The Hero's Journey

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Joseph Campbell was an American mythologist, writer, and lecturer. His book The Hero with a Thousand Faces explores the common journey that heroes from different works of literature take. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney further discusses this common structure of storytelling that Campbell identified. As you read, take notes on the different parts of the Hero's Journey.

When we follow a good story, we tend to follow the journey a character makes from beginning to end. We can't wait to find out what happens next. It's a page-turner; there are obstacles at every stage and crucial choices that characters have to make in order to overcome these obstacles. Eventually, we pick up another story. We have an appetite for stories. There are so many for us to choose from — in libraries, in bookshops, and on our screens — and each story seems new and exciting.

Well, in fact, oftentimes this is not true. We are led to believe these stories are new even though a lot of them follow a simple formula. When we stop to think about it, many of these stories have more similarities than we might think.

In the 1940s, the writer and professor, Joseph Campbell, noticed that a lot of his favorite stories shared a similar structure. He decided to write about it in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Today, this story structure is popularly known as “The Hero's Journey.” Stories that use this structure loosely follow a similar series of general events, otherwise known as plot points.

The hero is the main character in the story. He or she sets off on an adventure, or quest, to accomplish a specific goal. Below are just a few of the steps all heroes face in the “Hero's Journey” story plot. Popular stories like The Hobbit and The Hunger Games follow this structure.

The Ordinary World

The story usually opens with the hero's normal life: their ordinary world. This “world” can include their home and family life, their job, their personal history, and more. The author does this to introduce their hero and explain certain things about their personality and actions.

In the ordinary world, the hero often feels uncomfortable in some way. There is something they don't like about their normal life, something that causes them stress or discomfort. Others in the ordinary world might think the hero is odd in some way.

1. Crucial (adjective): of great importance
Call to Adventure

According to Campbell’s formula, something will then occur that disrupts our hero’s life in the ordinary world and causes them to face a decision. It could be an event, a discovery, an added danger, or something new from within the hero. It requires the hero to do something; they are the only person who can fulfill this call or accomplish this goal. The call to adventure provides a first look into what Campbell calls “a new world,” one very different from the ordinary world.

Refusing the Call

The hero may not immediately accept their call to adventure. They might be afraid of entering the new world or of the tasks they have to do. If this is the case, they will initially refuse to accept the call. If the hero initially refuses their call to adventure, bad things usually begin to occur.

Crossing the Threshold

In some stories, before the hero accepts the call to adventure, they meet with a mentor. This person will be a mature person who has experienced the new world before. The mentor offers advice that convinces the hero to accept the call and enter the new world.

“Crossing the threshold” happens when the hero finally accepts the call to adventure and enters the new world. The new world is very different from their ordinary world. It has unfamiliar rules and values that the hero must navigate.

Tests, Allies, and Enemies

In the new world, the hero faces a variety of tests and obstacles. Sometimes the hero is successful and sometimes they fail. All the tests serve to make the hero stronger and more determined to accomplish their goal. The hero encounters other people during his journey. They usually have at least one ally, someone who travels with them and supports them in the mission. Together they may encounter other helpful people.

The Ordeal

According to Campbell’s formula, midway through the story, the hero will face their hardest test yet, a test that will make them confront their greatest fear or insecurity. This often includes a brush with death. The hero overcomes this test, or escapes death, and finds new hope as they push towards their ultimate challenge or goal.

2. Ordeal (noun): a severe trial or experience
The Supreme Ordeal

At the climax of the story — the most intense, exciting or important point of the story — the hero faces one final test, which is often their absolute greatest challenge. Campbell calls this plot point the “Supreme Ordeal.” The hero is close to being able to return to the ordinary world, but they must overcome this final test to return. This is the moment where the hero accomplishes their goal; their quest has succeeded.

During the “Supreme Ordeal,” the hero will tend to experience a lot of turmoil. Maybe they face death again, or have to make a great sacrifice. They defeat the internal and external conflicts they have been facing throughout the story.

Reward and the Journey Home

After they've accomplished their mission, the hero collects some type of reward from their journey. Usually this is a physical reward, anything ranging from treasure, a prince or princess, to even the rulership of a kingdom.

The hero returns, with this reward, home to their ordinary world. Because of all they have experienced and accomplished, they are changed from the beginning of the story. The story may or may not have a happy ending, but a lot of the tension or discontent they felt has now been resolved because of what they accomplished on their journey.

Where can we find The Hero’s Journey formula?

Campbell's Hero's Journey structure shows up all over literature, no matter the genre. The Hero's Journey stories are so compelling because we like to see heroic characters overcoming great obstacles; we admire these heroes and hope to be like them. You don't have to be a character in a book to be a hero in your own life.

Now that you are familiar with the Hero’s Journey story structure. Let's try it out on the two popular hero stories mentioned earlier, The Hobbit and The Hunger Games. A warning for those readers who haven't read these books, the examples carry spoilers!

3. Turmoil (noun): a state of great disturbance or uncertainty
The Hobbit

In J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, The Hobbit, the hero is the Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo's “Ordinary World” is his hobbit hole in Bag End in the Shire. At first glance, Bilbo Baggins seems to be the most comfortable hobbit in all of Hobbiton. However, after hearing the dwarves' song, a part of Bilbo begins to long for adventure. His “Call To Adventure” comes when the wizard, Gandalf, approaches him and asks if he wants to go on an adventure. Bilbo, at first, refuses to go with Gandalf on the adventure (“Refusing the call”). Gandalf puts a sign on Bilbo's door and a band of dwarves come to his house and eat all his food. This is extremely unnerving for Bilbo (bad things happening after refusing the call). Gandalf serves as Bilbo’s “Mentor” throughout the story. Bilbo agrees to go with the dwarves to try and reclaim the treasure from a place called Lonely Mountain (“Crossing the Threshold”), and they begin their journey. One of Bilbo's “Tests” is his encounter with the trolls in the woods. When they capture the dwarves, he must rescue his friends. The elves (“Allies”) in Rivendell take care of Bilbo and the other dwarves and prepare them for the journey ahead. They will also face various “Enemies” who want to prevent them from finishing their goal. Bilbo's “Ordeal” is his journey to the heart of the goblin mountain and his encounter with Gollum, a twisted character, who he must outwit to save his own life. His “Supreme Ordeal” is when he participates in ‘the Battle of Five Armies,’ and his side succeeds. Bilbo's “Reward” is his share of the dwarves' treasure from the mountain.

