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When Jesus was a Girl: Polymythic Female Christ Figures in *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias*

Abstract

Partially in response to Anton Karl Kozlovic's call for research to refine the concept of the cinematic Christ-figure, this article examines *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias* as Christ-figure narratives with the intention that the Christ-figure interpretation sheds light on the meaning and significance of the films, and that the two films' young, female lead characters can illuminate the Christ-figure concept. Both films are polymythic Christ-figure narratives in that Christ-figure characteristics are present alongside elements from or allusions to other spiritual and mythological traditions. Both films also convey feminist sensitivities. The relationship between the films' polymythic elements and feminist messages suggests some of the complicated possibilities of how Christ-figure narratives can function.

That Christ-figures are not uncommon in popular culture texts such as film and television is both widely accepted and hotly debated. Anton Karl Kozlovic points out that, in interpreting film, scholars—like audiences in general—must steer between the extremes of seeing Christ-figures everywhere and missing them altogether. Kozlovic calls for more research and writing devoted to developing criteria that will allow interpreters to discern Christ-figure elements more clearly.¹ Christopher Deacy, however, accuses Kozlovic and most other Christ-figure hunters of falling prey to one of the extremes Kozlovic warns readers to avoid—reading films as Christ-figure narratives when no significant Christological themes or implications are present.²

Kozlovic points out that Christ-figures may be written into films intentionally or inadvertently. Intentional Christ figures, Kozlovic says, may reflect a wide range of intentions on the part of filmmakers, from self-conscious endorsement of Christianity to mere joking. The inadvertent Christ-figure may also arise from a variety of sources, from the influence of Joseph Campbell's analysis of hero myths (of which the Christ-narrative is a prime ex³ Or they may arise because Campbell and Jung were right: if the stories humans tell arise from a finite set of archetypes in the collective unconscious, then a certain percentage of stories will inevitably resemble the Christ narrative. Kozlovic and others have also pointed out that Christ-figures may be either male or female.⁴

This article interprets the young female lead characters in *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias* as Christ-figures in polymythic narratives. In each case, clear indicators of Christ-figure identity are present alongside elements from non-Christian spiritual or mythological traditions. The interpretation is further complicated by the fact that, in both films, modern Western feminist tropes are superimposed upon the Christic and other mythopoieic elements. The analysis of these narratives will move in two directions: as the concept of the Christ-figure is employed to interpret the films, the two characters will also help elucidate the parameters of the Christ-figure concept.

Kozlovic has proposed a list of twenty-five characteristics of cinematic Christ-figures.⁵ No single Christ-figure will display all twenty-five characteristics, and there is some slight overlap in the items he names. The twenty-five items on Kozlovic's list can be grouped loosely into three types of characteristics. First, several of the characteristics he lists can be described as narrative parallels between the Christ-figure's film story and the biblical Christ-narrative. Most important among these narrative parallel characteristics—and most essential among all Christ-figure characteristics—is a death/resurrection motif coupled with a theme of voluntary self-sacrifice. Other narrative parallels, such as a scene that symbolically represents baptism, Gethsemane, the last supper, or betrayal by a Judas-figure can enhance the strength of the Christ-figure identification.

A second type of Christ-figure characteristic can be described as ontological markers of Christic identity. These include the possession of special powers, description by other characters as “special” or godlike, a sense of being on a mission, outsider status, and a difficult negotiation/alteration between the Christ-role and ordinary human life. The third type of Christ-figure characteristic, which can be described as cinematographic clues, would include such items as possessing the initials J.C or some variant of the name Christopher, being portrayed in a cruciform pose, or being portrayed as resembling some well-known artistic representation of Christ. Cinematographic clues may also be in the background in such phenomena as scenes of crosses or other Christian symbols, sacred music in the soundtrack, or action corresponding to key seasons in the ecclesiastical calendar. The central characters in *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias* can clearly be seen to exhibit several of the various types of Christ-figure characteristics.

