***Vocabulary notes***:

1. I prefer the term “Heroic character” (or, simply “Heroic”) to “hero”; the latter tends to be androcentric in English, and as such tends to perpetuate limiting, gender-binary thinking, as well as promoting exclusion rather than inclusion as a central motif of the Heroic Archetype. While it is true that in many Classical and traditional mythologies, heroism was often the exclusive domain of males (and then only of males of a certain type), a universalist understanding of mythology and of the archetypes recognizes the Heroic as fundamentally inclusive and accessible.

2. For purposes of diversity and inclusion, I use the generic pronoun “they” when speaking of the Heroic in generalities and hypotheticals; however, in reference to existing Classical and traditional myths, the gendered pronouns will be used to refer to Heroic characters commonly accepted to be male or female, or when quoting an original source when the generic masculine pronoun is employed.

**The Heroic: Archetype of the Pedagogical Function**

As explained above, all archetypes act as “… vocabulary in the form, not of words, but of acts and adventures…”[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, the fundamental impulse of an archetype is *to act*, to behave in certain ways. This is especially true of the Heroic; its *raison d’etre* is to act in response to some event, situation, circumstance (collectively, a Challenge), and for the benefit of others who may be unable or unwilling to act on their own behalf.

This brings us to Campbell’s three Heroic types: Intentional, Accidental (Serendipitous), and Reluctant (Forced). These are by no means exhaustive categories (see below), nor will all “heroic” characters necessarily fall definitively or exclusively into one of these three. However, these categories do serve as a workable wrapper within which to begin to explore the Heroic Archetype.

***The Intentional Heroic***

In some ways, this is the least relatable (more on this later) of the three types. The Intentional Heroic seeks adventure; one might say that they “go looking for trouble”. The Intentional Heroic is already quite self-assured in their abilities to confront and vanquish Challenges; they simply seek an opportunity to display their prowess (usually the more ostentatious the better). Joseph Campbell mentions “… a typical early-culture hero who goes around slaying monsters” (the Monster-Slayer Heroic); this is a subtype of the Intentional Heroic — they see it as their job to “make the world safe for humanity,” and they go in search of ways to do just that (more on this below).

***The Accidental (Serendipitous) Heroic***

This type of Heroic character is carried *by circumstance* into a situation of needing to act in response to a Challenge. Something unexpected happens which requires a response, and the Heroic character finds that they are the only one who can act to address the situation. In essence, the Accidental Heroic falls (sometimes literally) into an adventure. The classic example of this heroic type is Alice In Wonderland; she literally falls into her adventure by plummeting down the rabbit hole. Yes, she followed the White Rabbit in order to satisfy her curiosity, but she had no intention of going anywhere beyond her well-known and comfortable garden in doing so.

The central motif of this aspect of the Heroic Archetype is codified by Robert Frost’s famous observation that “the best way out is always through.” (Frost, “A Servant To Servants”, 1915) In other words, we may not be happy about the situation, but we must stoically accept that it is what it is and work toward a solution. In Alice’s case, she cannot return via the route by which she arrived. Her only options are to sit at the bottom of the hole and starve, or to act on her own behalf to find another way to get home. She may not immediately know what is the right thing to do, but she knows for certain that inaction is the wrong thing. President Theodore Roosevelt is supposed to have said: “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing,” often rendered down to the more prosaic “Do something, even if it’s wrong.”

This forces us to realize that choosing is *always* acting; thus, when responding to a Challenge, choosing not to engage is still taking an action — an action not to act. Only when the possibility of choice is absent is action absent; for instance, in the adage “fight, flight, or freeze” only in “freeze” mode is action absent, because the possibility of choice is absent. The “freeze” response, being characterized by paralytic indecision, makes choice impossible — you are not choosing not to act, you are inactive due to an inability to choose which action to take.

***The Reluctant (Forced) Heroic***

This type of Heroic is compelled by another’s actions into responding to a Challenge. The difference between the Accidental Heroic and the Reluctant Heroic is subtle but crucial. They are similar in that in both cases the character isn’t actively seeking an adventure. They differ in the nature or source of the Challenge faced, and how the Heroic becomes aware of it. For the Accidental Heroic, often the Challenge is simply the result of happenstance, not malice. As J. H. Holmes observed, “The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly — it is simply indifferent.” (*The Sensible Man's View of Religion* (1932) ch. 4).

