THE STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

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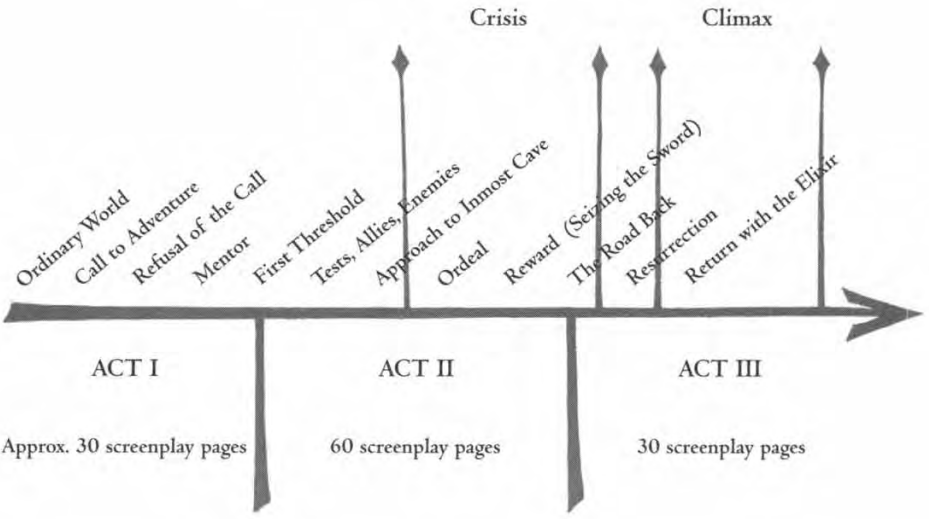
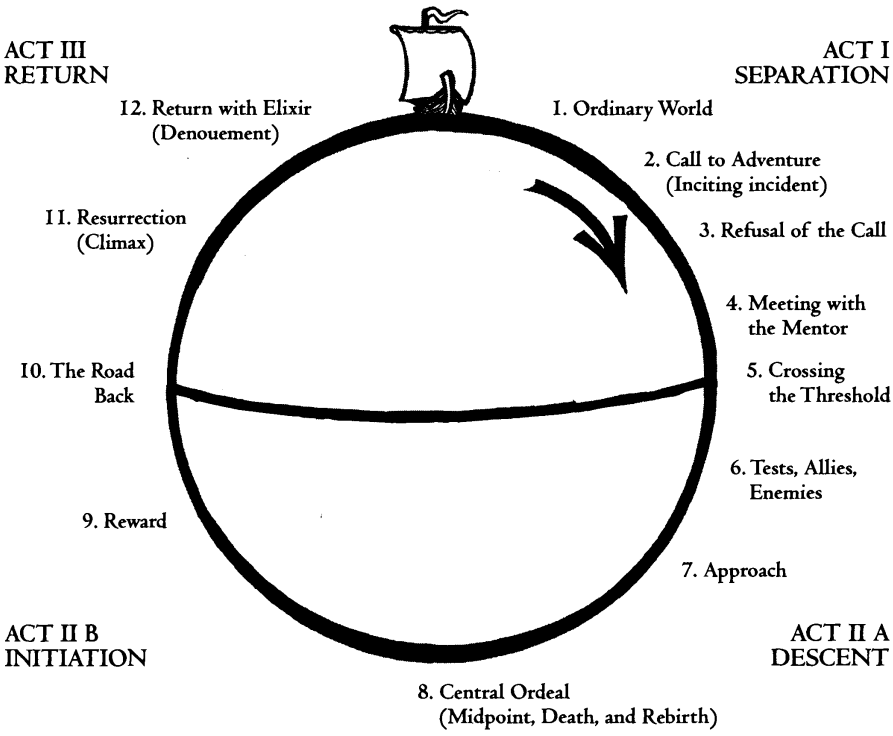
THE HERO'S JOURNEY MODEL



THE HERO'S JOURNEY



1. THE ORDINARY WORLD

Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary, mundane world and into a Special World, new and alien. This is the familiar "fish out of water" idea which has spawned countless films and TV shows ("The Fugitive," "The Beverly Hillbillies," *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, The Wizard of Oz, Witness, 48 Hours, Trading Places, Beverly Hills Cop,* etc.).

If you're going to show a fish out of his customary element, you first have to show him in that **Ordinary World** to create a vivid contrast with the strange new world he is about to enter.

In *Witness* you see both the city policeman and the Amish mother and son in their normal worlds before they are thrust into totally alien environments: the Amish being overwhelmed by the city, and the city cop encountering the 19th-century world of the Amish. You first see Luke Skywalker, hero of *Star Wars,* being bored to death as a farmboy before he sets out to tackle the universe.