The prospect of interpreting the character Pai (short for Paikea) in *Whale Rider* as a Christ-figure raises some potential objections, because *Whale Rider* seeks to represent indigenous Maori spiritual traditions, and imposition of a Christological framework onto the film may be viewed as another instance of Christian cultural imperialism. After all, among the world’s spiritual and religious traditions, Christianity holds no monopoly on the valorization of self-sacrifice, and Jesus is not the only figure in the history of religion and mythology to undergo a

death and resurrection. On the other hand, both the film and the novel upon which it is based appear after some 200 years of Maori contact with European colonialism, and from the earliest anthropological and ethnographic recording of indigenous traditions until the media portrayals of today, the centrality of the Christ-narrative in the dominant Christian-informed cultures has affected both the telling and the hearing of religious stories.

Whale Rider's Caucasian director, Niki Caro, has been criticized—most often mildly but at times more stridently—for diluting the aboriginal elements of the novel in order to produce a commercially viable film⁶ and perhaps even misrepresenting them to impose a Western feminist ideology onto a context it does not fit.⁷ Even the novel, by Maori author Witi Ihimaera, was written in New York City and inspired in part by the novelist's daughters' complaints, after watching an *Indiana Jones* movie, that movies need more female action heroes.⁸ *Whale Rider* was shown in theatres around the world and even garnered an Oscar nomination. John Petrakis, film critic for *The Christian Century*, stops short of explicitly identifying Pai as a Christ-figure, but says that in the film, “the story of a legend becoming fact turns into a parable, celebrating the power of love, sacrifice and resurrection.”⁹ Given the intercultural influences in the film's production and the global reach of its distribution, analyzing the film through the lens of the Christ-figure concept is legitimate.

First, Pai clearly exhibits the most prevalent of the ontological markers of Christ-figures in film—the possession of special powers—in her ability to communicate telepathically with whales. She also possesses the inner conviction of being on a mission. The opening voiceover by Pai makes clear that the audience is about to witness the story of a great leader: “In the old days, the land felt a great emptiness that was waiting, waiting to be filled up, waiting for someone to love it, waiting for a leader....” The opening voiceover continues with the story of Pai’s birth, featuring themes that argue both for and against a Christ-figure reading. “There was no gladness when I was born,” Pai announces, seemingly marking the circumstances of her birth as a binary opposite of the “good tidings of great joy” of the biblical Christ narrative. The joylessness of Pai’s birth results from the death of her mother and twin brother. On the other hand, unusual or ominous signs mark the birth of great leaders in most religious and spiritual traditions. Other details of Pai’s birth story parallel the Christ narrative; for example, just as Joseph conferred upon Jesus a name indicating his mission, Pai’s father Pourangani confers upon her a gender-inappropriate name indicating her connection to the great ancestor Paikea and her destiny of assuming his role as leader of the tribe. Pai’s gender also confers upon her the outsider status that Kozlovic names as one of the possible markers of Christ-figure identification.

There are other narrative parallels with the biblical Christ narrative. Like Joseph, Pourangani is absent during the crucial part of Pai's story, having moved to Germany to be an artist after Pai's birth, leaving her to be raised by her grandparents. There is also a baptism scene. Pai's grandfather Koro has tried to train the first-born boys in the village in their traditional ways, leading up to a final test to choose his heir as chief. He takes the boys out to sea, throws the taonga (a sacred whale tooth pendant) into the depths, and challenges the boys to dive in and retrieve it. They all fail. But Pai returns to the spot later with her uncle, dives in, and after a suspensefully long time underwater, retrieves the sacred object. This symbolic baptism unequivocally demonstrates (at least to audiences and to Pai's uncle and grandmother) Pai's credentials as leader. Unlike the baptism of Christ, however, Pai's symbolic baptism does not result in a pronouncement of approval by the authoritative father-figure. But like baptism in Christian tradition, Pai's baptism symbolizes her death and foreshadows her climactic self-sacrificial immersion into the ocean that will occur later in the film.

