

**From Clumsy to Conqueror: Po's Archetypal Ascension in  
Kung Fu Panda 3 (2016) Movie**

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*English Literature: Literary Criticism,*

*Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal*

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*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your  
mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and  
perfect will.”*

**Romans 12:2**

**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the archetypal dimensions of *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016) through the lens of Jungian archetype theory and Campbell's Hero's Journey framework. Using a qualitative method, specifically archetypal criticism, the analysis focuses on how Po's transformation from a clumsy panda into the Dragon Warrior reflects universal patterns of self-discovery, individuation, and moral growth. The study examines selected scenes, dialogues, and visual symbolism, supported by secondary literature on archetypal theory. The findings reveal three significant results: **1)** Po's development embodies the Hero's Journey archetype, in which he overcomes trials, confronts his shadow figure (Kai), and achieves individuation by integrating his conscious and unconscious selves. **2)** the binary opposition between Hero and Shadow illustrates Jung's psychological principles, where Po's strength emerges not from domination but from unity, mentorship, and acceptance of vulnerability. **3)** the film functions as children's literature by embedding moral lessons of identity, courage, and community into an accessible narrative, thereby reinforcing its educational value beyond entertainment. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that *Kung Fu Panda 3* communicates timeless archetypal patterns that resonate across cultural contexts, offering insights into human development while serving as a didactic tool for younger audiences. These results affirm the enduring relevance of archetypes in both literary and cinematic storytelling.

**INTRODUCTION**

Children's literature plays a pivotal role in the *Kung Fu Panda* film series, particularly in *Kung Fu Panda 3*, where it enhances the themes, storytelling, and broad appeal of the narrative. The character of Po embodies the archetypal journey of a reluctant hero, evolving through experiences that emphasize values such as determination, self-belief, and humility. These themes resonate with the essence of many classic children's stories, where morality and values are

intricately woven into the plot. The films attract audiences of all ages by delivering not only entertainment but also valuable life lessons through Po's journey.

A fascinating aspect of this narrative is the exploration of decision-making and its psychological underpinnings. Research indicates that a significant portion of our choices—up to 95%—is influenced by unconscious biases rather than conscious deliberation. This highlights the profound impact of the unconscious mind, which serves as a repository for past experiences and societal messages that shape behavior. Understanding these unseen forces is crucial for recognizing how they influence our actions and decisions.

Kung Fu Panda 3 (2016) continues Po's adventure as the Dragon Warrior, facing the antagonist Kai, an evil spirit yak who steals chi from kung fu masters. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, and featuring a talented voice cast including Jack Black and Bryan Cranston, the film blends genres such as adventure, comedy, martial arts, and fantasy. The plot unfolds with Po reuniting with his biological father and discovering a secret panda village while confronting Kai's threat. The film delves into themes of identity, family, friendship, and destiny, incorporating elements of Chinese culture like the zodiac and yin-yang symbolism to enrich its narrative depth.

The analysis employs archetypal theory as conceptualized by Carl Jung, which identifies universal patterns in human behavior and character traits found across cultures. This approach reveals hidden messages relevant to real-life experiences. In Kung Fu Panda 3, archetypal elements convey essential lessons about identity, courage, and relationships among characters. Previous research has examined figurative language in the film but has not fully explored its archetypal dimensions and their implications for children's psychological growth. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing Po's transformation from a clumsy panda to a wise Dragon Warrior through the lens of Jungian archetype theory.

Expert Marie-Louise von Franz emphasizes that archetypes are inherited dispositions influencing typical reactions to fundamental human challenges. This underscores the universal nature of archetypes as part of the collective unconscious shared by all humans. The film employs two primary analytical frameworks: archetypal criticism and the Hero's Journey. Archetypal criticism examines recurring symbols across cultures, while the Hero's Journey outlines a common narrative structure featuring a hero who overcomes obstacles and returns transformed.

