



Identity Crisis in the Hero's Journey of Ruby Gillman; Teenage Kraken (2023)

Anisa Nurhidayanti¹, Yuyun Nurulaen², Dian Nurrachman³

^{1,2,3}Sastra Inggris, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung,
Bandung, Jawa Barat

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-15 Revised: 2026-06-30 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: Ruby Gillman, The Hero's Journey, Narrative, Identity. DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11242 Corresponding Author: Anisa Nurhidayanti nurhidayantianisa5@gmail.com Sastra Inggris, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Bandung, Jawa Barat	<i>This study analyzes the 2023 DreamWorks animated film Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken to explore how the protagonist's growth reflects psychological maturation amid internal conflicts and social pressures. Using a qualitative narrative approach, this research combines the hero's journey with Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, offering a novel interdisciplinary framework that maps mythic archetypes onto adolescent identity formation. This integration contributes to film and literary studies by demonstrating how commercial animated cinema utilizes classical narrative structures to articulate complex psychological crises. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that each phase of the monomyth serves as a precise metaphor for the Identity vs. Role Confusion crisis. By transitioning from a passive Identity Foreclosure through a vulnerable Psychosocial Moratorium, the protagonist successfully attains Identity Achievement and the virtue of Fidelity. Ultimately, this contemporary animation redefines true maturation not as social conformity, but as the ego's courage to embrace a hybrid self to achieve a stable sense of self-sameness.</i>

1. Introduction

The rapid development of communication and media technologies has transformed how narratives are produced and interpreted, with film increasingly taking a central role alongside literature as a medium of comparable narrative complexity (Klarer, 2013; Boggs & Petrie, 2012). Within this context, animated films have evolved beyond children's entertainment into a medium capable of addressing mature psychological themes, such as identity formation, internal conflict, and self-acceptance, through symbolic and metaphorical storytelling.

The gap addressed in this study is as follows: although Campbell's Hero's Journey is widely used in film narrative analysis, and Erikson's psychosocial theory is widely applied in studies of adolescent identity, the two frameworks are rarely integrated and almost never applied to female-centered animated protagonists. Existing Hero's Journey scholarship tends to focus on male-dominated action and superhero narratives (e.g., Asmawati, 2019 on *Shazam!*), while studies of adolescent identity in film (e.g., Southcott & St John, 2021) draw on psychological approaches without linking them to a structural narrative framework. As a result, two parallel traditions structural and psychological have developed with limited integration, alongside the continued underrepresentation of female protagonists in Hero's Journey research. *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (DreamWorks, 2023) addresses this gap by offering a female-centered, identity-driven animated narrative that enables an integrated analysis.

Recent scholarship on female-centered animated protagonists has begun to test the limits of the classical monomyth from various perspectives. Studies of *Mulan* by Ariella et al. (2025) demonstrate how the film critiques traditional heroism and redefines greatness through resilience, intellect, and moral integrity, allowing the monomyth to be reinterpreted as a metaphor of empowerment. A 2023 study in LITERA analyzed *Moana's* identity status using Marcia's and Erikson's frameworks, treating identity achievement as the outcome of a crisis involving active exploration. Collectively, these studies indicate that female-centered narratives not only occupy existing structures but also renegotiate their meaning, making *Ruby Gillman* a timely and relevant case.

These studies also reveal a methodological divide that this research seeks to bridge. Structurally oriented research is effective in systematically mapping narrative stages but often treats psychological development as a byproduct. Conversely, psychologically oriented research provides precise insights into identity status but tends to overlook its relationship with narrative structure. This study addresses this divide by conceptualizing the stages of the Hero's Journey and Eriksonian identity development as a unified analytical framework rather than two separate approaches.

The Hero's Journey theory proposed by Joseph Campbell (1949) originally consists of seventeen stages within the structure of the monomyth. However, in its development, Christopher Vogler (2007) adapted this concept into twelve stages

that are more simplified and practical, particularly for narrative analysis in modern film. Therefore, this study employs Vogler's twelve-stage framework as an operationalization of Campbell's theory.

This integration is formulated as a conceptual framework. Campbell's monomyth and Vogler's (2007) refinement divide the hero's journey into three main stages: departure, initiation, and return. Erikson's (1968) theory, further developed by Kroger (2006), conceptualizes identity formation as a process that moves from an unexamined identity to crisis and exploration, and ultimately to commitment. These frameworks correspond closely: departure reflects the onset of identity crisis; initiation represents active exploration; and return signifies identity achievement. In Ruby's case, her initial rejection of her Kraken identity marks the onset of crisis, her trials represent exploration, and her eventual acceptance of her identity reflects identity achievement. Thus, narrative structure and psychological development are understood as two representations of the same process.

