

GILGAMESH AND THE “HERO’S JOURNEY”¹

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

*The passage of the mythological hero may be overground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world. ...Something of the light that blazes invisible within the abysses of its normally opaque materiality breaks forth, with an increasing uproar. The dreadful mutilations are then seen as shadows, only, of an immanent, imperishable eternity; time yields to glory; and the world sings with the prodigious, angelic, but perhaps finally monotonous, siren music of the spheres. Like happy families, the myths and the worlds redeemed are all alike. (Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*)*

Gilgamesh is among the oldest “hero” stories we know of. In this activity, we’ll be using Gilgamesh to consider some of the “universal” elements of such stories. In particular, we’ll be using the model of the **Hero’s Journey** proposed by the literature and mythology scholar **Joseph Campbell**. This model can provide a helpful (though imperfect) way of thinking about how the stories of heroes, both ancient (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Moses) and modern (Frodo, Luke Skywalker, Buffy the Vampire Slayer) are arranged. Campbell posits that this reflects a universal truth of human psychology and the way we humans understand and organize the world. However, one need not accept this claim to find the model to be a useful one.

STAGES IN THE HERO’S JOURNEY

*“Centuries of husbandry, decades of diligent culling, the work of numerous hearts and hands, have gone into the backling, sorting, and spinning of this tightly twisted yarn. Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.” (Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*)*

Campbell posits that mythic heroes generally go through number of different stages on their quests, which usually (though not always) occur in a particular order. Some stories will spend much longer on certain stages than others. Not every story will feature every stage. I’ve also included examples from *Star Wars* (since the original script was apparently written/revised with this idea in mind).

Stage	Description	Gilgamesh	Star Wars
The Ordinary World	This is the original world of the hero, which "suffers from a symbolic deficiency." The hero is lacking something, or something is taken from him.	Gilgamesh is a half-divine king, and is apparently pretty bad at it. He seems to be bored, and spends his time tormenting people.	Star Wars. Luke Skywalker is raised on the desert planet of Tatooine, where he is a farmer. He’s bored.
The Call to Adventure	The hero is given a challenge, problem, or adventure. Often it appears as a blunder, or chance. This stage establishes the goal of the hero.	Enkido challenges Gilgamesh to a fight, because of Gilgamesh’s bad behavior.	Luke find a droid with a message from the Princess. She needs help!
The Refusal of the Call	The (often) reluctant hero has to be set along the correct path. He must weigh the consequences and be excited by a stronger motivation to proceed further.	After Gilgamesh and Enkido are friends, Gilgamesh begins to want more out of life. Gilgamesh still hasn’t accepted his limitations though.	Luke is afraid to help initially (also true for Obi Wan and Han Solo).
Meeting with the Mentor	The hero encounters a wise figure who prepares him for the journey. This figure (or item) gives advice, guidance, or an item, but cannot go with the hero.	The elders give Gilgamesh and Enkido advice on going off on their adventure to kill Humbaba.	Obi Wan gives Luke advice after his uncle and aunt are killed
Crossing the Threshold	The hero has committed to his task, and enters the special world. Often he is met by a threshold guardian.	The adventure begins in earnest. Gilgamesh and Enkido meet and defeat Humbaba.	Luke and his pals leave Tatooine to help save the galaxy.
Tests, Allies, and Enemies	In the special world, the hero learns the new rules by meeting people and obtaining new information. There is often a "local watering hole" component. This is where the true	The gods get involved. Ishtar tries (and fails) to seduce Gilgamesh. She retaliates by killing Enkido. Gilgamesh has a crisis of the soul, and decides to seek out Utnapishtim, and achieve immortality.	Luke and friends board the Death Star and rescue Leia. They get the plans to the Death Star. Obi Wan is killed by Vader.

¹ Parts of this handout have been adapted with modifications from <https://libguides.gvsu.edu/monomyth>.

	characteristics of the hero are revealed.		
Approach to the Inmost Cave	Now our hero, and often his allies, have come to the edge of the dangerous place where the "object of the quest" is hidden. This stage often is the land of the dead.	Gilgamesh undertakes the journey to Utnapishtim, who lives in a wondrous place (very much like the land of the dead).	Luke and the rebels decipher the plans, and get ready to attack.
The Supreme Ordeal	The hero faces danger, often a life-or-death moment that is either physical or psychological.	Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh there will be no immortality for him. Gilgamesh is upset.	They attack the Death Star.
Reward, or Seizing the Sword	After surviving, our hero takes possession of the object, typically a treasure, weapon, knowledge, token, or reconciliation.	Gilgamesh finds a special magical plant to achieve long life. Victory?	Luke successfully uses the force to destroy the Death Star (by aiming a torpedo). Reward: Safety/Victory.
The Road Back	The hero must now deal with the consequences of their actions. They may be pursued by remaining forces. They now face the decision to return to the ordinary world.	Gilgamesh immediately loses the plant; he cannot accomplish the goal he originally wanted to. He must head home.	Luke embraces his role in the rebellion. He can never go back.
Resurrection	One final test is required for the purification and rebirth of the hero. Alternatively, it may be a miraculous transformation.	Gilgamesh returns home and contemplates the city he rules. Has he changed?	Luke is on his way to becoming a Jedi. Obi Wan speaks to him from beyond the grave as he attacks the death star.
Return With the Elixir	The triumphant hero returns to the ordinary world bearing the elixir. Common elixirs are treasure, love, freedom, wisdom, or knowledge. A defeated hero is doomed to repeat the lesson.	Gilgamesh seems to finally accept his mortality, and becomes a great king.	Luke and his friends bring a "new hope" to the galaxy. The Jedi have returned, and the Death Star is destroyed.

ACTIVITY: MODERN HEROS

"It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may very well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid." (Campell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces)

For this activity, I'd like you to choose an example of a MODERN book or film about a "heroic" journey, and apply the 12 stages to it. Please choose one that you care about, and that means something to you. Note: There are lots of examples online, but I'd like to see your ORIGINAL analysis. (I'm not grading on correctness!). Here are the rules:

1. You don't need to include all 12 stages, but please include at least 7.
2. Try to focus on ONE character. (This will make the exercise a lot easier).
3. Try to write at 1-2 sentences for each stage, explaining your reasoning in a bit of detail (enough detail so that someone who hasn't read the book or seen the movie will know what you are talking about).

When you're done, I'd like to write a brief reflection 100- to 150-word reflection on *why* hero stories (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Moses, Luke Skywalker, etc.) are important to us humans. In particular, say a bit about why the story you choose is/was important to you. Possible ideas:

1. Basically any Disney or Pixar film (from Frozen to Moana to Wall-E).
2. "Epic Fantasy" books (Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, etc.).
3. Many action or science fiction books or movies.
4. There are plenty of true life/documentary stories that fit this mold! Just make sure that, if you choose one, it is based on some sort of written/filmed account of the person's life. After all, this is an exercise about how we tell STORIES.