Po's journey is one of the perfect archetypes of the Hero's Journey, from his clumsy ways to wisdom. The battles he waged against Kai symbolically mark his confrontation with deep-seated fears, while Master Shifu serves as his mentor through those challenges. This process follows what Joseph Campbell calls the Hero's Journey: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered there and a

decisive victory is won" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949, p. 23). Po's story is an example of this, where he goes from an unsure and awkward panda to a confident leader who accepts his destiny.

Central to Po's transformation is the realization that true strength arises from self-belief and personal growth. While learning to teach others, Po masters not only the art of kung fu but also resilience and self-acceptance. This dual growth brings out the power of mentorship, where both teacher and student evolve. Master Shifu's mentorship and Po's eventual role as a teacher show that the Hero's Journey is not about personal accomplishments but about enabling others to continue the ripple effect of growth and inspiration.

Archetypes play an important role in highlighting motivations and symbolism within the story, which deepens the audience's understanding of its themes. Po's evolution is much more than just physical mastery; it reflects the unlocking of his potential and embracing of his true identity. As Carl Jung put it, "the privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are" (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959, p. 163), which resonates deeply with Po's journey. The film depicts that belief in oneself leads to personal enlightenment, while the supportive community nurtures and sustains such growth, proving that change is not an individual affair but collectively enriched.

In summary, this study highlights children's literature's significance in Kung Fu Panda 3 while examining how archetypal themes and character development contribute to the film's relevance and meaning. By exploring archetype theory's application in both the movie and real life, it can gain deeper insights into human experiences reflected in storytelling.

### Binary Opposition

HERO	SHADOW
<p>The hero in Po is framed as courageous, developing, and journeying into self-discovery. He undergoes many trials that force him to accept his inadequacies and truly be himself. His journey of learning chi and becoming a teacher puts at stake not only his abilities but also his identity and leadership, as it puzzles him who exactly he should be other than under the name Dragon Warrior. Master Shifu said <i>"I'm not like you... I've made so many mistakes."</i> It captures Po's sense of inadequacy and his fear of failing in the face of new challenges, showing the Hero's vulnerability.</p>	<p>The antagonist Kai epitomizes the Shadow archetype, embodying the dark, hidden forces Po must confront. Kai's relentless pursuit of power and his ability to steal Chi act as a distorted mirror of Po's journey toward self-mastery, symbolizing the dangers of pride and dominance. His conquest represents what Po must avoid, power without purpose. Ultimately, this external threat compels Po to realize that true strength lies not in control but in unity, contrasting Kai's claim, <i>"I will take what should have been mine!"</i> with Po's discovery that power is meant to be shared.</p>

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using archetypal criticism to analyze Kung Fu Panda 3. Grounded in Jungian archetype theory and Campbell's concept of the hero's journey, this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of thematic elements such as self-discovery, inner peace, and the balance of power. The film was selected because its narrative and characters strongly align with archetypal patterns that represent universal human experiences, including resilience and triumph over adversity.

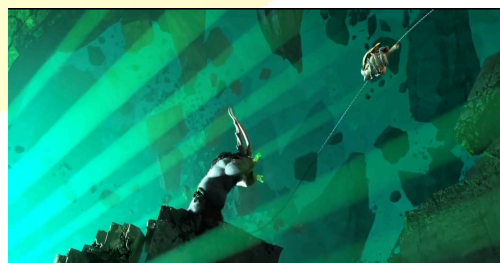
Data collection consisted of close textual and visual readings of the film, focusing on key scenes, dialogues, and symbolic motifs. Secondary sources on archetypal theory and previous studies of the hero's journey supplemented the analysis. No human subjects were involved. The analytical process proceeded in three stages: (1) reviewing foundational archetypal frameworks; (2) conducting scene-by-scene identification of characters, symbols, and narrative structures corresponding to roles such as Hero (Po), Shadow (Kai), and Mentor (Shifu); and (3) coding and organizing recurring motifs through thematic analysis. NVivo software supported data management, enhancing consistency in coding and interpretation.

