

S. Seifert

Hero's Journey Defined

Scholars categorize similar elements in stories to help them classify manuscripts into various types.

In the mid-1900s, Joseph Campbell's book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, offered just such a classification. He found a list of common elements in mythic adventures and defined what we now call the Hero's Journey.

This journey can be found in Homer's *The Iliad* and Lucas's *Star Wars*. It is in *Beowulf* and *The Matrix*. Any successful adventure of mythic proportion seems to follow the Hero's Journey.

The table below demonstrates these internal and external plot patterns. The terms for each stage are in the first column. Abbreviated definitions for the terms are in second. The third column has been left empty. If you print up this chart, you can put the elements of your adventure story in the blanks.

Hero's Journey Chart

The stages in this table are based on Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey.

***Note: Not all steps will occur in all stories nor will they appear in any particular order. In any given journey, readers can find from seven to twenty elements, but most successful adventures average approximately fourteen recognizable steps.

| The Hero's Journey | Explanation | Example: |
|---|---|----------|
| I: Departure (The protagonist is separated from the known and steps into the unknown.) | | |
| Home Culture | The protagonist has a "home," a place that s/he thinks is normal, familiar, and common to others in his/her culture. | |
| Call to Adventure | A normal occurrence motivates the protagonist to acknowledge an unknown aspect of his/her world, feel a restlessness with the constraints of his/her life, or find a new world that s/he was not aware existed. | |

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| Refusal of the Call | The protagonist chooses not to move forward in life because s/he chooses to not give up his/her position, power, ideals, goals, or responsibilities; the refusal is often based on his/her fear of the unknown and comfort in the familiar. Usually secondary characters support the protagonist's refusal. | |
| Supernatural Aid | The inexperienced protagonist is provided a supernatural, guiding, and/or guarding character, or an instrumental item (sword, encouragement, etc.) to assist his/her step forward into the unknown. | |
| Crossing the First Threshold | The protagonist moves out of his/her comfort zone and walks alone. S/he is confronted with an obstacle that must be overcome before s/he can fully enter the dangers of the unknown journey. | |
| II: Initiation (By crossing the threshold, the protagonist's world is changed forever. A mental journey merges with the physical journey to result in a spiritual revelation of purpose and self.) | | |
| Road of Trials | The protagonist is tested and found vulnerable, but the outcome reveals a part of him/her that s/he did not know existed. The assistance given the protagonist under the "Supernatural Aid" section of "Departure" begins to come into play in the story, and s/he is not expected to face the trials alone. | |
| Meeting a Soul Mate (mother-figure) | The protagonist meets an ideal (in ancient myths a goddess; in modern stories a soul mate) and sees the possibilities of his/her journey. This supernatural, human, or symbolic ideal encourages him/her forward. | |
| Overcoming Temptation (father-figure) | Someone or something tries to destroy the journey itself. Often the destroyer has been sent by a larger evil to stop the protagonist. The protagonist is often misled, but eventually overcomes his lack of knowledge, prejudices, and fears as s/he grows in the acceptance of his/her role as hero. | |
| Viewing the Whole Picture (god-like) | The protagonist moves beyond the final terrors of change that are founded in his/her ignorance. S/he adds the spiritual element to his/her journey. The protagonist is still in the midst of the journey but s/he is now willing to accept what is required of him/her to complete the mission. | |
| The Ultimate Goal (Treasure) | The protagonist becomes self-assured and often receives physical gifts and/or emotional rewards. Since personal limitations are broken, the protagonist can see the big picture not only | |

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| | in relation to him/herself but also in relation to others. The protagonist understands how the ultimate goal can be accomplished and the mission completed. | |
| III: Return (Through the protagonist's ultimate sacrifice of self, s/he walks in an enlightened state.) | | |
| Refusing to Return | Although seldom a true refusal, the protagonist, who should return "home" with his/her powers, ability, or wisdom, remains isolated and often faces a death of sorts. Sometimes s/he prefers to live in the enlightenment than return to a "home" that might not accept the ultimate gift. | |
| The Chase | The protagonist flees toward safety to thwart the attempts to take back the treasure, power, ability, or wisdom. Because the protagonist has changed, the chase characterizes his/her courage and confidence. | |
| The Rescue | The protagonist is unable to save him/herself. Others help him/her return "home," which may deflate his/her ego, but since s/he sees the entirety of the mission, s/he understands the importance of what is accomplished. | |
| Crossing the Return Threshold | The protagonist must face the evil or its leader and the realization that home is no longer a place but a state of being. Those in his/her past may not accept his/her new ability, power, or wisdom and may test it as a final trial to the protagonist. | |
| Master of Two Worlds | The protagonist has the ability, power, or wisdom without limitations to relax in whatever world (physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual) s/he finds him/herself. S/he can adjust to who s/he was in the past and who s/he might be in the future. | |
| Freedom (Often the theme of the quest) | The protagonist is able to combine the workings of unenlightened (old) and enlightened (new) societies into one world, the world where the protagonist now resides. S/he understands that his/her old self had to "die" in order for the new way of life to begin. S/he no longer fears change because s/he has learned to live in the moment regardless of what that means. | |

An Example of the Hero's Journey:
 (Click on any underlined link to see examples
 of the Hero's Journey in fiction.)



The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien

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