Likewise in *The Wizard of Oz,* considerable time is spent to establish Dorothy's drab normal life in Kansas before she is blown to the wonderworld of Oz. Here the contrast is heightened by shooting the Kansas scenes in stern black and white while the Oz scenes are shot in vibrant Technicolor.

An Officer and a Gentleman sketches a vivid contrast between the Ordinary World of the hero — that of a tough Navy brat with a drunken, whore-chasing father — and the Special World of the spit-and-polish Navy flight school which the hero enters.

2. THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Once presented with a **Call to Adventure**, she can no longer remain indefinitely in the comfort of the Ordinary World.

Perhaps the land is dying, as in the King Arthur stories of the search for the Grail, the only treasure that can heal the wounded land. In *Star Wars,* the Call to Adventure is Princess Leia's desperate holographic message to wise old Obi Wan Kenobi, who asks Luke to join in the quest. Leia has been snatched by evil Darth Vader, like the Greek springtime goddess Persephone, who was kidnapped to the underworld by Pluto, lord of the dead. Her rescue is vital to restoring the normal balance of the universe.

In many detective stories, the Call to Adventure is the private eye being asked to take on a new case and solve a crime which has upset the order of things. A good detective should right wrongs as well as solve crimes.

In revenge plots, the Call to Adventure is often a wrong which must be set right, an offense against the natural order of things. In *The Count of Monte Cristo,* Edmond Dantes is unjustly imprisoned and is driven to escape by his desire for revenge. The plot of *Beverly Hills Cop* is set in motion by the murder of the hero's best friend. *In First Blood* Rambo is motivated by his unfair treatment at the hands of an intolerant sheriff.

In romantic comedies, the Call to Adventure might be the first encounter with the special but annoying someone the hero or heroine will be pursuing and sparring with.

The Call to Adventure establishes the stakes of the game, and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or the lover, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge, or change a life.

What's at stake can often be expressed as a question posed by the call. Will E.T. or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* get home again? Will Luke rescue Princess Leia and defeat Darth Vader? In *An Officer and a Gentleman,* will the hero be driven out of Navy flight school by his own selfishness and the needling of a fierce Marine drill instructor, or will he earn the right to be called an officer and a gentleman? Boy meets girl, but does boy get girl?

3. Refusal of the Call (The Reluctant Hero)

This one is about fear. Often at this point the hero balks at the threshold of adventure, **Refusing the Call** or expressing reluctance. After all, she is facing the greatest of all fears, terror of the unknown. The hero has not yet fully committed to the journey and may still be thinking of turning back. Some other influence — a change in circumstances, a further offense against the natural order of things, or the encouragement of a Mentor — is required to get her past this turning point of fear.

In romantic comedies, the hero may express reluctance to get involved (maybe because of the pain of a previous relationship). In a detective story, the private eye may at first turn down the case, only to take it on later against his better judgment.

At this point in *Star Wars*, Luke refuses Obi Wan's Call to Adventure and returns to his aunt and uncle's farmhouse, only to find they have been barbecued by the Emperor's stormtroopers. Suddenly Luke is no longer reluctant and is eager to undertake the quest. The evil of the Empire has become personal to him. He is motivated.

4. MENTOR (THE WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN)

By this time many stories will have introduced a Merlin-like character who is the hero's **Mentor.** The relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the most common themes in mythology, and one of the richest in its symbolic value. It stands for the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, god and man.

The Mentor may appear as a wise old wizard (*Star Wars*), a tough drill sergeant (*An Officer and a Gentleman*), or a grizzled old boxing coach (*Rocky*). In the mythology of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show", it was Lou Grant. In *Jaws* it's the crusty Robert Shaw character who knows all about sharks.

The function of Mentors is to prepare the hero to face the unknown. They may give advice, guidance or magical equipment. Obi Wan in *Star Wars* gives Luke his father's light-saber, which he will need in his battles with the dark side of the Force. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Glinda the Good Witch gives Dorothy guidance and the ruby slippers that will eventually get her home again.

However, the Mentor can only go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the unknown alone. Sometimes the Mentor is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going.

5. CROSSING THE FIRST THRESHOLD

Now the hero finally commits to the adventure and fully enters the Special World of the story for the first time by **Crossing the First Threshold.** He agrees to face the consequences of dealing with the problem or challenge posed in the Call to Adventure. This is the moment when the story takes off and the adventure really gets going. The balloon goes up, the ship sails, the romance begins, the plane or the spaceship soars off, the wagon train gets rolling.

Movies are often built in three acts, which can be regarded as representing 1) the hero's decision to act, 2) the action itself, and 3) the consequences of the action.