The film provides a suitable context for applying this framework. Ruby's hidden identity as a descendant of the Kraken creates tension between her desire for social acceptance and her need for self-acceptance, thereby externalizing Erikson's concept of identity crisis. Additionally, the film reinterprets the "monster" trope as a source of strength and subverts the Little Mermaid narrative by positioning mermaids, rather than sea monsters, as antagonists. This inversion offers a distinctive perspective for analyzing identity.

Based on this framework, the study analyzes how the stages of the Hero's Journey are represented in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* and how each stage corresponds to the protagonist's psychosocial identity development. In doing so, narrative structure is treated as a symbolic medium through which identity formation is expressed. This study contributes to film and literary studies by extending Hero's Journey analysis into a female-centered contemporary animated context and by proposing an integrated approach to linking narrative stages with psychological development.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis as the primary method. This design is chosen because the focus of the research is on interpreting media texts (films) to reveal the underlying and latent meanings embedded within their narrative structures. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research aims to explore and understand meanings that individuals or groups attribute to social or human problems. In this context, the research design is directed toward analyzing how visual elements and dialogues in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* represent abstract concepts such as the Hero's Journey and psychosocial identity formation.

Source and Sample of Data

The data sources in this study are categorized into primary and secondary sources. The primary data source is the digital video file of the animated film *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023), with a duration of 91 minutes, produced by DreamWorks Animation. Supporting secondary sources include *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler (2007), scholarly literature on adolescent psychology by McLean and Syed (2015), and film criticism articles that provide additional context regarding identity reception.

The sample in this study consists of textual and visual data selected through purposive sampling. The primary text was unitized into the 12 developmental stages of the Hero's Journey proposed by Campbell. To provide concrete visual evidence, three major screenshots were sampled to represent the apex of the three macro-phases:

- 1) Ruby's state of isolation in the Ordinary World (*Departure*),
- 2) her physical and emotional struggle during the Supreme Ordeal (*Initiation*)
- 3) her final integrated form in the Resurrection (*Return*).

The psychological units analyzed within these stages include dialogues, internal monologues, and character expressions that explicitly indicate identity crisis, exploration, and achievement. As explained by Krippendorff (2018), systematic sampling in content analysis must be directly relevant to the research questions to ensure that the conclusions drawn remain valid and focused.

Technique of Collecting Data

The data collection technique utilizes documentation and structured textual observation methods. The process involves watching the film repeatedly to obtain an in-depth understanding of its narrative structure, transcribing key dialogues related to Ruby's self-perception, and capturing three specific frames (screenshots) as visual evidence of her transformation.

Technique of Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis is conducted using the interactive analysis technique developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three interconnected stages:

- Data Condensation: The researcher filters the film's dialogues and scenes, selecting only the specific narrative markers corresponding to the 12 stages that directly depict Ruby's transition from identity confusion to identity achievement.
- Data Display: The condensed data and the 3 primary screenshots are organized within the matrix table to cross-reference narrative stages with psychological identity statuses, ensuring the analysis avoids pure plot summary and focuses on critical interpretation.

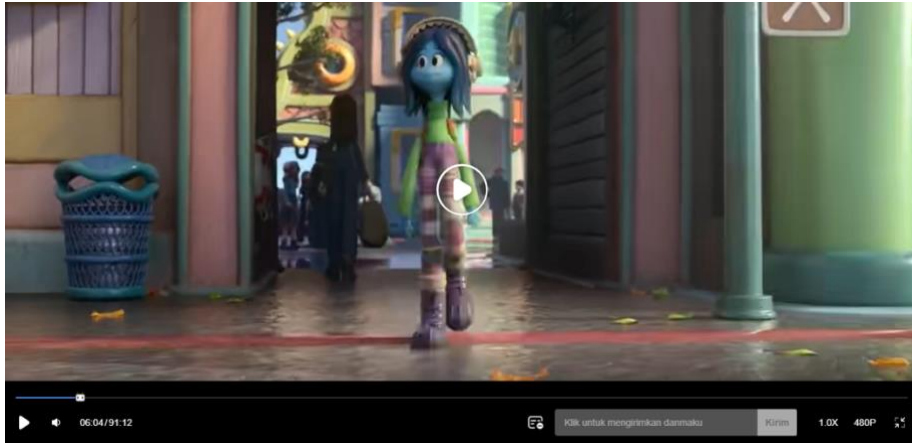
- **Conclusion Drawing:** The researcher performs a final synthesis to explain how the Hero's Journey structure functions as a symbolic framework for portraying the protagonist's psychological growth and self-acceptance.

