

*A Practical Guide to*  
**THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES**  
by Joseph Campbell

*(This is the "Coverage" written by Christopher Vogler that changed Hollywood)*

In the long run, the most influential book of the 20th Century may turn out to be Joseph Campbell's, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (note: This was later converted to a very readable book and very watchable PBS special, [The Power of Myth](#). If you have Netflix, it is available instantly in the documentary section.)

It's certainly true that the book is having a major impact on writing and story-telling, but above all on movie-making. Aware or not, filmmakers like John Boorman, George Miller, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Francis Coppola owe their successes to the ageless pattern that Joseph Campbell identifies in the book.

The ideas in the book are an excellent set of analytical tools.

With them you can compose a story to meet any situation, a story that will be dramatic, entertaining, and psychologically true.

With them you can always determine what's wrong with a story that's floundering, and you can find a better solution to almost any story problem by examining the pattern laid out in the book.

There's nothing new in the book. The ideas in it are older than the Pyramids, older than Stonehenge, older than the earliest cave painting.

Campbell's contribution was to gather the ideas together, recognize them, articulate them, name them. He exposed the pattern for the first time, the pattern that lies behind every story ever told.

Campbell is a mythographer -- he writes about myths. What he discovered in his study of world myths is that THEY ARE ALL BASICALLY THE SAME STORY -- retold endlessly in infinite variation.

He discovered that all story-telling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth, and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the "HERO MYTH"; the "MONOMYTH" whose principles he lays out in the book.

Campbell was a student of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, and the ideas in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* are often described as Jungian.

The book is based on Jung's idea of the "Archetypes" constantly repeating characters who occur in the dreams of all people and the myths of all cultures.

Jung believed that these archetypes are reflections of the human mind -- that our minds divide themselves into these characters to play out the drama of our lives.

The repeating characters of the hero myth, such as the young hero, the wise old man, the shape-shifting woman, and the shadowy nemesis, are identical with the archetypes of the human mind, as shown in dreams. That's why myths, and stories constructed on the mythological model, are always psychologically true.

Such stories are true models of the workings of the human mind, true maps of the psyche. They are psychologically valid and realistic even when they portray fantastic, impossible, unreal events.

This accounts for the universal power of such stories. Stories built on the model of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* have an appeal that can be felt by everyone, because they spring from a universal source in the collective unconscious, and because they reflect universal concerns. They deal with universal questions like "Why was I born?" "What happens when I die?" "How can I overcome my life problems and be happy?"

The ideas in the book can be applied to understanding any human problem. They are a great key to life as well as being a major tool for dealing more effectively with a mass audience.

Christ, Hitler, Mohammed, and Buddha all understood the principles in the book and applied them to influence millions.

If you want to understand the ideas behind the HERO MYTH, there's no substitute for actually reading the book. It's an experience that has a way of changing people. It's also a good idea to read a lot of myths, but it amounts to the same thing since Campbell spends most of the book illustrating his point by re-telling old myths.

Campbell gives a condensed version of the hero myth on p. 245. However, since he uses some specialized technical terms that require going back to his examples in earlier chapters to find out what he's talking about, I've taken the liberty of amending his outline slightly, re-telling the hero myth in my own way. Feel free to do the same. Every story-teller bends the myth to his own purpose. That's why *The Hero has a Thousand Faces*

## **The Stages of the HERO are:**

### **1) THE HERO IS INTRODUCED IN HIS ORDINARY WORLD**

Most stories take place in a special world, a world that is new and alien to its hero. If you're going to tell a story about a fish out of his customary element, you first have to create a contrast by showing him in his mundane, ordinary world. In *WITNESS* you see both the Amish boy and the policeman in their ordinary worlds before they are thrust into alien worlds -- the farmboy into the city, and the city cop into the unfamiliar countryside. In *Star Wars* you see Luke Skywalker bored to death as a farmboy before he takes on the universe.

### **2) THE CALL TO ADVENTURE**

The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure. Maybe the land is dying, as in the Arthur stories about the search for the Holy Grail. In *Star Wars* again, it's Princess Leia's holographic message to Obi Wan Kenobi, who asks Luke to join in the quest. In detective stories, it's the hero accepting a new

case. In romantic comedies it could be the first sight of that special -- but annoying someone the hero or heroine will be pursuing/sparring with the remainder of the story.