The self-sacrificial death/resurrection motif occurs with this later immersion. After a pod of whales beach themselves on the shore of the bay near Pai's village, Pai uses her telepathic ability to ride the lead whale and guide the rest of the pod out to sea. This self-sacrificial act is necessary because the death of the whales would bring bad mana upon her people and portend a loss of hope for the

future. The act also demonstrates that Pai, like the great ancestor after whom she is named, is a whale-rider. While continuity with the great ancestor chief is an important feature of Pai's identity, the contrast between Pai's act and that of her legendary ancestor are consistent with a Christ-figure reading. The legendary Paikea's whale-riding was a miraculous deliverance from the involuntary perils of a shipwreck, not a voluntary act of self-sacrifice for the good of the community like the act of Pai in the film.

For several minutes of the film, the audience and the other characters assume that Pai has died. Ultimately, however, the scene shifts to a hospital room, where after being found miraculously washed ashore, Pai lies unconscious. After her symbolic death, her grandfather Koro finally recognizes her for who she really is and utters beside what may be her deathbed a confession evocative the dying thief on the cross beside Jesus: "Wise leader, forgive me. I am just a fledgling new to flight." Pai opens her eyes briefly as if to acknowledge the confession. In the film's final triumphal scene, it is revealed that Pai has fully recovered and assumed her rightful role as leader.

Background similarities to the story of Jesus also are present. Koro's intransigent clinging to tradition and the resultant failure of the community to acknowledge its true leader can be seen as analogous to the Gospels' portrayal of the Pharisees. And, though the film's Maori setting has been discussed as a reason

to be hesitant about seeing Pai as a Christ-figure, the Maori community also represents a distinctive parallel to the New Testament environment that is lacking from the setting of most modern films. Esther Figueroa describes the Maori in *Whale Rider* as “a struggling community dealing with the byproducts of genocide, colonialism, and modernity.”¹⁰ The first-century Palestine into which Jesus was born was also a colonial outpost, and the Jewish community had struggled for generations with their imperial overlords’ coercive violence, which was genocidal under the Seleucids in the 2nd century B.C.E. and would become genocidal again under the Romans just a generation after the life of Jesus.

Whale Rider constructs a complicated relationship between Maori spiritual traditions, Christic narrative details, and feminist advocacy. Most critics point to the feminist agenda as the film’s central ethical message. Chris Prentice suggests that the features outlined here as Christic support the film’s universal appeal and ultimately facilitate its presentation of feminist values as superior to traditionalist notions of gender. First, *Whale Rider* presents a “‘family of man’ humanism” that unfolds through “‘universal’ struggles between tradition and change, intergenerational tensions, the quest for ‘self’ through recognition by others, self-fulfillment and self-realization” by means of which “a number of ‘lost’ characters are redeemed, while the community itself celebrates wholeness at the end.”¹¹ Then, feminist egalitarianism, as a form of universal justice, appears inherently superior

to rigid traditionalism: “*Whale Rider*’s cultural representations attempt to span rationalist and non-rationalist epistemologies. Paikea’s actions in relation to her gender privilege the (modern, Western) rationalist position defying tapu, or the sacred principle, and this constitutes a vulnerable point in relation to a cultural-authenticity reading.”¹²

Similarly, Bernard Beck claims that the film resolves “the ironic contradiction between traditional virtue and modern sexual equality” through the features that can be seen as Christ-figure characteristics. Koro’s problem, until the climactic moment of the film, is that his obsessive attachment to the “fierce, masculine, warrior power” valorized by his traditions prevents him from seeing that “someone is available to save the day, preserve the tradition, and rescue the dying whales.” Because “that savior is a girl,” Koro becomes complicit in the ways the “traditions disparage, reject, and punish the one who has the gift, the dedication, and the purity of faith to do what is needed.”¹³ Despite numerous signs obvious to audiences and to other characters, Koro’s eyes are not opened until the miraculous act of self-sacrifice. A deeper irony, perhaps, lies in the fact that although an act of Christ-like self-sacrifice is crucial to the film’s story of overcoming rigid traditionalism in the name of feminist equality, Christian civilization (conspicuously absent from the film) is by and large every bit as patriarchal as

Maori traditions are presented as being in *Whale Rider*. Feminist equality thus trumps all forms of patriarchal traditionalism.