To contextualize findings, the study also considered cultural and historical references to Eastern philosophy and martial arts traditions embedded in the film. Limitations were acknowledged, particularly the subjective nature of archetype interpretation, which may vary across cultural contexts.

This methodology thus allowed the research to uncover how Kung Fu Panda 3 communicates timeless archetypal messages through its characters and narrative design, highlighting the enduring relevance of mythic structures in contemporary cinema.

## DISCUSSION

The movie begins with the showing of two good and evil characters, Kai and Oogway. Kai, who was originally Oogway's best friend, is now his enemy because Kai wants more power, so he wants Oogway's power by turning him into Jade. Oogway, who knows Kai's plan, begins to follow his plan. This moment can



be seen by an image that shows some confrontation or major event in the movie. The general greenness of the background makes it quite mystical and out-of-this-worldly, depicting the Spirit Realm that keeps recurring throughout the film. Cracked rocks and debris floating everywhere,

signifying the struggle or climactic conflict. The lighting, with lines of light penetrating the scene, underscores a sense of hope, determination, or divine intervention amidst the chaos.

Dynamic tension is portrayed by one character seeming to jump or attack while another holds on to a rope. The composition is about the core of the movie: the clash of light and darkness, balance, and the power of unity. Then, the angle also used a bird's-eye view, which gives an effect of height that emphasizes how vast and dangerous the surroundings are. The slanted composition draws attention to the actions of the characters; this accentuates the dramatic atmosphere. The angle helps convey the seriousness of the moment, which symbolizes not only a physical struggle but also an emotional battle.

Moving to another scene, this is the scene where Po meets his real father, Li, who was previously taken care of by Mr. Ping. This moment is certainly an emotional meeting for the two after not meeting for a long time. Po wants to meet his real father because he thinks that his father should be a panda, just like him, not a duck. Suddenly one day, his real father came to Po's restaurant. At that time, his father asked the restaurant patrons about Po's whereabouts since Po



was a child. Li wanted to take Po to Panda Village, and Po agreed because he saw a prophecy that pandas had the power to awaken the Dragon Warrior. This scene uses a close-up angle to capture Po's facial expression, which is filled with wonder and happiness. The focus on Po's face emphasizes his emotions when he meets his

father. Furthermore, this moment is supported by the soft and warm light, with the yellow color of the background suggesting a happy and hopeful atmosphere. While hugging, Po said *"I always knew I wasn't the last of my kind. But finding you and the other pandas, it's like a dream come true."* When Po meets his biological father, Li, for the first time and learns that he is not the only panda left, he decides to go with Li to the secret panda village, where he hopes to learn more about himself and his chi. This scene symbolizes the archetype of the hero, who is the protagonist that goes on a journey of self-discovery and faces challenges and enemies along the way. Po is also the chosen one, who has a special destiny and a connection to the spirit world. It refers to Carl Jung (1968, Vol. 5, p. 34) about archetypes that said "Archetypes are innate, universal predispositions to experience certain events or situations in a particular way." That means that archetypes such as the Hero's journey form part of universal patterns to people experiencing events and interpreting personal occasions such as self-realization or reconnecting one to his origins. In this Po emotion is meeting up with his father where Po is determined to move forward into a journey where understanding one's identity represents all human concepts of belonging and self-discovery.



Then, this scene explains where Po met his people in Panda Village for the first time, which he had previously been separated from his father and mother because Panda Village was previously destroyed by Lord Shen. Po felt happy because after a long time, he

