

MONTHLY MOVIES

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From mythology to monomyth: The journey of the Hero's Journey

By T. Rob Brown

At the heart of most films is an important concept known as character growth. It centers around the cycles of life and the stages of those cycles we all travel through as we age.

From birth to death, our lives move in cycles of growth, experience, learning and change. Without these ideas, a film becomes bland and feels fake or boring. There's a reason for this.

Back in 1949, a professor of literature, who focused on comparative literature and comparative religion, released a book about this very concept. In "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," Joseph Campbell identifies the key concepts of mythology that existed back in the days of early humanity all the way to the present.

In this, he concludes that our heroes never truly changed throughout history. The stories we tell actually reflect our collective unconsciousness, which crosses cultural boundaries. Is Superman really all that different from Atlas? How about the Flash compared to Mercury or Hermes? Today's mythologies reflect ancient ones.

It doesn't matter if you're reading ancient Greek mythology and the tales of Zeus, ancient Norse mythology and the wisdom of Odin or ancient Polynesian mythology and the adventures of Māui—each of these stories serve the same purpose.

The purpose of mythology, and storytelling in general, is to teach us life lessons, or morals, we will need to survive our ordeals and move on to the next phase of life. This forms the essence of character growth in stories.

Campbell noted in his work that this cycle reflects our distant past before we even had civilization. Ancient tribes sent hunters out to do the dirty work of slaying animals so the tribe would have food and furs for clothing and blankets. Without this, the tribe would surely die in the harsh winters.

Tribes also sent out warriors for the even dirtier job of slaying those who would threaten their way of life. Leaving their "Ordinary World," the journey of the hunters and warriors led them to learn life's lessons to survive the "Special World" away from the tribe. Through their ordeals, they would become heroes to the tribe.

The drawback of the hero is that sometimes they get blood on their hands in pursuit of food or to fend off deadly threats. They must then be cleansed to return to the tribe. But their ordeals helped them seize some boon and bring back an elixir that will heal the land, often in the form of life-giving food and life-saving warmth from furs. Not unlike today's soldiers, heroes need time to reintegrate back into the Ordinary World after everything they've encountered and experienced while protecting their country.

One of Campbell's biggest and most well-known students was director George Lucas. No, he didn't study with him directly. But Lucas, as an anthropology student, grew in fascination for Campbell's work. By the 1970s, the work was commonly referred to as "The Hero's Journey."

Young Lucas found inspiration from it and used it to create his own formula for award-winning and lucrative cinema franchises like Star Wars and Indiana Jones. Through his friendship with fellow cinema student Steven Spielberg, they both embraced these ideas as they began their careers. Lucas understood that character growth and change were the focus of great stories and that the Hero's Journey would best help him tell those stories.

For most fans and practitioners of the Hero's Journey, "Star Wars" is considered its prime example. For the 1977 classic, Lucas focused on the journey of Luke Skywalker from a farm boy in the desert wastes of Tatooine to a Jedi in training. For these examples, I will be using the modified version of the Hero's Journey, according to author Christopher Vogler. Vogler's work "The Writer's Journey" (1992) is based on Campbell's and modernized it.

Vogler wrote for Disney, most notably on "The Lion King" (1994) animated film, and wrote a seven-page studio memo for the House of Mouse titled "A Practical Guide to the Hero with a Thousand Faces." He later expanded that idea into "The Writer's Journey."

In the beginning of "Star Wars," we see Luke on his farm. This establishes the first stage of the Hero's Journey: The Ordinary World, which Campbell originally called "The World of Common Day." Here, Luke whines about not getting to hang out with his friends and wanting to be a space pilot and go off to the academy but his uncle reminds him that he's told him before that he needs him there for the harvest. This is Luke's Status Quo, his everyday life.

Next, there is a catalyst—often called the Inciting Incident by filmmakers—when something happens that changes the hero's world. Campbell called this "The Call to Adventure." For Luke, this is when he first

meets R2-D2 and encounters the holographic message from Princess Leia. The Call to Adventure continues as R2 runs away and Luke goes after him and gets saved from the Tusken Raiders, or Sand People, by Obi-Wan "Ben" Kenobi.

The stage after this is usually called "Refusal of the Call." This is when, typically because of fear, the hero refuses the Call to Adventure. Obi-Wan asks Luke to join him and learn the ways of the Force but Luke refuses at first.

"I'm not going to Alderaan," he responds. "I've gotta get *home*. It's late. I'm in for it as it is." He proceeds to give several reasons as to why he can't go. He's afraid.

