

The Hero Cycle

A Pattern of Character Development
In Literature and Life

Stories are Patterns of Transformation

Beginning (where we meet the character and learn about his/her goal or problem)

Middle (where the character overcomes obstacles in order to work toward the goal)

End (where the character faces the final and most difficult obstacle and either succeeds or fails and returns as a changed person)

The Archetype of the Hero: The Monomyth

Joseph Campbell (1904 - 1987) was an American professor, lecturer and writer, known for his work with mythology, religion and folklore from around the world. He helped people to understand the Hero Archetype and its universal influence.

The Archetype of the Hero: The Monomyth

The Hero Archetype tells the story of a character who goes from an ordinary, (often unsatisfactory) life in a familiar community to an unknown region (or unfamiliar experience) in order to achieve a goal. In working toward the goal, the hero / heroine usually gains insight or understanding and returns to the familiar community with a way to make things better (or at least different) for everyone. Because this archetype is found in every culture and continues to influence stories today, it is often called the monomyth

The Hero Archetype: A Process

1. The Known World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. The Separation Through a Threshold
4. Meeting a Mentor
5. The Road of Tests and Trials
6. The Belly of the Whale
7. The Return

Part 1: THE KNOWN WORLD

- **Ordinary Experiences** (Note “ordinary” is a relative term. If the hero lives on planet Edrabubba, where it always rains maple syrup and carnivorous unicorns are common, then that’s ordinary for her, even if it isn’t for you.)
- Often The Hero Does Not Fit In
- Often the Hero is unhappy in his/her world, has difficulty with others in the community or is not reaching his / her potential

The Hero in the Known World

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy is bored and unhappy with dreary Kansas. She loves her family, but she wants more out of life than farming. She is also victimized by a mean old woman who wants to take away Dorothy's dog.

Shrek believes he is happy living alone in his swamp, but he is isolated. He has no friends and no one to care about or who cares about him. He is often persecuted by people with torches and pitchforks, simply because he's an ogre. Where Dorothy is unhappy in her situation, Shrek seems content with his.

Katniss misses her father, resenting her mother and protecting her sister. She scrapes by living a hard life in District 12, fearing the annual Hunger Games and hating (but tolerating) the Capitol. She hunts to get extra food for her family and she and her best friend / boyfriend? Gale talk about running away to find a better life, but she is resigned to maintaining the status quo.

THE KNOWN WORLD: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of main characters in the beginning of their own stories. What are their lives like? How do they feel about their situation?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

How does this character feel about his / her home? Relationships? Status in the community? The rules under which he or she lives?

Consider this...

Describe some of situations in the real world experience where they are in a familiar situation, but perhaps long for something different?

Ex.: Going to the first day of school or at a new school. Going from elementary to middle school or middle to high school or high school to college, work or the military. Starting a new job or a new relationship or joining a new club or a team or taking a trip

Part 2: The Call To Adventure

Something happens to pull the hero out of the known world and into a strange, new world.

The Call To Adventure

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy gets swept into a tornado. She leaves dreary, black and white Kansas and finds herself in brightly colored Munchkinland. She really has gone “Over the Rainbow.”

Shrek finds that his lonely swamp has been taken over by refugee fairy tale creatures who want to use his swamp as a new home. To get his peace and quiet back he has to leave the swamp to see Prince Farquaad.

Katniss probably would have continued hunting with Gale and quietly hating the Capitol except her sister, Prim, gets selected for the Hunger Games. Certain that Prim will die if she goes, Katniss volunteers as tribute and goes to fight in the Hunger Games herself. She has no expectation that she will return.

The Call to Adventure: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? What motivates them to start? Do they get a letter? An invitation? Do they meet someone new? Do they move to a new place? Do they find out about something they want or need to find or accomplish?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

How does this character get started on his / her adventure?

Consider this...

Describe some of the reasons why people in the real world go through a change.

Ex.: Graduation, getting or losing a job, moving, death, disease or divorce. Wanting to achieve a particular goal, meet or find a particular person or object, bucket list, see a famous place or visit a former home or homeland?

Part 3: The Separation

- The Hero must leave his/her world to answer the call.
- The Hero will cross a gateway, threshold or doorway.

The Separation through the Threshold

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy looks out of the front door of her house. Inside is black and white and familiar. Outside is all color and strange houses and plants and eventually Munchkins. Mmm. Munchkins. Later, she must cross other thresholds: The gate of Emerald City and the Gate of the Wicked Witch's fortress. The pattern repeats; that's why it's a cycle.

Shrek barely fits through the subway turnstile that gets him into Farquaad's kingdom. As soon as he crosses, he starts to see and hear strange things such as the puppets that sing the welcome song.