was reunited with his people. Then, Po begins to relearn how to be a true panda. The scene's cinematography, where Po is meeting his people for a very long time, emphasizes the moment of wonder and warmth. First, the shot that shows the whole Panda Village is wide; the background is green and lush to reflect peaceful and spiritual relations with nature. The dominant green color not only depicts a harmonious atmosphere but also has spiritual connotations that connect Po to his identity as a panda. Additionally, the soft lighting adds to the emotional feel, while the focus on Po's interactions with the other pandas outlines the sense of connection and happiness after a long time apart. The cinematography reinforces the themes of reunion and the search for identity. Li said *"You must rediscover what it is to be a panda. You have to learn how to live like a panda. Sleep like a panda. Eat like a panda."* In the Panda Village scene, Po embraces his panda heritage and learns the ways of his biological father and his panda village. He also respects his adoptive father and his noodle shop. He realizes that he can have two fathers and two cultures without losing himself. Like Carl Jung (1954, p.117-118) said about *'The Concept of The Self'*, "The self is the totality of the conscious and unconscious psyche. It is the centre, the seat of the personality." It means The self includes all aspects that we are aware of and hidden in thoughts and feelings. The self is a representation of our personality.

Po's father Li told Po that he didn't know how to make Po a Dragon Warrior. However, Li said that he would try everything he could to make Po get the power of the Dragon Warrior. Finally, Li told all his people to find out so that his people could get chi. The cinematography of the scene



where Po is meeting his people for a very long time emphasizes the moment of wonder and warmth. First of all, the shot that shows the whole Panda Village is a wide one and the background is green and lush to reflect peaceful and spiritual relations with nature. The dominant green color not only depicts a harmonious atmosphere but also has spiritual connotations that connect Po to his identity as a panda. Additionally, the soft lighting adds to the emotional feel, while the focus on Po's interactions with the other pandas outlines the sense of connection and happiness after a long time apart. The cinematography reinforces the themes of reunion and the search for identity. *"Po, there's something I have to tell you. Something I've been looking for a*

*very long time. You see, I've had this very strong and unmistakable feeling that I was...meant for something. That I had a destiny. And then I got this.*" Po receives a message from the universe

that leads him to meet his biological father, Li, who has also received a similar message. This scene shows a synchronicity of two events that are psychologically significant for Po and Li, but have no apparent causal connection. "Synchronicity is the experience of two or more events that are psychologically significant and



occur together in time, without any discernible causal connection." (C. Jung, 1969, p.329-366) Synchronicity teaches us to appreciate coincidences that have meaning, and understand that there are deeper connections behind the events we experience.

In this scene, when Kai visits the Panda village, Po feels intimidated. It can be seen when the camera shoots a long shot where Po stands in the middle and is surrounded by the villagers, while in the background, it is dark, showcasing the terror. Po says, *"I'm not a mortal. I'm a part of you. You're a part of me."* Kai represents the archetype of the shadow in Kung Fu Panda 3, because he is the opposite of Po, the hero. Kai and Po were both students of Oogway, but they chose different paths. Po followed Oogway's teachings of harmony, balance, and chi, while Kai



betrayed Oogway and became obsessed with power, greed, and fear. Kai also symbolizes the repressed or denied aspects of Po's self, such as his anger, insecurity, and doubt. Because of that, Po must face his fear and overcome these negative emotions in order to defeat Kai and master chi. As Carl Jung

(1966, p. 230-231) quotes about shadow that *"Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."* The sentence refers that everyone has a hidden personality in their life, if that personality is brought out it might cause shock to the people around them.

When Po and Kai were fighting, Po experienced a difficult battle, where Kai dominated the fight. Later, Po entered the Spirit Realm due to his entire body being turned into Jade by Kai. While in the Spirit Realm, Po said that he had failed to protect all his loved ones from Master Oogway. Master Oogway said *"You must do more than train, Po. You must find the hero within. And remember, the Dragon Warrior is not a title. It is a state of mind."* Then, Po's father gave chi to Po, followed by the other pandas. Finally, Po came out of the Spirit Realm and the Jade broke. He got up and turned the tables to win his fierce battle against Kai.