The First Threshold marks the turning point between Acts One and Two. The hero, having overcome fear, has decided to confront the problem and take action. She is now committed to the journey and there's no turning back.

This is the moment when Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road. The hero of *Beverly Hills Cop*, Axel Foley, decides to defy his boss's order, leaving his Ordinary World of the Detroit streets to investigate his friend's murder in the Special World of Beverly Hills.

6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies

Once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and **Tests**, makes **Allies and Enemies**, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World.

Saloons and seedy bars seem to be good places for these transactions. Countless Westerns take the hero to a saloon where his manhood and determination are tested, and where friends and villains are introduced. Bars are also useful to the hero for obtaining information, for learning the new rules that apply to the Special World.

In *Casablanca*, Rick's Cafe is the den of intrigue in which alliances and enmities are forged, and in which the hero's moral character is constantly tested. In *Star Wars*, the cantina is the setting for the creation of a major alliance with Han Solo and the making of an important enmity with Jabba the Hutt, which pays off two movies later in *Return of the Jedi*. Here in the giddy, surreal, violent atmosphere of the cantina swarming with bizarre aliens, Luke also gets a taste of the exciting and dangerous Special World he has just entered.

Scenes like these allow for character development as we watch the hero and his companions react under stress. In the *Star Wars* cantina, Luke gets to see Han Solo's way of handling a tight situation, and learns that Obi Wan is a warrior wizard of great power.

There are similar sequences in *An Officer and a Gentleman* at about this point, in which the hero makes allies and enemies and meets his "love interest." Several aspects of the hero's character — aggressiveness and hostility, knowledge of street fighting, attitudes about women — are revealed under pressure in these scenes, and sure enough, one of them takes place in a bar.

Of course not all Tests, Alliances, and Enmities are confronted in bars. In many stories, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, these are simply encounters on the road. At this stage on the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy acquires her companions the Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman and Cowardly Lion, and makes enemies such as an orchard full of grumpy talking trees. She passes a number of Tests such as getting Scarecrow off the nail, oiling the Tin Woodsman, and helping the Cowardly Lion deal with his fear.

In *Star Wars* the Tests continue after the cantina scene. Obi Wan teaches Luke about the Force by making him fight blindfolded. The early laser battles with the Imperial fighters are another Test which Luke successfully passes.

7. APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE

The hero comes at last to the edge of a dangerous place, sometimes deep underground, where the object of the quest is hidden. Often it's the headquarters of the hero's greatest enemy, the most dangerous spot in the Special World, the **Inmost Cave**. When the hero enters that fearful place he will cross the second major threshold. Heroes often pause at the gate to prepare, plan, and outwit the villain's guards. This is the phase of **Approach**.

In mythology the Inmost Cave may represent the land of the dead. The hero may have to descend into hell to rescue a loved one (Orpheus), into a cave to fight a dragon and win a treasure (Sigurd in Norse myth), or into a labyrinth to confront a monster (Theseus and the Minotaur).

In the Arthurian stories the Inmost Cave is the Chapel Perilous, the dangerous chamber where the seeker may find the Grail.

In the modern mythology of *Star Wars* the Approach to the Inmost Cave is Luke Skywalker and company being sucked into the Death Star where they will face Darth Vader and rescue Princess Leia. In *The Wizard of Oz* it's Dorothy being kidnapped to the Wicked Witch's baleful castle, and her companions slipping in to save her. The title of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* reveals the Inmost Cave of that film.

Approach covers all the preparations for entering the Inmost Cave and confronting death or supreme danger.

8. THE ORDEAL

Here the fortunes of the hero hit bottom in a direct confrontation with his greatest fear. He faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a

hostile force. **The Ordeal** is a "black moment" for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die. The hero, like Jonah, is "in the belly of the beast."

In *Star Wars* it's the harrowing moment in the bowels of the Death Star when Luke, Leia, and company are trapped in the giant trashmasher. Luke is pulled under by the tentacled monster that lives in the sewage and is held down so long that the audience begins to wonder if he's dead. In *E.T.*, the lovable alien momentarily appears to die on the operating table. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy and her friends are trapped by the Wicked Witch, and it looks like there's no way out. At this point in *Beverly Hills Cop* Axel Foley is in the clutches of the villain's men with a gun to his head.

In *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Zack Mayo endures an Ordeal when his Marine drill instructor launches an all-out drive to torment and humiliate him into quitting the program. It's a psychological life-or-death moment, for if he gives in, his chances of becoming an officer and a gentleman will be dead. He survives the Ordeal by refusing to quit, and the Ordeal changes him. The drill sergeant, a foxy Wise Old Man, has forced him to admit his dependency on others, and from this moment on he is more cooperative and less selfish.