But the polymythic Christ-figure narrative in *Whale Rider* can be read another way—as validating Maori tradition over against Christianity. The customary way to read a Christ-figure narrative is as an overlaying of a Christological framework onto a story otherwise unrelated to Christianity, thus transforming the story into a Christian parable. Such a reading of *Whale Rider* would bring us back to the charge of cultural imperialism, as if my intention were to displace the Maori traditions portrayed in the film and treat the story as a parable of a truer and higher spiritual reality. But the portrayal of Pai as a Christ-figure may be read alternatively as a subversion of colonial religion. In portraying Pai as a Christ-figure, the film could be saying in effect, on behalf of Maori people, “We don’t need the white man’s Jesus—we are capable of producing our own Maori saviors.”

Such a reading is reinforced by certain elements of the film. Pai’s grandmother Nanny recognizes her special identity throughout, and often challenges her husband’s assertion of masculine authority. In what might be considered a Gethsemane type-scene, Pai’s grandmother, Nanny, seeks to comfort her after Koro refuses to allow Pai to participate in his tradition training for the village’s first-born boys. Nanny advises her granddaughter, “Sometimes, you’ve

got to let him think he's the boss," and encourages her to fortify herself because "You've got the blood of Muriwai in your veins," identifying the child not with the male ancestor-chief after whom she is named, but with a powerful ancient female ancestor. Ultimately, Koro's understanding of Maori tradition is proven wrong. Despite the surface appearance of a simple struggle between gender equality and rigid traditionalism, the truth of Tania Ka'ui's assertion that Maori tradition is not in fact so patriarchal¹⁴ manages to peer out between the lines.

Both Matthew McEver and Arnfriður Guðmundsdóttir suggest that two elements not in Koslovic's list are essential to interpreting a film character as a Christ-figure: acts of protest against injustice and liberating intentions or effects in the act of self-sacrifice.¹⁵ Both elements are clearly present in *Whale Rider*. As a Christ-figure, then, *Whale Rider*'s Pai indicts all forms of patriarchal injustice—Christian, Maori, or other.

The character Shelby in *Steel Magnolias* is both more clearly identified as a Christ-figure than Pai and less obviously so identified. The clarity of her Christ-figure identification is seen in the film's overtly Christian symbolism. But the Christological elements are very subtle, existing mostly in the background and not coming clearly into focus until the final scene. Also in the background of the story, interacting with the Christ-figure characteristics, is the Greco-Roman myth of Demeter and Persephone. And as in *Whale Rider*, a message of feminist solidarity

underlies the polymythic elements (even though playwright Robert Harling, creator of the story, is male).

Unlike Pai, Shelby lacks any special power that would clearly mark her as a Christ figure, and is not clearly on any sort of special mission. The only ontological markers of her Christ-figure status are rather weak ones—her mother M'Lynn's identification of her as "special," and M'Lynn's repeated exclamations of "God" when talking to or about Shelby. Shelby's death is not as clearly self-sacrificial as Pai's, and the resurrection theme is easy to miss if one is not paying close attention.

Shelby's death is self-sacrificial in that it results ultimately from having put her severely diabetic body through the ordeal of pregnancy against medical advice. In an argument with her mother over the prudence of her decision to have a child, Shelby describes the child she will bear as "a little piece of immortality." Like Christ, in other words, Shelby dies in order to bring new life to the world and a promise of immortality.

Her death scene includes a striking parallel to the crucifixion of Jesus. After artificial respiration is withdrawn, Shelby's husband, father, and brothers all leave the hospital room, leaving her mother alone as a witness to her death—just as in the Gospels the male disciples flee, leaving Jesus to die in the presence of his mother

and the other women. M'Lynn comments on the deathbed experience later in the film:

We turned off the machines. Drum left. He couldn't take it. Jackson left. I find it amusing. Men are supposed to be made out of steel or something. I just sat there. I just held Shelby's hand. There was no noise, no tremble, just peace. Oh god. I realize as a woman how lucky I am. I was there when that wonderful creature drifted into my life and I was there when she drifted out. It was the most precious moment of my life.