4. a member of an imaginary race similar to humans, of a small size and with hairy feet
In Suzanne Collins’ dystopian novel, *The Hunger Games*, the main hero is Katniss Everdeen. Her “Ordinary World” is in District 12, an impoverished region in the fictional country of Panem where she lives with her mother and little sister, Prim. She struggles to support her family, often hunting illegally to keep them fed, but poverty is not the only stress in her life. Every year, children between the ages 12 to 18 face the ‘reaping’: a ceremony that chooses participants for the Hunger Games, a contest where those participants must fight to the death. In the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss experiences her “Call to Adventure” while on a hunting trip with her childhood friend, Gale. He talks about running away, leaving District 12 to live in the woods. Katniss dismisses Gale’s suggestion to run away because they both have families to take care of (“Refusing the Call). After refusing to run away, she attends the reaping ceremony. Out of the hundreds of entries, her little sister’s name is chosen, which forces Katniss to volunteer in her sister’s place in order to save Prim’s life. Bad things have happened after Katniss “refused the call,” which leads to her “Crossing the Threshold” and participating in the Hunger Games. Haymitch Abernathy is her “Mentor” figure, a former victor of the Hunger Games from District 12. He advises Katniss and the other District 12 champion, Peeta, on how to survive the Hunger Games. The Gamemakers test Katniss and the other tributes on their skills, and their score usually determines how well they will do in the game (“Tests”). Katniss encounters allies and enemies both in and out of the arena. Cinna, her stylist and only friend in the Capitol, encourages Katniss and helps her win over the audience in her interviews. Peeta and Haymitch also work to help Katniss survive (“Allies”). Many of Katniss’ competitors resent her and see her as a challenge (“Enemies”), but others, like the character Rue, create an alliance with Katniss. For the participants, the game itself is an ordeal; it forces them to kill or be killed. But for Katniss, the “Ordeal” occurs when Rue is killed. Rue’s death forces Katniss to confront the injustice of the Hunger Games. Shortly after, Katniss is motivated to defy the Capitol by making sure she and Peeta survive. “The Supreme Ordeal” arrives at the end of the game, the Gamemakers announce that only one tribute may win, despite their earlier rule change that declared two could survive. Rather than attack each other, Katniss and Peeta agree to eat poisonous berries. They are stopped by the Gamemakers before they can do so, but their willingness to sacrifice their own lives instead of killing each other saves them. Survivors of the Hunger Games receive money and fame (“Reward”), though at a terrible cost.

As you can see, both *The Hobbit* and *The Hunger Games* follow Campbell’s formula for “The Hero’s Journey”. So the next time you read a book, or watch a movie, check to see if it follows the formula and ask yourself: is this story really new?
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence best expresses the central idea of the text?
   A. While different genres of literature exist, all of them follow the Hero's Journey.
   B. When authors are writing novels, they intentionally adhere to the Hero's Journey.
   C. The Hero's Journey establishes the structure of a story that countless stories follow.
   D. The Hero's Journey is a helpful outline for author's to follow when writing.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “There are so many for us to choose from — in libraries, in bookshops, and on our screens — and each story seems new and exciting.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “Popular stories like 'The Hobbit' and 'The Hunger Games' follow this structure.” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “Campbell's Hero's Journey structure shows up all over literature, no matter the genre.” (Paragraph 17)
   D. “So the next time you read a book, or watch a movie, check to see if it follows the formula and ask yourself: is this story really new?” (Paragraph 21)

3. Which of the following describes the author's main purpose in the text?
   A. to encourage authors to move away from the structure of the Hero's Journey
   B. to show how common the structure of the Hero's Journey is in literature
   C. to prove that essentially every story follows the Hero's Journey
   D. to help readers understand how Campbell came to identify the Hero's Journey

4. Which statement describes how the author develops their analysis of the Hero's Journey?
   A. The author describes the structure of the Hero's Journey and then explores how it translates to popular books.
   B. The author discusses the Hero's Journey as Campbell describes it and then shows how it has changed over time.
   C. The author describes what the Hero's Journey is and then discusses the pros and cons of following such a structure.
   D. The author discusses Campbell's discovery of the Hero's Journey and then explores how the structure of stories has changed since then.
5. How does the author's discussion of "The Hobbit" and "The Hunger Games" contribute to the development of ideas in the text? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

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Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. McBirney asserts that the Hero’s Journey structure can be found across genres. What is another book or movie that follows the Hero’s Journey? Describe how your chosen book or movie fills the requirements for the Hero’s Journey.

2. In the text, the author claims that the Hero’s Journey requires a main character who is the hero. Do you think any main character can be the hero? Why or why not? What makes an ideal fictional hero for you? Who is your favorite fictional hero and why?

3. McBirney claims that the Hero’s Journey is so popular because people aspire to be like the hero and can relate to them. How do stories help us understand our world? Can we learn lessons that apply to our world from stories that follow the Hero’s Journey? Explain.