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Or, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, “A meteorite on a collision course with New York City [is only] obeying all the laws of the universe, but it [is] still a damn nuisance.” The meteorite isn’t acting out of malice aforethought; it didn’t consciously choose its path, but it still represents a problem to be dealt with.

On the other hand, a foreign army using trebuchets to lob boulders at your castle walls also presents you with a Challenge, but it’s one they’re *forcing* you into choosing whether or not to dealing with. You may not have sought conflict, but there it is. A less severe example is when someone else makes a decision which impacts you, and you have to decide how to respond — receiving an unexpected break-up text, for instance. You didn’t choose to upend your life, but it has been upended, and you have to decide how you’re going to adjust.

It is helpful to see these three options as points on a continuum:



… arranged in terms of both the attitude of the character toward heroism and of their willingness to engage with the Challenge. The Intentional can think of nothing they’d rather do;, the Forced would rather do just about *anything* else, and the Accidental is somewhere between the two extremes (and may, in fact, vacillate around the median frequently as the adventure proceeds). (See the section on the *Refusal of The Call*, below).

However, for the Campbell/Vogler system to be applicable, the Accidental and Forced types *must* become Intentional (to a greater-or-lesser degree) at some point in the process of the adventure. This doesn’t mean that the character must adopt a gung-ho enthusiasm for their situation, but they must become at least resigned to the fact that the best way out is always through. This often results in “The Hero(ic) In Spite of Themself” trope wherein the character struggles (or even petulantly complains), but takes the necessary actions, nevertheless.

This brings us to…

**The Relatability of The Heroic**

All archetypes must exhibit *relatability* in order to be effective. The audience must be able to see some aspect of themselves and their personal experiences in the character and the situation. In other words, the archetypes must evoke *empathy*.

This is certainly so of the Trickster (discussed elsewhere), but for no other archetype is relatability so crucial as for that of the Heroic. As Campbell says in The Message of The Myth episode of *The Power of Myth*:

What the myth has to provide [is] to give life *models*. And the models have to be appropriate to the possibilities of the time in which you’re living. (emphasis added)

In the same discussion Campbell elaborates that “… the hero is the one who can participate … *decently*, in the way of nature, not in the way of personal rancor, revenge, or anything of the kind,” and illuminates the Pedagogical Function of mythology (discussed above) with which the Heroic archetype is inseparably connected, by saying that it teaches/guides/encourages us: “… to live a human lifetime under any circumstances.”

So, what does this tell us about the relatability of the Heroic?

First, the Heroic, like all archetypes, must provide a model with which the individual can empathize, while also presenting an ideal toward which the individual can strive. After all, the word “model” means both “a standard for imitation” and “an exemplar”. Put simply, the problem the Heroic faces must be one the audience is familiar with (or that they can at least understand), and the necessary solution must require the Heroic to change in a way they did not originally believe they could (this is the very core of the *Transformation of Consciousness*). However, the model must be “appropriate to the possibilities”; in other words, the solution to the challenge must also be *relatable*. The solution must be one which the Heroic is capable of identifying, finding or achieving, and effectively applying, *within the context of the story*. This last caveat is crucial: if the story has a hard-science context and the required solution involves invoking magic, then the appropriateness — the relatability, and hence the believability — of the solution is problematic, Clarke’s Third Law[[2]](#footnote-2) notwithstanding.

Second, the actions of the Heroic must be *decent*, which is to say *acceptable* or *justifiable*, again, *within the context of the story*. This takes us down a short but critical detour …

***The Relativity of The Heroic***

To say that the actions of the Heroic must be acceptable or justifiable within the context of the story leads us into the realm of moral/ethical relativity and its famous utilitarian dictum “the ends justify the means”.

Campbell makes the statement (Message of The Myth): “The virtues of the past are the vices of today, and many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today.” At one level, this statement codifies that actions seen as Heroic behavior at one time may not be acceptable conduct in contemporary circumstances. Theseus’ abandonment of Ariadne, for instance, was considered appropriate and even imitable behavior in Classical Greece, but would likely be denounced as reprehensible in many sectors contemporary culture.