Katniss crosses many thresholds as she gets deeper into her story. First she gets on a high speed train to the Capitol. Everything is luxurious and waaay different from District 12. To get from the training center to the Hunger Games arena, Katniss goes into a glass elevator tube. When that tube opens, her life is immediately in danger.

Separation Through a Threshold: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? What doors, gates, tunnels, barriers, borders etc. do they cross.

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

Once the character crosses, how does the setting / other characters seem different?

Consider this...

Describe some of thresholds people cross in the real world.

Ex.: Door to a new school or new job. Gates of a military base, an airplane, train or boat. An airport or port. The Lincoln Tunnel, The Golden Gate Bridge

Part 4: Meeting A Mentor

The hero usually has much to learn. The adventure quest is how the hero learns it. But the hero also needs some help.

The hero meets someone, a teacher or guide, who gives him/her the tools that are needed.

THESE TOOLS CAN BE ACTUAL OBJECTS,
PLANS OF ACTION or a new way of thinking.
Or all three and then some.

Meeting a Mentor

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy gets magic shoes from Glinda, the Good Witch of the North. The shoes are supposed to protect Dorothy from the Wicked Witch's magic. She also gives her a plan of action: Follow the Yellow Brick Road and Find the Wizard.

Donkey is not only Shrek's partner, he's Shrek's mentor. Donkey helps Shrek to find a new understanding about relationships and Donkey helps Shrek to acknowledge that he does not really want to be alone anymore.

Katniss gets several mentors who help her in various ways. Haymitch, who teaches her about surviving in the games, Cinna who gives her what she needs to be popular with the people and Effie who gives her insight into what people from the Capitol are really like.

Meeting a Mentor: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? Who helps them? What kinds of help do they get? A tool? A weapon? A Map? Information? Advice or Guidance?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

Once the character meets a mentor, how does it effect the hero? Does the hero change in some way? If so, how?

Consider this...

Describe some of the real world mentors people meet such as teachers, coaches, religious leaders, older siblings, bosses, trainers, friends, etc.

What kinds of help or advice to these mentors often give? What should people do with this help or advice? Why?

PART 5: The Road of Trials and Tests

The Road of Trials is paved with hardship.

- Extraordinary Experiences
- Trials and tests
- Challenges to be met
- Competitors to be bested
- Obstacles to be overcome

The Road of Trials

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy has to survive the dangers of the journey to Emerald City and then, once she's there, she learns that she has to destroy the Wicked Witch before the Wizard will help her. Along the way she learns a lot about courage, friendship, loyalty and trust. She also learns that not everyone is what they seem to be at first.

Shrek has to face-off against a dragon to rescue a princess and then bring her safely to Prince Farquaad. Along the way, Shrek learns a lot about courage, friendship, loyalty and trust. He also learns that not everyone is what they seem to be at first. Hmm... that sounds familiar.

Katniss experiences pain, brutality and hardship, fighting for survival and witnessing the violent deaths of other kids; some friends and some enemies. The experience changes her until she totally transforms from Katniss to the Mockingjay.

The Road of Trials: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? What difficult tasks do they have to complete? What dangerous places do they have to navigate safely? What tests must the hero pass?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

Once the character begins to complete a task, what obstacles does he or she face? How does the skill, object or lesson from the mentor help the hero complete the task?

Consider this...

Describe some of real world tests people have to experience. Are these ever considered a “rite of passage”?

Ex.: school exams, SAT/ACT Medical Exam, Bar Exam, driving test, training program, auditioning for a show, trying out for a band gang initiation, fraternity / sorority initiation, trying out for a team, solving a big problem, creating a promposal?

Part 6: The Belly of the Whale

The Hero Archetype is not only about action in the physical world, it is also about emotional and spiritual growth. The hero changes during the course of the adventure. In order to build something new, the old thing often needs to change or even be destroyed!

The Belly of the Whale

Out with the old and in with the new! The Hero arrives at a situation where his or her old habits no longer work. Through the aid of the mentor and through his or her own actions, the hero has learned. For the final test, the hero must use these new skills or understandings. The hero must evolve into something better or perish!

The Belly of the Whale

Examples:

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy finds herself alone and in the power of the Wicked Witch. her time is running out. In that moment, she sees (literally) what is really important to her and she learns a key lesson. After that she has the strength to complete her quest.

Shrek has cut himself off from Donkey and Fiona and is isolated once again in his swamp. At the beginning he thought this was what he wanted, but after the adventure and all his conversations with Donkey, he has learned to see his solitary life differently.