3. Result

Summary Mapping of Hero's Journey Stages to Identity Development Indicators

Monomyth Phase	Hero's Journey Stage (Vogler)	Operationalized Identity Status (Erikson/Kroger)	Core Identity Conflict Marker
Departure	1. The Ordinary World	Identity Foreclosure & Crisis Incubation	Adoption of passive parental rules; sudden physical disruption of the hidden self; defensive denial to maintain fragile social safety.
	2. Call to Adventure		
	3. Refusal of the Call		
Initiation	4. Meeting with the Mentor	Identity Moratorium	Vulnerability to false peer validation; active but misguided experimentation with dual roles; severe identity rupture and ego breakdown.
	5. Crossing the First Threshold		
	6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies		
	7. Approach to the Inmost Cave		
Return	8. The Ordeal	Identity Achievement	Public disclosure of the integrated hybrid self; deconstruction of restrictive social and cultural expectations.
	9. The Reward		
	10. The Road Back		
	11. The Resurrection		
	12. Return with the Elixir		

Departure Phase: The Stagnation and Rupture of Foreclosure



*Figure 1. Ruby compressing her visual scale and concealing her Kraken identity in the Ordinary World.
(06:07)*

Initiation Phase: The Illusion of Moratorium and Identity Rupture



Figure 2. "Ruby's confrontation with Chelsea during the Supreme Ordeal."

(68:34)

Return Phase: The Public Articulation of Identity Achievement



Figure 3. The confrontation between Ruby and Nerissa at the Supreme Ordeal stage.

(77:15)

4. Discussion

Departure Phase: The Stagnation and Rupture of Identity Foreclosure

In the initial phase of the narrative, Ruby Gillman's journey does not merely represent a physical movement, but rather a psychological transition from a stagnant identity condition toward a forced rupture of identity.

1. The Ordinary World: Visual Manifestation of Identity Foreclosure

The Ordinary World functions as a visual representation of the early Identity Foreclosure condition within Erik Erikson's psychosocial dynamics. In this phase, adolescents passively adopt an identity without undergoing crisis or independent exploration.

Cinematographically, Ruby is consistently framed within dense and crowded human compositions (Figure 1, 25:30). This framing technique deliberately reduces Ruby's visual scale, serving as a metaphor for how she compresses her true identity in order to assimilate into the human environment. Textually, Ruby's identity is unilaterally defined by her mother's protective narrative:

"We are from Canada" (05:55).

This statement reflects how Ruby internalizes a constructed identity imposed by her parents to maintain the family's emotional stability. It represents a pre-exploration identity foreclosure, in which the adolescent ego submits to external mandates to avoid conflict.

2. The Call to Adventure: Catalyst of Existential Crisis

This identity stagnation is forcibly disrupted through The Call to Adventure, triggered when Connor falls into the water (13:50). Physical immersion into water psychologically symbolizing entry into the

unconscious triggers an unintended biological mutation.

From Erikson's perspective, this stage acts as an unavoidable crisis catalyst. Ruby's massive physical growth beyond the limits of the human environment reflects how suppressed aspects of adolescent identity will inevitably erupt. Physical change (puberty/mutation) forces the individual out of the comfort of childhood identity and confronts them with the demand for self-discovery.

3. The Refusal of the Call: Acute Role Confusion

Ruby's initial psychological response to this drastic change is rejection (The Refusal of the Call), manifested through a severe panic attack while hiding in the school library. This internal conflict is expressed when she hyperventilates and whispers in despair:

"I'm a monster, I'm a monster!" (24:07).

Analytically, this scene illustrates an acute condition of Role Confusion. Ruby experiences ego fragmentation; she no longer knows who she is whether a normal human teenager or a sea monster. Her rejection here is not physical fear, but an ego defense mechanism aimed at protecting her fragile previous identity from a new reality that alienates her from her social environment.

4. Meeting with the Mentor & Crossing the First Threshold: Deconstruction of Stigma and the Beginning of Ego Exploration

Ruby's transition toward healthy exploration begins as she enters the stages of Meeting with the Mentor and Crossing the First Threshold. Her encounter with Grandmamah functions as the emergence of an external mentor archetype that deconstructs her role confusion. Grandmamah provides existential validation through her dialogue at 28:10:

"You are only one of the three giant Krakens on this Earth, Ruby."