The cinematography in that moment when Master Oogway motivates Po to rise up against Kai is dominated by dramatic lighting, where the colors of gold and orange dominate,

thus setting a spiritual and epic atmosphere to show the moment of Po's awakening. The warm colors signify the hope, wisdom, and strength transferred from Oogway to Po. The composition puts Oogway at the center, often at a little low angle to give an impression of authority. The camera moves slowly, using close-ups to capture Po's emotionally charged expression as his spirit awakens with determination. The light effects shining from around Oogway stress the themes of transformation and spiritual connection, reinforcing this pivotal moment. The dialog of Master Oogway tells when Po enters the Spirit Realm and meets Oogway, who has taken the form of a glowing dragon, he tells Po that he chose him as the Dragon Warrior because he saw himself in him. He then gives Po his staff and tells him to return to the mortal world and defeat Kai. This scene shows Po's individuation process, as he realizes his true identity and destiny, and accepts his connection to the spirit world. He also integrates his conscious self (*Po*) with his unconscious self (*the Dragon Warrior*), and his personal unconscious (his memories and experiences) with his collective unconscious (*his panda heritage and chi*).

Carl Jung (1954, p.117-118) said about '*Individuation*' "Individuation is the process by which an individual becomes a psychological 'whole.' It involves the integration of the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche." It means a person tries to integrate various aspects of personality, both visible and conscious and hidden and unconscious. This includes self-acceptance, understanding the emotions, values, beliefs, and motivations that shape one's identity that makes this person become a whole in psychology's side. After Po and Kai's fight, Po became the Dragon Warrior with his tough fight. Since that event, everyone bowed to him, The Dragon Warrior

## **CONCLUSION**

The psychological dimension of growth for Po, influenced by decision-making mostly from the unconscious bias, is what makes the film explore these spheres. Research indicates that most decisions are led by subconscious forces, which shape behaviors and choices. This goes well with Po's journey: the transformation guided not only by conscious training but also by an in-depth understanding of self and placement in this world. Through Po's struggles, Kung Fu Panda 3 really brings into view the unconscious mind, especially during such instances when Po has to face challenges that bring him into a tussle with his inner fears and uncertainties. This reflects the psychological foundation of many classic children's stories where heroes must confront their inner darkness to grow.

Archetype theory, conceptualized by Carl Jung, gives a framework through which Po's transformation can be analyzed. In Kung Fu Panda 3, the transformation of Po from uncertainty to mastery is an embodiment of the hero's journey-a universal pattern across cultures. By pitting Po against the antagonist Kai, the film brings into sharp focus the binary opposition of the Hero

and the Shadow. Kai, who personifies Po's unspoken fears and darker impulses, compels Po to confront his deepest insecurities and understand that true strength does not come from power but unity and self-acceptance. This confrontation is important for Po's individuation process, whereby he integrates his conscious and unconscious selves in the realization of his true identity and purpose.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, while the paper frames *Kung Fu Panda 3* as children's literature, the pedagogical dimension of how archetypes transmit moral and educational values to younger audiences is not explored in depth. Second, the analysis primarily highlights the Hero, Shadow, Mentor, and Self, leaving other archetypes, such as the Trickster or Parental archetypes, underexamined. Third, the study relies mainly on Jung and Campbell, with limited engagement with other scholars of archetypal criticism, such as Marie-Louise von Franz or Northrop Frye, which could have broadened interpretive insights. Moreover, although the discussion includes cinematographic techniques, some descriptions are more technical than analytical, lacking consistent integration with archetypal meaning. Finally, while the film draws heavily from Chinese philosophical traditions, their intersection with Jungian universality is not fully analyzed. These gaps provide opportunities for future research to expand on the cultural, pedagogical, and archetypal dimensions of the film.

In conclusion, *Kung Fu Panda 3* shows that a hero's journey is not solely about an individual achievement but rather about enabling others to grow. Po's role as a mentor further exemplifies this theme, as he passes on the lessons he's learned to others, enriching their lives as he was once enriched by his own mentors. This reciprocal growth highlights the importance of community and shared wisdom in personal development. By applying archetypal criticism, especially about the Hero and Shadow of this film, one uncovers the psychological and emotional tides driving Po's transformation, converting this into more than just an adventure but also a story of deep-seated self-discovery and mass development.

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