Katniss finds herself near death in a tomb-like cave with Peeta who himself is nearly dead. Amid all this underworld imagery, Katniss learns her true feelings and gains the insight she needs about how to beat the Capital at the Hunger Games. She transforms (symbolically) into the Mockingjay and becomes something more than just Katniss Everdeen.

The Belly of the Whale: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? At what point in the story does all hope seem lost? Does the quest seem to have failed? Are they alone or nearly alone? Have they made some terrible mistake?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

What difficult thing do they have to do or what important lesson do they have to learn to get out of an apparently hopeless situation?

Consider this...

Describe some of real world situations where people stop being one thing in order to become something new. Or when a person makes significant life or lifestyle changes in order to do something new.

Ex: addicts who “hit rock bottom” and realize they have lost everything and need treatment or when a single person gives up being single to start a new relationship.

PART 7: The Return

- The Hero completes (or fails to complete) the task and returns with a new outlook
- Often the hero has accomplished or found something that helps others in his / her community.
- The Hero's standing in the community or his / her understanding of his / place in the community has changed.
- The hero matures or gains self-awareness or insight into others.

The Return

Examples (warning-- Spoilers!):

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy returns home with a new appreciation for her friends and family and a new strength to stand up for herself. Also, the Wizard gives out rewards.

Shrek joins the larger community and his his lonely swamp becomes a loving home.

In the Hunger Games, Katniss returns with a new appreciation for her Mother (who has become stronger in her absence) and with a new, more complex understanding about her feelings for Gale and for Peeta. She also inspires others to challenge the status quo of the Capitol's rule and the Hunger Games themselves.

The Return: On Your Own

Think of your own examples of characters from stories or movies? Once they have completed or failed to complete their task, do they return to the place where they started? Have they changed? Have their relationships changed? Does their community acknowledge their efforts? Have they become more or less empathetic, loyal or compassionate?

Brainstorm a few character from movies or stories you know.

When their quest is over, how are they different? How is their life different? Do they have new items or new knowledge? How has their community changed?

Consider this...

Describe some of real world situations where people undergo a significant event (a big trip, a move, death, disease, divorce, a new job, etc.) and must grow or change, becoming more insightful or more empathetic or wiser.

The Hero Archetype: Separation, Initiation, Return

The hero in the Known World. Everything is familiar and status quo, but everyone is not necessarily happy -- especially the hero.

The Call to Adventure

Crossing a Threshold to the Unknown, separation from the Known World.

Beginning

Return with knowledge or items that benefit the whole community

Middle

End

Death and Rebirth in the Belly of the Whale: Hero is alone and must use what he / she learned on the journey to transform or die.

Series of increasingly challenging tasks, tests, trials the hero must complete. In doing so, the hero gains experience and knowledge of self and of the world.

Meet a Mentor

Initiation: Trial by Fire

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

The entire Hero's Journey Archetype is contained in the life of a caterpillar.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

1. The Known World: The caterpillar starts out in an egg. Relatively safe. Its needs are met. But it's cramped and confined and the caterpillar is meant for bigger things.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

2. The Call to Adventure: When it's time, the caterpillar needs to come out of that egg and "fulfill its destiny," so it has to hatch.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

3. Separation Through a Threshold: The caterpillar hatches out of its egg. As soon as it crosses the barrier of the egg, the world is a larger, more complex and potentially more dangerous place, but it is also more rewarding than life in the confines of the egg. If the caterpillar never came out of its egg, it would eventually die.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

4. Meeting a Mentor: A caterpillar does not have a mentor the way a human hero does, but hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary biology and genetic information that has been passed to it guide the caterpillar in its quest for food and safety.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

5. The Road of Trials: The caterpillar has to find enough to eat, gathering its strength while avoiding being eaten by predators or getting squashed, drowned, trapped, or any of a million things that can go wrong in the life of a caterpillar.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

6. Belly of the Whale: The caterpillar goes into a cocoon (a tomb-like, death-like state) where it completely transforms. The caterpillar literally disintegrates into goo until it is totally unrecognizable as its former self, and then it is “reborn” as something better: a butterfly.

The Hero's Journey for a Caterpillar

7. The Return: The caterpillar has transformed into a butterfly. It is beautiful to look at and it pollinates flowers, so its transformation is a benefit to others. As it reaches maturity, the butterfly will reproduce and start the cycle over again.

The Hero's Journey

Consider this:

How is a human's journey from womb to adulthood similar to a caterpillar's? How do both natural cycles reflect the Hero Archetype?

Next time you read a story or
watch a movie,

Look for the Hero Archetype Pattern.

And don't forget to look for that same
pattern in real life as well!