Through the introduction of the magnificent underwater kingdom, the mentor reframes the feared "monster" stigma into a noble heritage. When Ruby willingly dives deeper into the ocean, she officially crosses the First Threshold. This act symbolizes her readiness to begin experimenting with new roles in an unfamiliar world, leaving behind her human ego to explore deeper aspects of herself.

Initiation Phase: The Illusion of Psychosocial Moratorium and Identity Rupture

The Initiation phase represents what Erikson calls Psychosocial Moratorium a "grace period" in which adolescents are allowed to experiment with different roles without immediately making permanent commitments.

5. Tests, Allies, and Enemies: Manifestation of Moratorium and the Danger of Negative Identity

In this stage, Ruby struggles to balance two opposing roles: being a human student and becoming the heir to the Kraken throne. Amid the

instability of the moratorium phase, Chelsea emerges and exploits Ruby's need for someone who understands her. She offers false validation:

"It can be an assembly of peace" (52:58).

Driven by the adolescent tendency to seek emotional closeness (early aspects of intimacy vs. isolation), Ruby mistakenly identifies Chelsea as an ally. This interaction highlights the vulnerability of the moratorium phase; in an attempt to escape role confusion, adolescents can be easily drawn to peers who offer instant solutions or lead them toward dangerous "negative identities."

6. The Approach to the Inmost Cave: A Desperate Attempt to End the Crisis

This emotional instability drives Ruby into The Approach to the Inmost Cave, operationalized through her reckless decision to enter the deep ocean trench to retrieve the Trident of Oceanus (60:05). This risky act represents a desperate attempt to prematurely end her identity crisis. Ruby mistakenly believes that retrieving the Trident will resolve the conflict between her two worlds and validate her existence without undergoing a full psychological maturation process.

7. The Ordeal: The Peak of Identity Crisis and Identity Breakdown

The Ordeal serves as the structural pivot of the narrative and the peak of Ruby's identity crisis. After retrieving the Trident, Ruby's idealistic expectations collapse when Chelsea betrays her and reveals her true identity as Nerissa, the evil Mermaid queen. Nerissa's dialogue at 68:34 brutally dismantles Ruby's assumptions:

"Surprise, I'm a freaking mermaid!"

Visually (Figure 2, 68:34), the confrontation highlights the stark contrast between Ruby's fragility and Nerissa's dominance. This conflict triggers an identity crisis breakdown. Ruby realizes that her attempt to resolve role confusion by pleasing manipulative peers leads to disaster. Trapped and defeated, she reaches her lowest point a realization that performing a false identity completely undermines healthy ego integration.

8. The Reward: Mother Child Reconciliation and Integration of the Past

The collapse of Ruby's ego opens the way for The Reward. From Erikson's perspective, successful identity resolution requires reconciliation with parental authority and past influences. This reward is achieved through emotional reconciliation with her mother, Agatha, who admits her mistake at 78:23:

"Ruby, I'm sorry. I was wrong. I should have told you the truth, and from now on there will be no more lies."

The collapse of parental deception frees Ruby from role confusion. This stage marks a major psychological shift: Ruby begins integrating her family's values into her own self-concept, initiating true ego commitment.

Return Phase: The Public Articulation of Identity Achievement

The Return phase becomes the space where Ruby publicly articulates her mature and integrated identity.

9. The Road Back: The Social Stage as a Testing Ground for the Ego

The Road Back is triggered when Nerissa launches a destructive attack during prom night (75:27). Symbolically, prom represents a social transition ritual for human adolescents. Its use as the final battleground creates strong narrative irony: a place Ruby once feared due to potential role confusion becomes the arena where her identity integration is fully tested in public.

10. The Resurrection: Actualization of Identity Achievement

The Resurrection serves as the final resolution of the protagonist's psychosocial identity crisis. In front of her school community and Connor, Ruby consciously transforms into her giant Kraken form (75:55).

Visually (Figure 3, 77:15), this scene is the complete antithesis of Figure 1. Instead of being compressed and hidden, Ruby now stands tall, dominates the frame, and embodies full confidence.

From Erikson's perspective, this is the moment of Identity Achievement. Ruby successfully synthesizes her hybrid identity: she is neither a pretending human nor an alienated monster, but a unified integration of both a teenager and an ocean protector. Her resurrection represents the ego's success in overcoming crisis and achieving fidelity to the authentic self.