Analogous to the female presence at the death scenes of Shelby and Jesus is the female presence at the burial site. After the funeral, M'Lynn lingers at the graveside of Shelby after everyone else has left, and then is joined there by her coterie of female friends.

The resurrection motif unfolds in two ways. First, both before and after Shelby's death, the circle of women characters begin to see their lives improve as a result of Shelby's influence. Some of these improvements come as they put into practice little pieces of advice Shelby had given them while she was alive. These events may seem trivial—Clairee takes Shelby's advice and purchases a local radio station, Ouiser has an old love rekindled through Shelby's intervention, Truvee's husband Spud is inspired by Shelby's death to come out of his depression and reconnect with his wife—but they represent little resurrections that bring happiness to characters who earlier in the film had lived as if they thought their lives were already over. Second, and more significant, the character Annelle, who has become

pregnant, seeks M'Lynn's approval/permission to name the child after Shelby, and on the Easter after Shelby's death, goes into labor at the community Easter Egg Hunt. Truvee's husband Spud rushes Annelle to the hospital in his SUV, with Annelle's husband Sammy following close behind in an Easter Bunny costume on the back of a motorcycle, as the camera ascends slowly to an aerial view of the town and surrounding region—as if the audience is seeing the scene from Shelby's heavenly vantage point. “Shelby” will be (re)born on Easter. The comic nature of this scene evokes the way Luke's gospel uses humor to accentuate the joy in stories of annunciation.

Other allusions and clues in the film strengthen the Christ-figure association. At the beginning in the film, in the first conversation between Shelby and M'Lynn, Shelby responds to M'Lynn's exasperation with Shelby's younger brothers by saying, “You should have drowned them at birth,” which can be seen as an allusion to the Christ/Moses parallel of the massacre of the innocents by Herod and Pharaoh. Also near the beginning of the film, Jackson sneaks into the house to seek assurance that Shelby is really planning to go through with the wedding. He enters her room while she is in the bath, which given its place in the narrative and in combination with the other Christ-figure elements may be seen symbolically as a baptism scene. Later in the film, when the women at the beauty shop see Shelby's dialysis scars, Ouiser exclaims, “Shelby, it looks like you've

been driving nails up your arms!”—a possible allusion to a familiar aspect of the crucifixion. Christian hymnody plays a significant role in the film. The public announcement of Shelby’s pregnancy is accompanied by carolers singing “Silent Night.” Shelby’s kidney transplant is preceded by a church scene in which the choir sings “Abide With Me,” and the music from the church scene continues in the background as the scene shifts to a dinner where Shelby reintroduces Ouiser to her old beau Owen as the strains of “Holy, Holy, Holy” slowly fade away, signifying perhaps that this act of matchmaking, like the other ways Shelby touches the lives of her friends, is part and parcel of her holy mission.

The prominence of church buildings in the film also suggests association with the story of Christ. The film begins with a wedding in a church. Midway through, the kidney transplant is preceded by a scene in church. And immediately after Shelby’s death, M’Lynn rushes to Aunt Vern’s house to retrieve her grandson Jack Jr. He runs toward her with arms outstretched. Then she picks the toddler up, holds him above her, and looks up into his face as sunlight breaks through the clouds and illuminates the façade of a church building across the street in the background.

The Christ-figure elements in *Steel Magnolias* are juxtaposed with and perhaps eclipsed by the presence of another mythic tradition. Lisa Tyler argues compellingly that the myth of Demeter and Persephone underlies the film (and the

play of the same title upon which the film is based).¹⁶ In the myth, Hades abducts the beautiful Persephone and takes her to the underworld, where he rapes her and makes her his bride. Persephone's distraught mother Demeter responds by refusing to allow the earth to yield fruit. After searching high and low for Persephone, Demeter finally learns the awful truth, and a compromise is brokered whereby Persephone will be allowed to return to her mother each Spring, but must return to Hades in the underworld each Winter. Thus, at one level the myth is a simple etiology of the cycles of the seasons. As a story of mother-daughter solidarity, however, the myth of Demeter and Persephone became a basis for commemoration of female solidarity by ancient mystery cults and by modern feminists. Tyler quotes Susan Gubar's distillation of the essence of the Persephone-Demeter myth as the message of *Steel Magnolias* as well: "female sexual initiation involves a terrifying separation from the female community and grotesque submission to male force so the marriage of death becomes a symbol of daemonic male power which . . . effects the destruction of the girl."¹⁷

