

The Hero's Journey¹

"...a hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Joseph Campbell, the noted anthropologist and student of world mythology, has written about the "hero's journey," an archetypal² motif that is found again and again throughout all the world's literatures. A documentary about Joseph Campbell describes his conception of "hero's journey" as follows:

The hero is the personification of a culture's ideals, as embodied in its mythology. Traditionally the hero might be a warrior, the ideal of strength, or of courage; an explorer, the founder of civilizations; a philosopher, an adventurer of the mind; and in the modern world, the artist and the scientist would be added to the pantheon of heroes. But the journey is essentially the same; one shape-shifting story of the vision quest that transforms the world.

Whether it is Odysseus, or King Arthur, or Luke Skywalker, the hero is the one who responds to the call to adventure. The stories often open with the hero appearing restless. Something is missing in life. There is a feeling of destiny. It is a time of separation; sometimes it takes a shock to make the final break with the past.

But no one can go it alone; everyone needs a mentor to provide wisdom and magical power.

The descent into the underworld of adventure is often blocked by strange and dangerous threshold guardians. They mark the point of no return. Beyond them is the region of the unknown, a dream-like labyrinth of tests and trials. To pass this initiation, the hero must become a dragon-slayer; to seize the treasure, or rescue the princess. But the decisive ordeal of the quest is when the hero confronts death. He is challenged to follow the path of his heart. With the newfound wisdom and experience gained from his quest, the hero returns to the world above with the power to bring about its renewal and salvation.

¹ Also sometimes referred to by Campbell and others as the "monomyth"

² [A] the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype. [B] (in Jungian psychology) a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches.

Joseph Campbell breaks the Hero's Journey pattern down into three basic stages, and then each stage into several sub-stages:

Separation

- call to adventure, refusal of the call, supernatural aid, threshold crossing, belly of the whale

Initiation

- road of trials, meeting with the goddess, woman as temptress, apotheosis, ultimate boon

Return

- refusal of the return, magic flight, crossing return threshold, master of two worlds, freedom to live

The Separation

The quest always begins with the hero in a state of neurotic anguish. The call comes when the psychological forces of the mind (*Id* and *Superego*) become unbalanced. The hero can sometimes become distracted or turn his back on the call. When that happens, the adventure can turn into its opposite, and things go sour. Along the way, the hero often encounters a helper, usually a wise old man, who gives the hero both psychological and physical weapons. The hero eventually must cross into a dark underworld, where he will face evil and darkness, and thereby find true enlightenment, but first he/ she must get past a guardian who guards the threshold. Having gotten past the threshold guardian, the hero finds him/herself in a place of darkness. It's an ambiguous place of fluid dream-like forms.

The Initiation

Once in the underworld, the hero is repeatedly challenged with mental and physical obstacles that must be overcome. With all the obstacles overcome, the hero can find bliss in the arms of a lover. This is the ultimate prize for the hero. There is a negative side to the Goddess however, in the form of lustful temptation. This can distract the hero from his ultimate goal and plunge him back into darkness. Father and son are often pit against each other for mastery of the universe. To understand the father, and ultimately the self, the hero must reconcile with this ultimate authority figure. Having reconciled with the father and achieved personal enlightenment, the hero's psychological forces are again balanced. His new found knowledge, or boon, also has potential to benefit society.

The Return

Having found bliss and enlightenment in the underworld, the hero may not want to return with the boon. The hero may need to be rescued from without by humanity. This is followed a mad dash to return with the prize. Before the hero can return to the real world however, he must confront another threshold guardian. The first threshold was a symbolic death, this is now a symbolic rebirth. Once the final threshold is crossed, the

hero is now free to move back and forth between the two worlds at will. He has mastered the conflicting psychological forces of the mind. With the journey now complete, the hero has found true freedom, and can turn his efforts to helping or teaching humanity.

Once the “hero’s journey” pattern is understood, one can begin to see that it is the backbone of many familiar stories both ancient and contemporary. Joseph Campbell was a script consultant for *Star Wars*, and Luke Skywalker goes through each of the different aspects of Campbell’s scheme. *Star Wars* borrows heavily from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, another modern example of a Hero’s Journey story. The roots of the Hero’s Journey are very old, older than the written word, as old as the oldest stories people have told to each other to make sense of the world. The closer one looks, however, the more evident it is that nearly every dramatic narrative contains elements of this ancient pattern, from *Cars* to *Finding Nemo* to most television drama and modern fiction. In our readings for 10X class this year, we will be following the story from its earliest surviving examples right down to the present day.