Also, the relativity of the Heroic forces us to confront the Just War Theory dictum that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” As former CIA operative Amaryllis Fox says in a YouTube video: “Everybody believes they’re the Good Guy.” She elaborates:

An al-Qaeda fighter made a point once during a debriefing; he said “All these movies that America makes like *Independence Day* … and *Star Wars* — they're all about a small, scrappy band of rebels who will do anything in their power with the limited resources available to them to expel an outside, technologically advanced invader, and what you don't realize,” he said, “is that to us — to the rest of the world — *you* are the Empire and we are Luke and Han; you are the aliens and we're Will Smith.”

< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WEd34oW9BI>

During the conversation between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell in The Hero’s Adventure episode of *The Power of Myth*, Moyers asks, “So, does heroism have a moral objective?” Campbell answers:

The moral objective is that of saving a people or saving a person, or saving an idea. [The Heroic] is sacrificing … *for* something, that’s the morality of it. Now you, from another position, might say that something … should not have been realized, you know. That’s the judgment from another side. *But it doesn’t destroy the heroism of what was done — absolutely not*. [emphasis added]

What this tells us is that heroism *is* relative. First: the success (value) of a heroic act is not measured solely by its *results*, but also by its *intents*. This is encoded in the first attribute of the Heroic act. — *willingness to sacrifice*, which is focused on selflessness. The Heroic character acts to address the challenge with no thought for their own personal well-being, but also with no expectation of potential reward or accolades (in other words, there is also willingness to sacrifice one’s own ego, as well as willingness to sacrifice one’s life).

Taken to the logical extreme, this means that the most Heroic of all characters are actually those whose heroism is humble, unostentatious, or even unnoticed, similar to Kant’s assertion that an act is not moral if the actor derives some personal advantage from it, and also to the Latin maxim *ars est celare artem —* it is true art to conceal art — meaning that the best art conceals the means by which it is achieved. This is problematical for the Intentional Heroic, because a character engaging in heroism with the aim or expectation of praise and recognition automatically disqualifies themselves from deserving the title of Heroic.

There is a tangential relationship, here, to the third attribute of a heroic act — that it produce a *potential to change the Ordinary World*. The operative word is “potential”; a change need not actually be produced in the Ordinary World in order for the act to have been heroic. To say that an act is not heroic because the challenge is not defeated is to judge the action solely by its results, and ignore the intentions.

Thus, we see that it is possible to have either a successful heroic act (the challenge is prevailed over), or an unsuccessful heroic act (the challenge prevails) — but the *act remains heroic, regardless*. The tangential connection is this: even if one’s heroic act is, indeed, successful, *it need not be known to nor acknowledged by anyone else in order to have been heroic*. It is the *potential* to generate change that is the important factor, not whether-or-not change was, in fact, brought about.

So, a Heroic character may in fact return to the Ordinary World with the answer to the challenge (see The Elixir, below), but encounter resistance or apathy in applying it. We see this in stories where society rejects salvation because the savior doesn’t reflect their expectations of who or what their rescuer “should be”.

Nevertheless, the Heroic has provided the potential to overcome the challenge, which act was, indeed, heroic, whether or not the “customer” chooses to acknowledge either the value of the act or of the solution. Again, to judge an action unheroic because no one appreciates it or its achievement is to measure it by the wrong standard.

Indeed, some of the most poignant stories involve a Heroic saving someone else from themselves, the worth of which is not recognized (at least immediately) by the person(s) being saved. Think of a conscientious parent preventing a child from engaging in an action with dangerous short- or long-term consequences: often, the child’s immediate reaction is “I hate you!”; and only later do they come to realize and acknowledge the wisdom and love inherent in the parent’s resolute restriction.

**The Heroic Adventure as Transformation**

Joseph Campbell said that “… all the myths have to deal with … *transformation of consciousness*” (Campbell: The Power Of Myth, The Message Of The Myth). He was referring to both the consciousness of the *individual* and of the *collective*. This is true especially of the heroic archetype — the heroic undergoes a *personal* transformation of consciousness which enables or empowers them to contribute to the transformation of a collective consciousness in which they participate. In fact, *Transformation of Personal Consciousness* is one of three “requirements” which “define” a Heroic Arc (along with *Willingness to Sacrifice* and *Potential to Change The World*, but more on this later.)

