

The Hero's Journey Defined

A hero ventures forth from the world of 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 described the hero's journey as occurring in a cycle consisting of three phases: **Departure**, where the hero leaves his comfortable and familiar world and ventures into the darkness of the unknown; **Initiation**, where the hero is subjected to a series of tests in which he must prove his character; and **Return**, in which the hero brings the boon of his quest back for the benefit of his people.

The hero's journey is about growth and passage. The journey requires a separation from the comfortable, known world, and an initiation into a new level of awareness, skill, and responsibility, and then a return home. Each stage of the journey must be passed successfully if the initiate is to become a hero. To turn back at any stage is to reject the need to grow and mature.

Characteristics of the Hero

According to Campbell, the hero is someone who has given his life over to someone or something bigger than himself. Even in novels and films, the hero is someone who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. The following characteristics are typically found in the heroes of mythology:

- The hero is usually male. According to Campbell, women typically represent creation and ultimate wisdom and therefore do not need to make a journey. If a woman does go on a quest, traditionally it is to find her prince or mate.
- The hero often times is of lowly birth, but may secretly have special powers or a high birthright he is unaware of.
- The hero's parents are often dead, absent, or uncaring. A hero usually can't begin a journey to become a man if his father figure is still present.
- A hero is judged by the things he does and the way he reacts and relates to people. His deeds must be marked by a nobility of purpose, and he must be willing to risk his life for his ideals.

The Call to Adventure

The potential hero may receive his Call in a variety similar ways:

- The town leaders may select the initiate and order him to face danger so that his village can be saved from an evil fate like disease or famine.
- Often the initiate is told to go on a quest by a god or "force" — this usually happens in a dream or a vision.

- The initiate may go willingly or may be forced by circumstance to go on the quest. The Call is a realization of an imbalance or injustice. The Call often comes when something has been taken away from the potential hero's or family or society. Similarly, the initiate might begin a journey because of a mistake — something is lost and he must find it.
- The Call may be a sensation on the part of the hero that something is lacking in his or her life and that he or she must search for what is missing.
- Another type of Call comes when the hero realizes that society is being denied something, and he or she goes on a quest to win rights for the people. Sometimes it is nothing more than the need to save honor.

The Stages of the Journey

The following is the hero's journey as described by Campbell in key excerpts from his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1949).

1. Departure

- **The Call to Adventure**

This first stage of the mythological journey — which we have designated the "call to adventure" — signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure . . . or he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent. . . . The adventure may begin as a mere blunder . . . or still again, one may be only casually strolling when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths of man. (p. 58)

- **Refusal of the Call**

Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless — even though, like King Minos, he may through titanic effort succeed in building an empire or renown. Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from him his Minotaur. All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration. (p. 59)

- **Supernatural Aid**

For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with

amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass. (p. 69)

What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny. The fantasy is a reassurance — a promise that the peace of Paradise, which was known first within the mother womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as in the past. . . . One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear. Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side. Mother Nature herself supports the mighty task. And in so far as the hero's act coincides with that for which his society itself is ready, he seems to ride on the great rhythm of the historical process. (pp. 71-72)

- The Crossing of the First Threshold

With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the "threshold guardian" at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. . . . Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe. The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored. (pp. 77-78)

The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades. (p. 82)

- The Belly of the Whale

The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died. (p. 90)

This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. . . . [I]nstead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshiper into a temple — where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes unless immortal. The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond, above, and below the confines of the world, are one and the same. That is why the approaches and entrances to temples are flanked and defended by colossal gargoyles: dragons, lions, devil-slayers with drawn swords, resentful dwarfs, winged bulls. These are the threshold guardians to ward away all incapable of encountering the higher silences within. . . . They illustrate the fact that the devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. . . . Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the

jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act. (pp. 91-92)

2. Initiation

- The Road of Trials

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth-adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage. (p. 97)

The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: Can the ego put itself to death? For many-headed is this surrounding Hydra; one head cut off, two more appear — unless the right caustic is applied to the mutilated stump. The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed — again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land. (p. 109)

- The Meeting with the Goddess

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage . . . of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart. (p. 109)

The meeting with the goddess (who is incarnate in every woman) is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love, which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity. (p. 118)

And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed — whether she will or no. And if she has shunned him, the scales fall from her eyes; if she has sought him, her desire finds its peace. (p. 119)