Tyler identifies several elements of the film as indicators of its relation to the Demeter-Persephone myth. Most obvious is the central mother-daughter relationship between M'Lynn and Shelby, with M'Lynn's constant protective vigilance. Second, the film portrays men as almost universally violent and rapacious. Shelby's father Drum is a comic figure who is introduced using guns

and explosives to scare birds out of the trees for his daughter's wedding. Jackson is portrayed as selfish, obsessed with hunting, and utterly indifferent to his wife's well-being as long as he gets what he wants—a son. Even men who do not appear on screen but are merely discussed by the female characters are overly violent. Symbolizing both the demonic nature of the male half of the species and the film's mythic connection with the underworld abode of Hades, the local high school football team is named the Devils.¹⁸

Tyler suggests that the film's Christian symbolism also is intended merely to reinforce the Demeter-Persephone myth. Looking for a way to symbolize Persephone's return from the underworld that realistically fits the film's Louisiana setting, the Christian festival of Easter with its resurrection motif is the only logical choice. Reinforcing such a reading is the film's focus on the outdoor, Spring-celebration dimensions of Easter rather than the holiday's Christian religious meanings—Easter in the film is about grassy meadows, flowers, eggs, and bunnies. Though all of the characters attend church, the only character who expresses any overt Christian conviction and practice is Annelle, and her Christianity is ridiculed and dismissed by the other characters.

Tyler points out that the action in the play takes place entirely within Truvy's beauty shop, an exclusively feminine space into which men will not enter. The film utilizes a much wider variety of settings, allowing male characters to be

in view, but the focus remains on the separate social space constructed by women for themselves, the rituals they observe there, and the solidarity that grows among them even across lines of social class. Tyler sees these practices as modern parallels to the ancient rites surrounding the Demeter-Persephone myth that grew up among women.¹⁹

Tyler further suggests that M'Lynn's donation of a kidney to try to save her daughter parallels Demeter's journey to the underworld to search for her daughter and bring her back in some versions of the myth.²⁰ But even this event is overlaid with Christian symbolism. As mentioned above, it is preceded by a church scene featuring the hymns "Abide With Me" and "Holy, Holy, Holy," and by the beauty shop scene in which Shelby's nail-scarred arms are revealed. This beauty shop scene also features a symbolic baptism of M'Lynn: after washing M'Lynn's hair, Annelle is distracted by the revelation of Shelby's nail scars, and M'Lynn exclaims, "Annelle, I'm dripping." Thus, M'Lynn's ordeal can be read either as a Demeter-like journey into the underworld of clinical anesthesia in hopes of bringing her daughter back from death or as a Christ-like act of self-sacrificial death and resurrection.

A polymythic reading, then, is to be preferred, since both Christ-figure characteristics and Demeter-Persephone parallels are clearly present. In concert, the Christ-figure elements and the Demeter-Persephone parallels effect a prophetic critique of patriarchy, including the patriarchy of traditional Christianity, similar to the critique seen in *Whale Rider*. Specifically, reading Shelby as a Christ-figure brings into view a danger inherent in the construction and interpretation of female Christ-figures. Linda Mercadante worries that a Christ-figure film's "distinct Christic allusions" can have the effect that viewers "uncritically accept images that have been used to promote or justify destructive human behavior."²¹ Since an essential characteristic of a Christ-figure is self-sacrifice, female Christ-figures can reveal or reinforce the danger that feminist theologians have noted in combining a definition of Christ-like love as self-sacrifice with a social ideology of female submission to male authority.²² As Mercadante notes,

Even though Jesus' sacrifice is considered unique and unrepeatable—in its divine origin, substitutionary role, and salvific effect—it has also been promoted as a model for believers to follow. Unfortunately, this model has often been used to condone abuse, justify violence, force submission, and minimize the reality of suffering.²³

