Vader is his grandfather. This closely guarded secret, which was previously

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<sup>17</sup> Hidalgo. *Star Wars The Force Awakens Visual Dictionary*, 26.

only shared by Leia, Hans, Luke, and probably Chewie, is revealed publicly to the Galactic Senate by one of Leia's political rivals in an attempt to discredit her. This public revelation forces Leia to record a private message for Ben, hoping it reaches him before the news. We never find out whether it does, and so we can only speculate as to whether Ben's reaction would have been different if it had.

Based on this information, it seems plausible to conclude that Ren is compelled to kill Luke's trainees and become Snoake's apprentice because he is confronted with the secret of his family heritage, and perhaps even that this allows him to acknowledge a darkness within himself that he always sensed. This seems confirmed when Han attempts to comfort Leia, who worries they made the wrong decision by sending him away to train with Luke, by telling her there is nothing they could have done to change his fate, since, "there's too much Vader in him."<sup>18</sup> However, in the extra features of *TFA*, it is suggested that Ben's actions can instead be understood as resulting from a deep sense of abandonment by his parents, who had very little involvement in his life after they sent him away for training, "If you really imagine the stakes of him, in his youth, having all these special powers, and having your parents kind of be absent during that process on their own agendas, equally as selfish. He's lost in the world that he was raised in and feels that he was kind of abandoned by the people he's closest with. He's angry because of that, I think, and he has a huge grudge on his shoulders."<sup>19</sup> Thus, this evil deed, which seems to signify his initial turn to the dark side, is not motivated by an embracing of his shadow, but by a sense of abandonment by his parents.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Force Awakens*, 1:24:22.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Driver on Kylo Ren, "Extra Features," *The Force Awakens*.

Once Ren becomes Snoake's apprentice, the First Order issues a decree indicating that his birth name never be spoken.<sup>20</sup> This is an attempt to demonstrate that Ren's ties to his previous life, which was characterized by his family legacy and his Jedi training, are broken, and that he is now fully committed to the Dark Side and the command of the Knights of Ren. Nevertheless, even his adopted name, Kylo, which is a composite of Skywalker and Solo, suggests that this transition is not in fact complete. This is further evidenced by Kylo's actions and motivations throughout the film, which demonstrate that despite his best efforts, he continues to be overcome by the light. We see this especially in his pleading with his grandfather's memory, here represented by his helmet (which, significantly, represents Anakin's shadow), for guidance in defeating the light he feels continually "pulling" him.<sup>21</sup> It could also be argued that Ren's failure to interrogate Rey, who is just discovering her force power, is due to his inability to embrace the power of the dark side, and thus benefit from its power.

When Ren kills his father it seems that this signifies his success in confronting his shadow, or turning to the dark side. The importance of this act for his personal transformation is indicated by his dialogue with Snoakes, who tells Ren, "Even you, master of the Knights of Ren, have never faced such a test." Confident in his ability to "pass" this test, Ren replies "By the grace of your training, I will not be seduced." He, of course, is talking about being seduced by the light, (unlike both Luke and Anakin). Even Snoakes, however, seems to doubt his resolve, "we shall see" he replies, "we shall see."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hidalgo, *Star Wars The Force Awakens Visual Dictionary*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> *The Force Awakens*, 59:07

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 49:20-51:10

When Ren meets his father and is confronted with this task, Han tries to appeal to the goodness he knows is still present (in fact, I argue, dominant) in his son. Importantly, the first thing Han asks of Ren is that he remove his mask (helmet) so that he can see “the face of my son.” Although Ren insists that his son, or Ben, is gone, he does admit that he “is being torn apart,” that he knows what he has to do but not if he has the strength to do it. This could mean that he knows he needs to kill his father in order to embrace his shadow; or, it could mean that he needs to leave with his father, “go home,” and no longer serve as Snoakes apprentice.<sup>23</sup> Because he kills Han, it seems that it is the former is the case, that the light that Ren has been fighting all along may finally let go of its hold on him, and we may finally have a formidable shadow.

It is significant, after all, that this test occurs just moments before the final armed conflict between Rey and Ren. The connection between these two scenes is further emphasized by the fact that the wound that Chewie inflicts upon Ren after he kills Han becomes instrumental in this battle. Not only is it made apparent that Ren is wounded, as his blood stains the white snow on which they duel, it also serves as an indication that Ren has not, in fact, successfully embraced his shadow and transitioned to the dark side. This becomes apparent as every time Ren has a reprieve from direct fighting, he strikes and hits his wound in order to fuel the pain, anger, and hatred, and therefore tap into the dark side powers that might allow him to defeat Rey. The fact that he needs to resort to this, rather than simply taking advantage of the new dark side powers his father’s murder endowed him with, indicates that his transition is not complete.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1:45:01- 1:48:22.

It should also be noted that in this final battle, Ren is unable to use his power to summon his grandfather's light sabre to him, a feat Rey accomplishes fairly effortlessly. This is indicative not only of the fact that Ren has not embraced his shadow, but also that Rey, our hero who is just discovering her Force powers, has already tapped into the ambiguity of the Force more effectively than her opponent. This could also be said to be evidenced by the fact that, although they do not complete their battle, Rey seems to have and so there is no clear winner, there is also no clear loser. Thus, although it is Rey's first time fighting with a sabre, she proves herself a formidable hero and opponent, even when faced with Ren's years of training.