Campbell broadly defined “the heroic act” as “…departure, fulfillment, return.” (Campbell: Message Of The Myth). In this volume, we’ll refer to these as the *phases* of a Heroic Arc.

Broadly, in the first phase (Departure), the heroic character is made aware of the challenge they will be facing, commits to the adventure, and enters the “Special World” (Vogler); in the second phase (Fulfilment), the heroic character encounters difficulties which both test their dedication to the adventure and grow their heroic capacity to deal with the Central Challenge, acquires allies, identifies antagonists, and obtains the solution to the Central Challenge; and, in the third phase (Return), the heroic character brings or communicates to the “Ordinary World” the solution to the Central Challenge.

Departure: Preparation

Fulfilment: Progression

Return: Presentation

Each of these three phases have certain element*s* which are associated primarily (but not exclusively) with them. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), enumerated the aspects (or steps, as he called them) as seventeen in total. However, despite his largely universalist view of mythology, some of Campbell’s original steps are still predicated on androcentric and Classicist ideas of the heroic; for instance, The Meeting With The Goddess, Woman as The Temptress, and Master of The Two Worlds. The first two of these assume a masculine heroic relating to the feminine energy, in antagonism in the second instance. In the third, the primary problem is in the word “master”, which both carries both gender-biased and socially inequitable connotations.

To address these disadvantages, Christopher Vogler published *The Writer’s Journey* in 1995. In it, he broadened condensed Campbell’s heroic arc into twelve more generalized stages, which served to open the system to mythologies both old and new, remove limitations to its universal applicability, and provide a workable framework for the consciously equitable construction of new heroic paradigms which are both contemporarily relevant and yet timeless. It is Vogler’s system which forms the foundation (with some minor modification of terminology) of our exploration of the Heroic Archetype.

Some of the benefits of Vogler’s system are: firstly, that it is fundamentally inclusive; heroic status is not gender-centric, race-centric, or even species-centric. *Any* character which shows a *Willingness to Sacrifice* and experiences a *Transformation of Personal Consciousness*, which lead ultimately to realization of a *Potential to Change The World* can be said to have undergone a heroic adventure. By employing broad terminology in the naming of the stages (hereinafter, we will use the term *aspects*), it encourages inclusive thinking when contemplating whether-or-not a character’s story arc is heroic; one is not distracted away from recognizing a character as heroic purely on the basis of some particular attribute, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Secondly, Vogler’s system allows for the construction of a story line which is not slavishly formulaic. While certain aspects are more strongly identified with a given phase (Meeting With A Mentor is listed in the Departure phase, for instance), they are not necessarily exclusively associated with any particular phase; the heroic character may encounter mentors during the Fulfilment or even the Return phase. While Tests, Allies, and Enemies are most commonly found in the Fulfilment stage, any of these may also appear (and often do) in the Departure phase.

Thirdly, Vogler’s system not only lends itself admirably to analyzing existing Classical and traditional heroic mythologies, but it also provides a workable framework for generating storylines that are conscious of current affairs and therefore are readily approachable and engaging to contemporary audiences, but couching them in symbols and metaphors which are, nevertheless, universal and eternal.

The overall structure of the Heroic Journey (à la Vogler) is:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **~~Phase~~** | **~~Aspects~~** |
| **~~Departure~~** | ~~The Ordinary World~~ |
| ~~The Call to Adventure~~ |
| ~~Refusal of the Call~~ |
| ~~Meeting With The Mentor~~ |
| ~~Crossing the Threshold~~ |
| **~~Fulfilment~~** | ~~Test, Allies, and Enemies~~ |
| ~~The Innermost Cave~~ |
| ~~Ordeal~~ |
| ~~Reward~~ |
| **~~Return~~** | ~~The Road Back~~ |
| ~~Resurrection/Purification~~ |
| ~~Return With the Elixir~~ |

1. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” (letter to Science magazine in 1968) < *Clarke, Arthur C. (1968-01-19).* [*"Clarke's Third Law on UFO's"*](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/159/3812/255.3)*. Science.* ***159*** *(3812): 255.* [*doi*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doi_(identifier))*:*[*10.1126/science.159.3812.255-b*](https://doi.org/10.1126%2Fscience.159.3812.255-b)*.* [*ISSN*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISSN_(identifier))[*0036-8075*](https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0036-8075)*.*

   > [↑](#footnote-ref-2)