Steel Magnolias is ambiguous on the degree to which Shelby's decision to risk pregnancy arises from her own desire to have children and the degree to which she is merely acceding to her husband's wishes. Shelby's story thus functions as both moral example and cautionary tale. It affirms that self-sacrificial love can be life-

giving to one's community of loved ones. But it also demonstrates that submitting to husbands can be life-threatening for women. By combining Christ-figure characteristics with a mythic celebration of female solidarity, *Steel Magnolias* offers a prophetic critique of male privilege and constructs the separate social space of women's culture as a respite, but not quite a liberation, from male domination.

Deacy's primary criticism of "uncritical" readings of cinematic heroes as Christ-figures is that such readings seem to assume that important Christological messages are in the films, waiting to teach viewers something new about Christian theology. Interpretations of film, Deacy contends, depend—like interpretations of the Bible or any other text—as much on what a viewer brings to a film as on the contents of the film itself.²⁴ And Kozlovic does seem overly enthusiastic about the value of cinematic Christ-figures for Christian education.²⁵ The evidence of *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias* suggests that both Kozlovic and Deacy are partly right. Kozlovic is right to note that there are Christ-figure characteristics present in films, and that the concurrent presence in a film of a significant cluster of such characteristics warrants reading certain characters as Christ-figures. But Deacy is correct in pointing out that cinematic Christ-figures do not automatically provide raw material for constructive Christian theology. Merely identifying a character as a Christ-figure does not significantly foreclose the range of meanings and messages—theological or otherwise—that viewers might find in a film.

As is evident in *Whale Rider* and *Steel Magnolias*, a Christ-figure narrative can deconstruct Christian traditions as easily as it can reinforce them. When placed in juxtaposition to other spiritual or mythic traditions, a Christ-figure narrative can suggest that a non-Christian myth is a better resource for prophetic criticism and liberative praxis than Christianity, especially given the oppressive nature of Christianity's better known, dominant historical embodiments. Female Christ-figures who embody prophetic critique of and liberation from patriarchal structures of domination suggest that Christian history, with its tradition of male dominance and female submission, is radically discontinuous with the life and values of Christianity's alleged founder.

Yet the presence of a cluster of Christ-figure characteristics sufficient to warrant interpreting a character as a Christ-figure does raise questions that should interest theologians, especially if the film is of sufficient aesthetic quality—or sufficient influence—to be taken seriously. In describing *Whale Rider* as “a parable... of love, sacrifice and resurrection,” Petrakis perhaps inadvertently names a valid approach to cinematic Christ-figures. Christ-figures function like parables, though they are not necessarily Christian parables. By taking structural elements of the formative Christian story and placing them into an alien context, Christ-figure narratives prompt a response of shock or surprise, forcing viewers to question assumptions about the meaning and implications of the Christ narrative. Once the

emotional response is evoked and questions are raised, the Christ-figure's work is done. As soon as interpreters begin answering the questions with explanations and propositions, the thought process has left the realm of the parable and even the wider realm of narrative itself.

And yet, if the Christ-figure narrative is a powerful one, it lingers in the consciousness of viewers and continues to exert its parabolic question-raising capacity in relation to future formulations and re-formulations of meaning. To the extent that the audience identifies with the Christ-figure, the narrative can prompt a sense of calling to similar Christ-like self-sacrifice and raise questions about the role that such self-sacrifice should play in our lives. To the extent that the audience identifies with other characters in the Christ-figure narrative, the film can prompt a renewed sense of how it feels to be the beneficiary of Christ-like self-sacrifice.

Whale Rider and *Steel Magnolias* present two such powerful Christ-figure narratives, made more powerful by their polymythic connections with Maori tradition and classical mythology. Audiences touched by these films might be moved to re-experience and reconsider the meaning of self-sacrifice in the spiritual life, whether that life be construed Christianly or not. If the Christ narrative is the means by which Christians are to locate themselves in relation to the world, then cinematic Christ-figure narratives can play a similar if less central identity-shaping role for viewers. The young, female Christ figures in *Whale Rider* and *Steel*

Magnolias can help (post)modern audiences to ponder their place in the various relational webs in which they find themselves by asking what Jesus would have done, when Jesus was a girl.