### **3) THE HERO IS RELUCTANT AT FIRST**

Often at this point, the hero balks at the threshold of adventure. After all, he or she is facing the greatest of all fears -- fear of the unknown. At this point Luke refuses Obi Wan's call to adventure, and returns to his aunt and uncle's farmhouse, only to find they have been barbed by the Emperor's stormtroopers. Suddenly Luke is no longer reluctant, and is eager to undertake the adventure. He is motivated.

### **4) THE HERO IS ENCOURAGED BY THE WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN**

By this time many stories will have introduced a Merlin-like character who is the hero's mentor. In *JAWS* it's the crusty Robert Shaw character who knows all about sharks; in the mythology of the Mary Tyler Moore Show, it's Lou Grant. The mentor gives advice and sometimes magical weapons. This is Obi Wan Kenobi giving Luke Skywalker his father's light sabre.

The mentor can only go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the unknown by himself. Sometimes the wise old man is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going.

### **5) THE HERO PASSES THE FIRST THRESHOLD**

He fully enters the special world of his story for the first time. This is the moment at which the story takes off and the adventure gets going. The balloon goes up, the romance begins, the plane or spaceship blasts off, the wagon train gets rolling. Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road. The hero is now committed to his journey... and there's no turning back.

### **6) THE HERO ENCOUNTERS TESTS AND HELPERS**

The hero is forced to make allies and enemies in the special world, and to pass certain tests and challenges that are part of his training. In *Star Wars*, the cantina is the setting for the forging of an important alliance with Han Solo, and the start of an important enmity with Jabba The Hut. In *CASABLANCA*, Rick's Cafe is the setting for the "alliances and enmities" phase, and in many westerns it's the saloon where these relationships are established.

The tests and challenges phase is represented in *Star Wars* by the scene of Obi Wan teaching Luke about the Force, as Luke is made to learn by fighting blindfolded. The early laser battles with the Imperial Fighters are another test which Luke passes successfully.

### **7) THE HERO REACHES THE INNERMOST CAVE**

The hero comes at last to a dangerous place, often deep underground, where the object of his quest is hidden. In the Arthurian stories the Chapel Perilous is the dangerous chamber where the seeker finds the Grail. In many myths the hero has to descend into hell to retrieve a loved one, or into a cave to fight a dragon and gain a treasure. It's Theseus going into the Labyrinth to face the Minotaur. In *Star Wars* it's Luke and company being sucked into the Death Star where they will rescue Princess Leia. Sometimes it's

the hero entering the headquarters of his nemesis; and sometimes it's just the hero going into his or her own dream world to confront his or her worst fears... and overcome them.

## **8) THE HERO ENDURES THE SUPREME ORDEAL**

This is the moment at which the hero touches bottom. He faces the possibility of death, brought to the brink in a fight with a mythical beast. For us, the audience standing outside the cave waiting for the victor to emerge, it's a black moment. In *Star Wars*, it's the harrowing moment in the bowels of the Death Star, where Luke, Leia and company are trapped in the giant trash-masher. Luke is pulled under by the tentacled monster that lives in the sewage, and is held down so long the audience begins to wonder if he's dead. E.T. momentarily appears to die on the operating table.

This is a critical moment in any story, an ordeal in which the hero appears to die and is born again. It's a major source of the magic of the hero myth. What happens is that the audience has been led to identify with the hero. We are encouraged to experience the brink-of-death feeling with the hero. We are temporarily depressed, and then we are revived by the hero's return from death.

This is the magic of any well-designed amusement park thrill ride. Space Mountain or The Great White Knuckler make the passengers feel like they're going to die, and there's a great thrill that comes from surviving a moment like that. This is also the trick of rites of passage and rites of initiation into fraternities and secret societies. The initiate is forced to taste death and experience resurrection. You're never more alive than when you think you're going to die.

## **9) THE HERO SEIZES THE SWORD**

Having survived death, beaten the dragon, slain the Minotaur, the hero now takes possession of the treasure he's come seeking. Sometimes it's a special weapon like a magic sword, or it may be a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land.