11. Return with the Elixir: The Emergence of Fidelity

The narrative concludes with Return with the Elixir. In Erikson's theory, successfully resolving the Identity vs. Role Confusion crisis produces the psychosocial virtue of Fidelity loyalty to oneself and one's values. This is socially validated when Connor approaches her and they dance together.

Positive responses from both her social environment (Connor and her school peers) and her family confirm that Ruby's hybrid identity has been fully accepted. Ultimately, the Hero's Journey structure in this film functions as a psychological metaphor aligned with Erik Erikson's theory: true maturation is not about escaping reality or faking acceptance, but about the ego's courage to embrace all aspects of the self and achieve a stable sense of self-sameness.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the narrative structure and psychosocial dynamics in the film *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023), this study demonstrates that the stages of the Hero's Journey (Monomyth) serve not merely as physical plot-driving mechanisms, but as a precise visual and narrative metaphor for Erik Erikson's crisis of *Identity vs. Role Confusion*. The *Departure* phase represents the rupture of

Ruby's initial, passive state of *Identity Foreclosure*, where unexpected physical changes force her out of childhood comfort and into an existential crisis.

Furthermore, the *Initiation* phase highlights the inherent dangers and vulnerabilities during the *Psychosocial Moratorium* (grace period), during which Ruby's experimental search for peer validation from the wrong source triggers a severe identity breakdown. This crisis is ultimately resolved publicly during the *Return* phase, which functions as the social stage for her identity articulation.

Through emotional reconciliation with parental authority and the courage to undergo a complete transformation in front of her community, Ruby successfully transitions from self-alienation to *Identity Achievement*. The success of her ego in synthesizing her hybrid identity as both a human and a Kraken gives rise to the psychosocial virtue of *Fidelity* (loyalty to oneself and one's core values). Consequently, the film deconstructs traditional animated tropes of good-versus-evil and reframes the essence of true adolescent maturation. Authentic growth is not achieved through conformity or faking acceptance to fit into an environment, but rather through the ego's courage to embrace all fragments of the self, ultimately achieving a stable and cohesive sense of self-sameness within society.

6. References

- Ariella, S., Pramana, A., Arta, I. I., Nehe, K. A. K., & Syahputra, F. P. (2025). Analyzing Disney Mulan's hero's journey in terms of literature. *International Journal of Education and Literature*, 4(2), 01-09.
- Asmawati, A. (2020). *HERO'S JOURNEY AS RESPRESENTED IN SHAZAM MOVIE (2019): A STUCTURAL NARATIVE ANALYSIS* (Doctoral dissertation, UNIVERSITAS PGRI ADI BUANA SURABAYA).
- Awwalina, K. (2018). *THE HERO'S JOURNEY OF MOANA IN MOANA (2016) MOVIE*.
- Boggs, J. M., & Petrie, D. W. (2012). *The Art of Watching Films*. McGraw-Hill.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (3rd ed.). New World Library. (Original work published 1949).
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cohen, J. J. (Ed.). (1996). *Monster theory [electronic resource]: reading culture*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- HARDI, J. B. (2023). *ANALISIS NARATIF TUBUH PEREMPUAN DALAM FILM YUNI BERDASARKAN STRUKTUR HERO'S JOURNEY* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta).
- Juanda, A., Surya, S., & Nasrullah, N. (2021). *THE HERO'S JOURNEY OF ARTHUR CURRY CHARACTER IN AQUAMAN MOVIE*. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya*, 5(4), 681-694.
- Mahendra, A., & Fattia, N. N. (2024). *ANALISIS PSIKOSOSIAL ERIK H. ERIKSON TERHADAP PENOKOHAN ZAIN AL-RAFEEA PADA FILM "CAPERNAUM"*

- KARYA NADINE LABAKI. *Nazharat: Jurnal Kebudayaan*, 30(1), 71-83.
- McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. U. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of identity development*. Oxford University Press.
- Klarer, M. (2013). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. Routledge.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. SAGE Publications.
- Prokhorov, A. (2026). The Pixar Hero's Journey: A Comparative Study of Propp's Morphology and Campbell's Monomyth. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 59(1), 7-14.
- Southcott, J. A. (2021). *An investigation into identity formation and adolescent identity in American teen film, with a focus on interstitiality, angst and alienation* (Doctoral dissertation, York St John University).
- Sudarisman, Y. (2016). Sastra Sebelah: Perlakukan film sebagai film. *Jurnal al-tsaqafa*, 13(2).
- Tlonaen, Z. A. (2023). Exploring 'Moana's Achieved Identity': A movie analysis of the main character. *LITERA*, 22(2), 219-231.
- Vogler, C. (2007). *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions.