

The Hero with a Thousand Faces and its Application to Star Wars by Douglas Mann, from my book *Understanding Society* (Oxford UP, 2008)

The American theorist of myths Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) argues in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/1968) that there is a common underlying, unconscious structure behind all religion and myth. Myth is:

... the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historical man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. (1968: 3)

Just as dreams play out in fantastic landscapes the unconscious problems of the dreamer, myths play out on a much vaster field the collective problems of humanity (19).

Campbell convincingly argues that all the great mythical sagas are basically one story, the *monomyth*. This monomyth is the Hero's Journey, which has a rough-and-ready common structure of stages in myths taken from a wide variety of cultures. It is the quest saga, the same story told in Greek myths like Jason and the Golden Fleece and Odysseus's journey, in the legends of King Arthur and the Round Table, in the ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, the Irish legends of Finn McCool, even in the story of the Buddha (not to mention hundreds of tribal myths from all over the world). Campbell got this idea of an unconscious myth from Carl Jung's notion of cultural archetypes and of the *collective unconscious*, which he felt provided the foundation of mythological thinking in a great diversity of cultures. He mixed in a hefty dose of both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis in his work, seeing the hero's journey as a simultaneous journey of the ego to achieve oneness with the world, to overcome its fears of both id and superego, of the seductive Mother and the ogre-like Father. Campbell doesn't talk much about being influenced by French structuralist theory, though the monomyth is a clearly attempt to find an underlying structure beneath the many surface manifestations of the story of the great quest found throughout the world.

The journey has three major parts to it - Departure, Initiation, and Return, each with a number of subsections. In its shortest form, the hero ventures out from his common world into a supernatural one, encounters and defeats strange and magical forces arrayed against him, and returns to his ordinary world with a marvelous boon for his comrades at home (30). The hero cycle also contains a number of familiar repeated characters - the hero (obviously), a mentor, a villain (who Campbell sometimes calls the "dragon"), a goddess (sometimes also a mother figure), magic potions or forces, helpers, sometimes a rogue, and jesters or tricksters. They also feature the struggle of Good versus Evil, Light versus Darkness. Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey can be applied to the original *Star Wars* movie, and to an extent the whole original trilogy. Indeed, *Star Wars'* creator George Lucas was an admirer of Joseph Campbell, and consciously patterned the *Star Wars* saga on the Hero's Journey. This use of a universal archetype of myth explains why *Star Wars* was so popular, since it appealed to our unconscious patterns of thought. Below is a chart applying the archetypal characters and stages in the hero's journey to three films which fit Campbell's model rather well: *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Oh Brother, Where Art*

Thou?¹ It no doubt fits many others, including *The Lord of the Rings*. Campbell would argue that these films are successful in part because they draw on mythic archetypes of the monomyth lodged deep in our unconscious minds. As it turns out, structuralism is big box office. Given the power of mass media over our lives, this is a fact that social theory can't afford to ignore.

Table 1. The Hero's Journey

| Character/Stage in the Hero's Journey | <i>Star Wars</i> (1977) | <i>The Matrix</i> (1999) | <i>Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (2000) |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Hero | Luke Skywalker | Neo | Ulysses Everett McGill |
| Mentor (Magician) | Obi-Wan (later Yoda) | Morpheus | Blind Railwayman |
| Goddess | Princess Leia | Trinity | Penelope McGill |
| Villain (the Dragon) | Darth Vader | Agent Smith | Sheriff Cooley |
| Rogue | Han Solo | Tank or Cypher | Pete Hogwaller |
| Jesters & Tricksters | Chewbacca, droids | Mouse | Delmar O'Donnell |
| Magical Power | The Force (dark & light) | Control of the Matrix | Music |
| <i>Stages in the Hero's Journey</i> | | | |
| 1. Call to Adventure | Luke watches holo-recording from Princess Leia asking for help | Trinity hacks into Neo's computer with warning: "Wake up Neo" | Everett, Pete and Delmar escape from the chain gang |
| 2. Refusal of Call | Luke feels he has to help with the harvest | Neo reluctant to go with his friends to the club | |
| 3. Supernatural Aid | Obi-Wan rescues Luke from the sandpeople | Morpheus's magic phone call, later tells Neo that his world is an illusion | Blind railwayman offers them a prophecy (=Tiresias in Homer) |
| 4. Crossing of the First Threshold | Luke's aunt & uncle killed, Luke leaves Tatooine | Neo takes the red pill, leaves the Matrix | Trio visits cousin Washington's farm |
| 5. The Belly of the Whale | Trio trapped in garbage compactor | Neo captured by agents OR Neo ejected into underground wet cavern | Trio trapped in burning barn by Sheriff |
| 6. Road of Trials | Light-saber practise, rescue of Leia | Neo undergoes training, meets Oracle, battles three agents | Encounters with Big Dan (=Cyclops in Homer) and Baby Face Nelson |
| 7. Meeting with the Goddess | Luke meets Princess Leia | Neo meets Trinity in dance club | The meeting with Penny (Penelope), Everett's wife, later in the film |
| 8. Woman as Temptress | Not literal: Luke is tempted by the dark side in <i>Empire Strikes Back</i> | [Cypher tempted by the promise of oblivious pleasure in the Matrix] | The sirens tempt our heroes, turn Pete into a frog? (=Circe in Homer) |
| 9. Atonement with the Father | "Luke, I am your father" in <i>Empire Strikes Back</i> | Neo returns to the Matrix to save Morpheus from the agents | |
| 10. Apotheosis | Luke becomes a Jedi in <i>Return of the Jedi</i> | Neo killed by agents, resurrected by Trinity's love, now invincible | Trio records song "Man of Constant Sorrow" as Soggy Bottom Boys |
| 11. The Ultimate Boon | The Death Star is destroyed (out of order) | Vaguely, the destruction of the Matrix (not resolved in first film) | Supposedly bank heist money, but really Penny and 7 Wharvey gals |

¹ Joel and Ethan Coen, who wrote and directed *Oh Brother*, explicitly acknowledge Homer's *Odyssey* as the inspiration for their film. The fact that the hero's name is "Ulysses" makes this connection obvious.

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| 12. The Refusal of the Return | Luke wants to stay to avenge Obi-Wan during shoot-out in docking bay | Neo stays in the virtual subway station to battle Agent Smith | |
| 13. The Magic Flight | The <i>Millennium Falcon</i> escapes from Death Star, pursued by fighters | Vaguely, Neo's running battle with the agents in last third of film | The rescue of Tommy from the Klan, escape from angry Klansmen |
| 14. Rescue from Without | The <i>Millennium Falcon</i> shows up during the battle, saves Luke | Perhaps Neo's being resurrected by Trinity's kiss | Governor Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel pardons trio after song |
| 15. Crossing the Final Threshold | The <i>Millennium Falcon</i> fights a running battle with TIE fighters | Neo "kills" the three agents after his apotheosis | Caught by Sheriff, about to be hung, saved by the Great Flood (cow on roof) |
| 16. Master of Both Worlds | Luke destroys the Death Star; the force is with him | Trinity's love has saved the physical Neo, and he has become the "One" | "Ulysses" freed from prison and gets his family back |
| 17. Freedom to Live | Victory ceremony at end of <i>Star Wars</i> (or the defeat of the empire in <i>Return</i>) | Neo back in Matrix at end, his phone call prophesies revolution | "Ulysses" is free to live a normal life |

Now we'll analyse the seventeen stages in the hero's journey in detail, referring to the original *Star Wars* (1977), and to a lesser degree the other two films in the foundational trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), as examples of how the monomyth lives on in contemporary cinema. George Lucas, the director and writer of the original film and co-writer of the second and third installments in the saga, has on several occasions admitted to being influenced by Campbell's work; Campbell has returned the favour in interviews by commenting on how Lucas's films embody the monomyth.

I. Departure

1. The Call to Adventure: The call to adventure is the point in the future hero's life when he is told that things are about to change radically. He is called to adventure and to leave his home by some herald or message.² Sometimes it's mere chance or a blunder which starts his journey. The call leads him to a dark forest, an underground kingdom, a secret island, or some other hidden place where the adventure takes place (58). In *Star Wars*, the call comes when the young hero of the movie, Luke Skywalker, discovers Princess Leia's holographic call for help in the memory banks of a discarded droid (R2-D2). Luke lives on Tatooine, a desert planet where he, his aunt and uncle eke out a meager living. He's bored and looks forward to leaving.

2. Refusal of the Call: Sometimes after the call to adventure is given, the hero is reluctant or refuses to heed it. This may be from a sense of duty or some obligation, a fear of the new world that looms before him, or some other reason that holds him in place. In *Star Wars*, this is when Luke tells Obi-Wan that he can't leave his aunt and uncle, who need help with the harvest. But after Imperial storm troopers murder them, he feels free to leave.

3. Supernatural Aid: Once the hero has decided to go on the quest, a mentor or guide with special powers appears to aid him. The helper gives the hero magical aids,

² I refer to the hero as male to reflect the fact that almost all mythical heroes were men.

amulets, talismans, or weapons. The helper is usually a wise old man, like Merlin in the Arthur sagas, Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, or Obi-Wan in *Star Wars*. In the latter, Obi-Wan Kenobi, a former Jedi (a knight with supernatural powers based on the Force), rescues Luke from the sandpeople raiders and gives him his father's light-saber (the equivalent of Excalibur in the King Arthur legends). He also starts to teach Luke about the Force, the "magical" power of the *Star Wars* universe. After Obi-Wan's death, Yoda becomes Luke's new mentor, training him to become a Jedi on the swamp planet of Dagobah.

4. *The Crossing of the First Threshold:* The hero now ventures forth into the unknown, leaving his old world behind. Beyond the threshold there is darkness and danger - Columbus' men believed there to be mermaids and sea monsters in the Atlantic Ocean beyond the limits of European navigational knowledge. "Beyond here there be dragons!" as the ancient mariners used to say. Here the hero has to cross some sort of barrier, having to defeat a threshold guardian to do so. In *Star Wars*, Luke leaves his home and travels to the Mos Eisley spaceport, where he visits a cantina full of odd-looking aliens. Campbell sees this as the traditional seaport scene where our hero is about to cross over into a new world. The bar patrons are threshold guardians who threaten our young hero with their strange customs and sudden outbursts of violence. Yet at the same time Luke meets the mercenary trader Han Solo and his sidekick Chewbacca: they seem untrustworthy at first, but turn out later to be solid allies. Luke has given up on his old life at this point, crossed over from being a farm boy to the hero with a thousand faces.

5. *The Belly of the Whale:* Early in his adventure the hero is often trapped in the belly of the whale - in a great beast like Jonah, in a cave, underwater, or in some other enclosed space. The hero appears to die, but is resurrected, perhaps in a new form. The hero's old self has died, a new one born. Although the belly is dark and scary, it represents the final split between the known and unknown worlds and thus the start of enlightenment. Here the hero shows his willingness to undergo a metamorphosis and get on with his adventure. Campbell (1988) suggests that in *Star Wars* the scene where Luke, Princess Leia and Han are trapped in the trash compactor represents the belly of the whale - especially when Luke is pulled underwater by the slimy beast and appears dead, though he reappears a minute or two later. He sees the water in the scene as representing the unconscious. Yet it could also be argued that the scene where Han's ship the *Millennium Falcon* is pulled inside the Death Star by a tractor beam also represents the belly of the whale.

II. Initiation

6. *The Road of Trials:* The road of trials is a series of tests and tasks that the hero must complete to achieve his goal. This road of trials usually takes place in a tricky setting - there could be a labyrinth, an enchanted forest, or dangerous waters along the way. There is usually some sort of dragon or dragon-substitute to slay. The hero may fail one of these tests, yet doesn't give up, for he's aided by a magic amulet, secret agents of a greater power, and a rogue or trickster. This stage is often the core of quest saga. In *Star Wars*, Luke's tests include light-saber practise, rescuing the princess from her cell, and escaping from the Death Star. The labyrinth is the Death Star itself. One sees the enchanted forest in *The Return of the Jedi*, inhabited by the cuddly Ewoks, the hero's hidden helpers, while

another labyrinth appears in the form of the Cloud City ruled by Lando Calrissian in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

7. *The Meeting with the Goddess:* The meeting with the goddess is where the hero meets a woman who represents an all-encompassing love. Campbell sees the goddess figure as mixed up with the earth Mother. This stage represents a mystical marriage with the “Queen Goddess of the World” who is simultaneously mother, sister, mistress and bride (109-111). In the *Odyssey*, it’s when Odysseus tarries for seven years with the beautiful nymph-goddess Calypso. In *Star Wars*, this stage is loosely symbolized by Luke’s meeting and infatuation with Princess Leia, who later turns out to be his sister.

8. *Woman as the Temptress:* Here the hero is tempted to fall off his chosen path by either a seductive woman, or more metaphorically by the temptations of material life that he has chosen to abandon as part of his quest. At this stage the hero feels the temptations of the flesh, temptations he can’t give into if he is to win the boon. Campbell talks of how the hero, a pure soul, becomes tainted with the odour of the flesh and feels revulsion for



the goddess (121-122). This is when Oedipus realizes he’s slept with his mother, and when Hamlet becomes disgusted with his mother’s marrying his uncle. In the *Star Wars* trilogy, it’s not a literal woman, but Darth Vader’s attempt to seduce Luke with the Dark Side of the Force to make him a servant of the Empire.

9. *Atonement with the Father:* Here the hero must confront his father, or a father figure, who represents great power and the balance between life and death. This is the center of the journey, when the hero undergoes a transformation of some sort, perhaps resulting from his apparent death and transfiguration. Campbell says that this stage is where the hero abandons the “double monster” of a dragon thought to be God (in Freudian terms, the superego) and the dragon seen as sin (the repressed id), coming to see the father as merciful (130). This stage is represented by Darth Vader’s revelation in *The Empire Strikes Back* that he is Luke’s father, and his attempt to win Luke over to his side. It’s also represented by the ultimate reconciliation of Vader to the light side of the Force at the end of the trilogy as he dies in Luke’s arms.

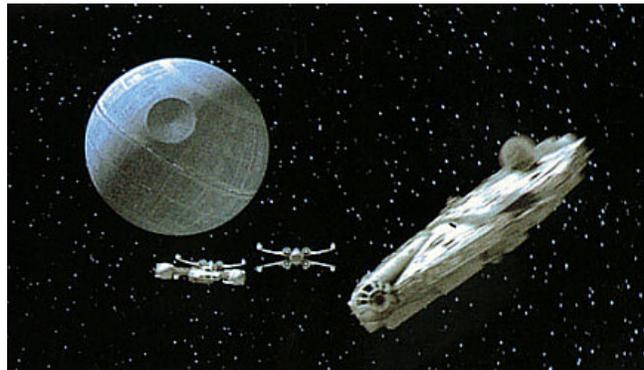
10. *Apotheosis:* Here the hero gains some godlike or spiritual power, or becomes enlightened. Like the Bodhisattva, our hero throws away the terrors born of ignorance and sees the world as illuminated and free from pain. Campbell hints that in some cases the hero takes on an androgynous quality at this point, like the Hindu god Shiva. In the *Star Wars* saga, this is obviously when Luke becomes a full Jedi, and is able to defeat enemies like Jabba the Hutt with his magical powers. The Force is Luke’s divine power. Note that after Leia is revealed to be his sister, Luke no longer shows any interest in women: he has become Campbell’s bisexual god.

11. *The Ultimate Boon:* The ultimate boon is the goal of the hero's quest. This could be the milk of paradise, the elixir of life, a holy object, a magical talisman, or simply a great feat. In the Arthur legends, it was the Holy Grail; for Jason of Argos, it was the Golden Fleece; for Gilgamesh, immortality; for the Buddha, enlightenment. Although the hero may win the prize with ease, he may also, like Prometheus, have to trick the gods of their treasure, and beat a hasty retreat afterwards. In *Star Wars*, the first great boon is the destruction of the Death Star. In the bigger picture of the original trilogy, the death of the Emperor is the ultimate boon.

III. Return

12. *Refusal of the Return:* Once the prize has been won, the hero must return it to the kingdom of humanity from the magical realm. Yet the hero is often reluctant to return ordinary reality after having lain with the Goddess and drunken her sweet nectar. So he stays a while in the blessed isles. This stage is vague in *Star Wars*. It could be during the shoot-out in the docking bay when Obi-Wan is apparently killed by Darth Vader in a light-sabre battle, and Luke wants to go back to avenge his death, but Hans yells "Luke, come on!"

13. *The Magic Flight:* Where the boon has been stolen from the gods, or they've been tricked to give it up, the hero must flee from the scene with the villain and his or her minions in hot pursuit. The road home is a dangerous one in such cases, the adventure by no means over. The hero uses magical evasions, or throws behind him delaying obstacles. The magic flight in *Star Wars* is the escape of the *Millennium Falcon* from the Death Star and its fighting off of pursuing Imperial fighters.



14. *Rescue from Without:* Just as the hero uses helpers and guides during his adventure, he may need some help on the return journey in order to get the boon back to humanity. This is especially so if the hero has fallen under the spell of the magical realm, and needs society to come knocking at his door to remind him of his ordinary duties. Yet that society might feel resentment at the prize of life-redeeming elixir, and be at a loss to comprehend its value (216). In *Star Wars*, this stage is the *Millennium Falcon's* sudden appearance during the battle over the Death Star, which saves Luke's fighter from destruction (though there are several cases of characters being rescued by others throughout the trilogy).

15. *The Crossing of the Return Threshold:* Here the hero must cross over from the land of darkness to the land of light, and to bring his newly won wisdom to the people living there. How can he pass his soul-satisfying experience on to those consumed by banalities and low passions? Why even come back to such a world? (218) Yet return he

must to complete the journey. In *Star Wars* the parallel could be the destruction of the pursuing Imperial fighters by the *Millennium Falcon*, though this happens before the rescue scene mentioned above.

16. Master of the Two Worlds: For the Buddha, this was the moment under the Bodhi tree when he achieved enlightenment: he became a master of both the material and spiritual worlds. In general, it's when the hero loses attachment to limitations, ambitions, hopes and fears, winning victories on physical and spiritual planes. He is now the cosmic dancer, able to move from the sunlit to dark worlds and come back again as he sees fit. In *Star Wars*, it's when Luke uses the Force to destroy the Death Star. Later in the trilogy, it's when Luke balances the light and dark sides of the Force.

17. Freedom to Live: Finally, the hero is victorious, and has overcome his fear of death. He lives in the now, and sees a connection of individual minds with the universal will. We see this stage in the final scene in *Star Wars*, the victory ceremony in a great hall in the rebel base. It comes again in *The Return of the Jedi* with the death of the Emperor and the victory of the rebellion.

In the monomyth we see a powerful recurring mythical structure that has appears not only in a multitude of ancient tales, but also in some of the better examples of modern popular culture.