All of this overlaps with the next stage known as "The Meeting with the Mentor." The Mentor is one of the key character archetypes in the Hero's Journey. This character is based on one from Greek mythology actually called Mentor in Homer's "The Odyssey" and another called Chiron, the centaur. The role of the mentor is to give gifts, often magical, to impart wisdom and advice to the young hero.

In "Star Wars," Obi-Wan gives Luke his father's lightsaber and provides him with knowledge and advice. Later, he even begins to train him in the ways of the Force aboard the *Millennium Falcon* freighter.

Following the Inciting Incident, filmmakers like to include something even bigger called the Big Event. For Luke, this is when he finds his aunt's and uncle's smoldering corpses and then tells Obi-Wan there's nothing left for him there. Campbell calls this the acceptance of the call, but it doesn't really have its own stage in the journey.

Next, the hero begins the journey and leaves the Ordinary World in a stage called Crossing the First Threshold. The hero enters the Special World of the story and must learn its rules and ways in order to survive. This is when Luke gets to Mos Eisley spaceport.

"You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy," Obi-Wan tells Luke as they look upon the spaceport from a scenic overlook. "We must be cautious." Intentionally, I've stood at that exact same point in Death Valley where they shot the scene.

There, they begin the stage known as "Tests, Enemies and Allies." They make friends with Han Solo and Chewbacca the Wookiee as they hire them to fly off Tatooine. They also make enemies of Stormtroopers (Threshold Guardians) and aggressive cantina patrons. Luke begins to learn the rules of the Special World as they are tested many times.

The next stage is called "The Approach to the Inmost Cave." For Luke, this is when they approach the Death Star near the remains of Alderaan. They encounter a TIE fighter before getting pulled into a tractor beam to the giant space station. "That's no moon!"

After the approach, they enter the inmost cave in a stage called "The Ordeal." Here, Luke and the gang goes into Cell Block 11A to rescue Princess Leia and ends up in a firefight with Stormtroopers. As a result, they then end up in the deepest, darkest part of the Death Star. Luke nearly dies in the trash compactor when a strange aquatic creature known as the dianoga attempts to pull him under.

The Ordeal is also called the Midpoint of the story and usually involves some type of death or near-death experience. Campbell defines the hero as one who survives death. It's at this part of the story when our hero truly becomes the hero of the story. Sometimes this scene even uses symbolism like baptism to show a rebirth. Luke rises from the waters of the trash compactor, born again.

Having rescued the princess and discovered that the secret Death Star plans are hidden in R2, the team has now “Seized the Sword,” another term, for the stage called “The Reward.”

But it’s not over yet. They upset the balance and awoke the forces of the opposition. As they attempt to flee the Death Star in the stage known as “The Road Back,” they are chased by TIE fighters. Typically, this stage is a chase scene but not always. At the end of this stage, the hero usually returns to the Ordinary World.

The “Resurrection” is what filmmakers often call the Climax of the film. For Luke, the climax is the Battle of Yavin, which costs the life of his best friend, Biggs Darklighter. The specific part of the climax called “The Resurrection” is when Vader’s TIE fighter closes in on Luke’s X-wing and Vader’s fingers hover over the firing button, Luke in his crosshairs and he says, “I have you now.” For a moment, we believe Luke is a goner. His resurrection occurs when Han Solo’s starship appears and fires on the TIE fighters. The climax ends when Luke blows up the Death Star.

The final stage of the Hero’s Journey is called “The Return with the Elixir.” Filmmakers often call this the Realization and/or the Denouement. This is when all of the loose ends of the story are wrapped up, all subplots are finalized or at least referenced, the hero realizes what they learned on the journey and most importantly, the hero brings back an “elixir,” which will heal the broken world.

For Luke, this includes the awards ceremony—which incidentally ignores Chewbacca’s efforts when he is denied a medal—and the realization that the “elixir” is right in the title of the film: “A New Hope.” By destroying the most powerful battle station in the galaxy, Luke brought back hope to a galaxy filled with fear. We see that hope spread into “The Empire Strikes Back” (1980) and “Return of the Jedi” (1983) as the ragtag Rebellion fleet grows and grows.

You’ll probably never watch a movie the same way ever again.

“Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope,” rated PG, was written and directed by George Lucas and features Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker), Harrison Ford (Han Solo), Carrie Fisher (Princess Leia), Sir Alec Guinness (Obi-Wan Kenobi), Peter Cushing (Grand Moff Tarkin), and James Earl Jones (voice of Darth Vader). It received a 92% Tomatometer score and a 96% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 8.6/10 on the International Movie Database.

“The show must go on.”