- Woman as the Temptress

The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its master. And the testings of the hero, which were preliminary to his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride. With that he knows that he and the father are one: he is in the father's place. (pp. 120-121)

The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else. (pp. 121-122)

But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, pure soul. . . . The innocent delight of Oedipus in his first possession of the queen turns to an agony of spirit when he learns who the woman is. Like Hamlet, he is beset by the moral image of the father. (p. 122)

Where this Oedipus-Hamlet revulsion remains to beset the soul, there the world, the body, and the woman above all, become the symbols no longer of victory but of defeat. A monastic-puritanical, world—negating ethical system then radically and immediately transfigures all the images of the myth. No longer can the hero rest in innocence with the goddess of the flesh; for she is become the queen of sin. (p. 123)

- Atonement with the Father

Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster — the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult. One must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy. Therewith, the center of belief is transferred outside of the bedeviling god's tight scaly ring, and the dreadful ogres dissolve. (p. 130)

It is in this ordeal that the hero may derive hope and assurance from the helpful female figure, by whose magic (pollen charms or power of intercession) he is protected through all the frightening experiences of the father's ego-shattering initiation. For if it is impossible to trust the terrifying father-face, then one's faith must be centered elsewhere (Spider Woman, Blessed Mother); and with that reliance for support, one endures the crisis — only to find, in the end, that the father and mother reflect each other, and are in essence the same. (pp. 130-131)

The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands — and the two are atoned. (p. 147)

- Apotheosis

Those who know, not only that the Everlasting lies in them, but that what they, and all things, really are is the Everlasting, dwell in the groves of the wish-fulfilling trees, drink

the brew of immortality, and listen everywhere to the unheard music of eternal concord. These are the immortals. (p. 167)

- The Ultimate Boon

The gods and goddesses . . . are to be understood as embodiments and custodians of the elixir of Imperishable Being but not themselves the Ultimate in its primary state. What the hero seeks through his intercourse with them is therefore not finally themselves, but their grace, i.e., the power of their sustaining substance. This miraculous energy-substance and this alone is the Imperishable; the names and forms of the deities who everywhere embody, dispense, and represent it come and go. This is the miraculous energy of the thunderbolts of Zeus, Yahweh, and the Supreme Buddha, the fertility of the rain of Viracocha, the virtue announced by the bell rung in the Mass at the consecration, and the light of the ultimate illumination of the saint and sage. Its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven. (pp. 181-182)

3. Return

- Refusal of the Return

When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet or the ten thousand worlds. (p. 193)

But the responsibility has been frequently refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernal ecstasy. Numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being. (p. 193)

- The Magic Flight

If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess of the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian, or if the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion. (pp. 196-197)

- Rescue from Without

The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him. For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state. . .

. And yet, in so far as one is alive, life will call. Society is jealous of those who remain away from it, and will come knocking at the door. If the hero . . . is unwilling, the disturber suffers an ugly shock; but on the other and, if the summoned one is only delayed — sealed in by the beatitude of the state of perfect being (which resembles death) — an apparent rescue is effected, and the adventurer returns. (p. 207)

- The Crossing of the Return Threshold

How teach again . . . what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand thousand times, throughout the millenniums of mankind's folly? That is the hero's ultimate difficult task. How render back into light-world language the speech-defying pronouncements of the dark? How represent on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional form, or in a three-dimensional image a multi-dimensional meaning? How translate into terms of "yes" and "no" revelations that shatter into meaninglessness every attempt to define the pairs of opposites? How communicate to people who insist on the exclusive evidence of their senses the message of the all-generating void? (p. 218)

Many failures attest to the difficulties of this life-affirmative threshold. The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life. Why re-enter such a world? Why attempt to make plausible, or even interesting, to men and women consumed with passion, the experience of transcendental bliss? . . . The easy thing is to commit the whole community to the devil and retire again into the heavenly rock dwelling, close the door, and make it fast. (p. 218)

The returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world. (p. 225)

- Master of the Two Worlds

Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division . . . is the talent of the master. The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another. It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest. (p. 229)

The meaning is very clear; it is the meaning of all religious practice.; The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. The Law lives in him with his unreserved consent. (pp. 236-237)

- The Freedom to Live

The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he is. "Before Abraham was, I AM." He does not mistake apparent changelessness in time for the permanence of Being, nor is he fearful of the next moment (or of the "other thing"), as

destroying the permanent with its change. . . . Thus the next moment is permitted to come to pass. (p. 243)