Sometimes the "sword" is knowledge and experience that leads to greater understanding and a reconciliation with hostile forces.

The hero may settle a conflict with his father or with his shadowy nemesis. In *Return of the Jedi*, Luke is reconciled with both, as he discovers that the dying Darth Vader is his father, and not such a bad guy after all.

The hero may also be reconciled with a woman. Often she is the treasure he's come to win or rescue, and there is often a love scene or sacred marriage at this point. Women in these stories (or men if the hero is female) tend to be SHAPE-SHIFTERS. They appear to change in form or age, reflecting the confusing and constantly changing aspects of the opposite sex as seen from the hero's point of view. The hero's supreme ordeal may grant him a better understanding of women, leading to a reconciliation with the opposite sex.

## **10) THE ROAD BACK**

The hero's not out of the woods yet. Some of the best chase scenes come at this point, as the hero is pursued by the vengeful forces from whom he has stolen the elixir or the treasure. This is the chase as

Luke and friends escape from the Death Star, with Princess Leia and the plans that will bring down Darth Vader.

If the hero has not yet managed to reconcile with his father or the gods, they may come raging after him at this point. This is the moonlight bicycle flight of Elliott and E.T. as they escape from "Keys" (Peter Coyote), a force representing governmental authority. By the end of the movie, Keys and Elliott have been reconciled, and it even looks like Keys will end up as Elliott's father. (The script not the final cut, guys).

## **11) RESURRECTION**

The hero emerges from the special world, transformed by his experience. There is often a replay here of the mock death-and-rebirth of stage 8, as the hero once again faces death and survives. Each ordeal wins him new command over the Force. He is transformed into a new being by his experience.

## **12) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR**

The hero comes back to his ordinary world, but his adventure would be meaningless unless he brought back the elixir, treasure, or some lesson from the special world. Sometimes it's just knowledge or experience, but unless he comes back with the elixir or some boon to mankind, he's doomed to repeat the adventure until he does. Many comedies use this ending, as a foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place.

Sometimes the boon is treasure won on the quest, or love, or just the knowledge that the special world exists and can be survived. Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell.

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## **THE SHORT FORM OF THE HERO STORY:**

The hero is introduced in his ordinary world, where he receives the call to adventure. He is reluctant at first but is encouraged by the wise old man or woman to cross the first threshold, where he encounters tests and helpers. He reaches the innermost cave, where he endures the supreme ordeal. He seizes the sword or the treasure and is pursued on the road back to his world. He is resurrected and transformed by his experience. He returns to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or elixir to benefit his world.

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As with any formula, there are pitfalls to be avoided. Following the guidelines of myth too rigidly can lead to a stiff, unnatural structure, and there is danger of being too obvious.

The HERO MYTH is a skeleton that should be masked with the details of the individual story, and the structure should not call attention to itself. The order of the hero's stages as given here is only one of many variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically reshuffled without losing their power.

The values of the myth are what's important. The images of the basic version -- young heroes seeking magic swords from old wizards, fighting evil dragons in deep caves, etc., -- are just symbols, and

can be changed infinitely to suit the story at hand.

The myth is easily translated to contemporary dramas, comedies, romances, or action-adventures by substituting modern equivalents for the symbolic figures and props of the hero story. The Wise Old Man may be a real shaman or Wizard, but he can also be any kind of mentor or teacher, doctor or therapist, crusty but benign boss, tough but fair top sergeant, parent, grandfather, etc. Modern heroes may not be going into caves and labyrinths to fight their mythical beasts, but they do enter an innermost cave by going into space, to the bottom of the sea, into their own minds, or into the depths of a modern city.

The myth can be used to tell the simplest comic book story or the most sophisticated drama. It grows and matures as new experiments are tried within its basic framework. Changing the sex and ages of the basic characters only makes it more interesting, and allows ever more complex webs of understanding to be spun among them. The basic characters can be combined, or divided into several figures to show different aspects of the same idea. The myth is infinitely flexible, capable of endless variation without sacrificing any of its magic.

And it will outlive us all.

Adapted from coverage by Christopher Vogler

Recommended books by Christopher Vogler

[The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers](#)

[Memo from the Story Department: Secrets of Structure and Character](#)