What all of this amounts to is the fact that if Ren is our shadow, he is a very disappointing one indeed. We see this disappointment in Rey's face the moment he takes off his helmet to reveal what one reviewer calls the face of "a teen who's borrowed dad's car without telling him."<sup>24</sup> This reaction was shared by many fans and reviewers, who expressed "incredulity that this pallid, clean-shaven dude was the most menacing figure in the Star Wars universe."<sup>25</sup> Even Emilio Ranzato, film critic for the Vatican's newspaper, L'Observatore Romano, claims that in comparison to "the two most-efficient villains," of the original trilogies, Kylo Ren falls quite short. Also focusing on Ren's helmet, Ranzato comments that Ren, wears a "mask simply to emulate his predecessor," thus, the donning of his helmet does not imply, as it did for Darth Vader, a complete transition to the Dark Side, but rather, a pale imitation.<sup>26</sup> The degree to which Ren fails to personify the shadow has even led to the fan theory that Ren has not turned to the

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Matyszczyk, "New Star Wars movie not evil enough, Vatican paper says," cnet.com

<sup>25</sup> Cusmano, "Fan Reactions to Kylo Ren."

<sup>26</sup> Cited in, Estevez, New 'Star Wars' villains not evil enough," *Catholic News Service*.

dark side at all, but has committed himself to it in order to bring it down, similar to the role that Severus Snape plays in the *Harry Potter* series.<sup>27</sup>

A possible response to the failure of Ren's character to provide us with an effective shadow is, of course, that he is not the shadow (or at least not the shadow we are looking for). Another look at Campbell's work reveals a very (potentially) exciting possibility. Because the shadow represents the repressed aspects of the hero, it must always be the same gender as the hero. Therefore, because we not have a female hero, we might expect a female shadow! *The Force Awakens* and *Bloodline* give us two possibilities for this role.

The first of these is the only woman we see belonging to the First Order, Captain Phasma. The first thing we notice about her, and what distinguishes her from the other stormtroopers under her command, is her armour. It is "coated in salvaged chromium from a Naboo yacht once owned by Emperor Palpatine. Its polished finish helps reflect harmful radiation, but it serves primarily as a symbol of past power." Donning this symbol of the power of the Emperor may be a foreshadowing of her future prospects for power. Phasma is also not one to shy away from battle, as she insists on participating in all stormtrooper missions, and has dedicated herself (perhaps even obsessively) to training her troops and ensuring that "only the best soldiers wear the armour of the First Order." As the Captain of the military force of the First Order, who pays "little heed to outdated notions of inequality between genders, an idea common in undeveloped worlds," Phasma may be someone to watch out for as we continue to seek our shadow."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cusmano, "Fan Reactions to Kylo Ren."

<sup>28</sup> Hidalgo, *Star Wars The Force Awakens Visual Dictionary*, 27-8.

The other possibility for a female shadow is presented in *Bloodline*, where we learn that it is in fact a woman, Lady Carise Sindian, who is behind the organization of the First Order. Carise's position within the Senate enabled her to search for and organize former Imperial officers into an army, which she was also instrumental in funding. Although the First Order remained largely underground at the time of *Bloodline*, she looks forward to the day the Centrists (her political party, which, contrary to the Populists, Leia's party, favors a more powerful government and military), will break away from the New Republic, strengthened by their First Order army. It is also Carise who discovers the secret of Leia's parentage, and is instrumental in revealing to it the Senate.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, because we simply have the first of three installments of this new trilogy, Ren could very well turn out to be the shadow he aspires to be, and which the structure of myth requires. However, this seems doubtful, considering just how much emphasis has been placed on his internal struggle against the light. Nevertheless, if Ren is in fact our shadow, analysis needs to go beyond simply addressing his role in the story or audience's reactions to him, and must also consider what we are losing if this is the shadow we are confronted with in one of our most important and influential myths. If, as Campbell argues, the purpose of mythology is to help us integrate the various aspects of ourselves, and therefore make the necessary transitions to live successful lives, we are, it seems to me, in quite a bit of trouble.

And this trouble extends beyond the *Star Wars* universe to other popular culture phenomena, which increasingly present us with heroes and villains that are, at best, ambiguous,

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<sup>29</sup> Gray, *Bloodline*, 226; 328.

and, at worst, indistinguishable. Some important examples of this are found in the realm of superheroes, where we might expect to find our most reliable, or at least identifiable heroes and villains. Instead, we are presented with heroes who fight one another, rather than villains, (*Batman vs. Superman*; *Captain America Civil War*), or villains who are sympathetic or even working for the greater good, (Magneto, *X-Men First Class*; *Suicide Squad*). In contrast to the previous ages of Comic books, our present age is characterized by ambiguity and a loss of identifiable shadows and heroes.<sup>30</sup>

When interpreted in light of Campbell's work, the failure of our popular culture myths to provide us with a shadow that can be successfully confronted and integrated has detrimental consequences. It threatens our ability to successfully heed our calls to adventure, navigate the challenges in our lives, and integrate the various repressed aspects of our psyches, especially our shadows. If we are ultimately unable to confront and integrate our shadows we are also denied the possibility of tapping into our greatest and most important potentials, our universal sources of freedom and power. As we fail to integrate our shadows in an effective way, we also cease to expect others to do so. The ultimate result of this is that we not only lose our villains (which are important in their own right), but we also lose our heroes, as these are, after all, those who have confronted and assimilated their shadows, not only in myth, but in "real life" as well.

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<sup>30</sup> Oropeza, "Introduction: Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise," 10-18.