¹ Anton Karl Kozlovic, "Jesus Covered In a Secular Wrapper: The Christ-figure in Popular Films," *Kinema* (Fall 2005), <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/kozl052.htm>; "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html>.

² Christopher Deacy, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13 (Summer 2006), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art13-reflectcinematicchrist.html>.

³ Kozlovic, "Structural Characteristics," par. 6-1

⁴ Kozlovic, "Jesus Covered In a Secular Wrapper"; Linda Mercadante, "Bess the Christ Figure? Theological Interpretations of Breaking the Waves." *Journal of Religion and Film* 5/1 (April 2001); <http://cid.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/bessthe.htm>; Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, "Female Christ-figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of Breaking the Waves and Dead Man Walking," *Studia Theologica* 56/1 (June 2002): 27-43.

⁵ Kozlovic, "Structural Characteristics."

⁶ Esther Figueroa, Review of *Whale Rider*, *The Contemporary Pacific* 16/2 (Fall 2004), 422-425; Ann Hardy, "Return of the Taniwha: The Re-spiritualization of Land and Film in Aotearoa," *British Review of New Zealand Studies* 14 (2004): 84-104; Antje M. Rauwerda, Review of *The Whale Rider* (Novel and Film), *Postcolonial Text* 1/1 (2004), <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/index>; Pascale De Souza, "Maoritanga in *Whale Rider* and Once Were Warriors: A Problematic Rebirth Through Female Leaders," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 1/1 (January 2007): 15-27.

⁷ Tānia M. Ka'ai, "Te Kauae Mārō o Muri-ranga-whenua (*The Jawbone of Muri-ranga-whenua*): Globalising local Indigenous culture - Māori leadership, gender and cultural knowledge transmission as represented in the film *Whale Rider*," *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 2/2 (July 2005), <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/portal/splash/>

⁸ De Souza, "Maoritanga," 15; Ka'ai, "Te Kauae Mārō," 2.

⁹ John Petrakis, "Girl Power," *The Christian Century* 120/20 (October 4, 2003): 44.

¹⁰ Figueroa, Review of *Whale Rider*, 423.

¹¹ Chriss Prentice, "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *Whale Rider*," in *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions, Cross Cultures Series* 85, ed. Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 258.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 263. Prentice thus agrees both with those who view the film's misrepresentation of Maori traditions as an inevitable consequence of telling a universally appealing story (see note XXX above) and with Tania M. Kau'ai assertion that the feminist agenda is to blame for the film's misrepresentation of Maori tradition (see note XXX above).

¹³ Bernard Beck, "The Sea Around Us: Social Climbing in *Seabiscuit*, *Whale Rider*, and *Finding Nemo*," *Multicultural Perspectives* 6/2 (2004), 26.

¹⁴ See note 7 above.

¹⁵ Guðmundsdóttir, "Female Christ-figures in Films," 35, 38; Matthew McEver, "The Messianic Figure in Film: Christology Beyond the Biblical Epic," *Journal of Religion and Film* 2/2 (October 1998), <http://www.unomaha.edu/~jrf/McEverMessiah.htm>, par. 29

¹⁶ Lisa Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in *Steel Magnolias*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 22/2 (1994) 98-104.

¹⁷ Susan Gubar, "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies: An interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (1979), 305, quoted in Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth," 99.

¹⁸ Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth," 99-100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103; on the beauty parlor as transformative female space in *Steel Magnolias*, see also Jennifer Scanlon "'If My Husband Calls I'm Not Here': The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space," *Feminist Studies* 33/2 (Summer 2007), 319-321.

²⁰ Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth," 102.

²¹ Mercadante, "Bess the Christ Figure?" par. 2.

²² See Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 146-159.

²³ Mercadante, "Bess the Christ Figure?," par. 12.

²⁴ Deacy, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures," par. 10-14.

²⁵ Kozlovic, "Structural Characteristics," par. 70-71.