In romantic comedies the death faced by the hero may simply be the temporary death of the relationship, as in the second movement of the old standard plot, "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl." The hero's chances of connecting with the object of affection look their bleakest.

This is a critical moment in any story, an Ordeal in which the hero must die or appear to die so that she can be born again. It's a major source of the magic of the heroic myth. The experiences of the preceding stages have led us, the audience, to identify with the hero and her fate. What happens to the hero happens to us. We are encouraged to experience the brink-of-death moment with her. Our emotions are temporarily depressed so that they can be revived by the hero's return from death. The result of this revival is a feeling of elation and exhilaration.

The designers of amusement park thrill rides know how to use this principle. Roller coasters make their passengers feel as if they're going to die, and there's a great thrill that comes from brushing up against death and surviving it. You're never more alive than when you're looking death in the face.

This is also the key element in rites of passage or rituals of initiation into fraternities and secret societies. The initiate is forced to taste death in some terrible

experience, and then is allowed to experience resurrection as he is reborn as a new member of the group. The hero of every story is an initiate being introduced to the mysteries of life and death.

Every story needs such a life-or-death moment in which the hero or his goals are in mortal jeopardy.

9. REWARD (SEIZING THE SWORD)

Having survived death, beaten the dragon, or slain the Minotaur, hero and audience have cause to celebrate. The hero now takes possession of the treasure she has come seeking, her **Reward**. It might be a special weapon like a magic sword, or a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land.

Sometimes the "sword" is knowledge and experience that leads to greater understanding and a reconciliation with hostile forces.

In *Star Wars* , Luke rescues Princess Leia and captures the plans of the Death Star, keys to defeating Darth Vader.

Dorothy escapes from the Wicked Witch's castle with the Witch's broomstick and the ruby slippers, keys to getting back home.

At this point the hero may also settle a conflict with a parent. *In Return of the Jedi*, Luke is reconciled with Darth Vader, who turns out to be his father and not such a bad guy after all.

The hero may also be reconciled with the opposite sex, as in romantic comedies. In many stories the loved one is the treasure the hero has come to win or rescue, and there is often a love scene at this point to celebrate the victory.

From the hero's point of view, members of the opposite sex may appear to be **Shapeshifters**, an archetype of change. They seem to shift constantly in form or age, reflecting the confusing and constantly changing aspects of the opposite sex. Tales of vampires, werewolves and other shapechangers are symbolic echoes of this shifting quality which men and women see in each other.

The hero's Ordeal may grant a better understanding of the opposite sex, an ability to see beyond the shifting outer appearance, leading to a reconciliation.

The hero may also become more attractive as a result of having survived the Ordeal. He has earned the title of "hero" by having taken the supreme risk on behalf of the community.

10. The Road Back

The hero's not out of the woods yet. We're crossing into Act Three now as the hero begins to deal with the consequences of confronting the dark forces of the Ordeal. If she has not yet managed to reconcile with the parent, the gods, or the hostile forces, they may come raging after her. Some of the best chase scenes spring up at this point, as the hero is pursued on **The Road Back** by the vengeful forces she has disturbed by Seizing the sword, the elixir, or the treasure.

Thus Luke and Leia are furiously pursued by Darth Vader as they escape the Death Star. The Road Back in *E.T.* is the moonlight bicycle flight of Elliott and E. T. as they escape from "Keys" (Peter Coyote), who represents repressive governmental authority.

This stage marks the decision to return to the Ordinary World. The hero realizes that the Special World must eventually be left behind, and there are still dangers, temptations, and tests ahead.

11. Resurrection

In ancient times, hunters and warriors had to be purified before they returned to their communities, because they had blood on their hands. The hero who has been to the realm of the dead must be reborn and cleansed in one last Ordeal of death and **Resurrection** before returning to the Ordinary World of the living.

This is often a second life-and-death moment, almost a replay of the death and rebirth of the Ordeal. Death and darkness get in one last, desperate shot before being finally defeated. It's a kind of final exam for the hero, who must be tested once more to see if he has really learned the lessons of the Ordeal.

The hero is transformed by these moments of death-and-rebirth, and is able to return to ordinary life reborn as a new being with new insights.

The Star Wars films play with this element constantly. The films of the "original trilogy" feature a final battle scene in which Luke is almost killed, appears to be dead for a moment, and then miraculously survives. Each Ordeal wins him new knowledge and command over the Force. He is transformed into a new being by his experience.

Axel Foley in the climactic sequence of *Beverly Hills Cop* once again faces death at the hands of the villain, but is rescued by the intervention of the Beverly Hills

police force. He emerges from the experience with a greater respect for cooperation, and is a more complete human being.

An Officer and a Gentleman offers a more complex series of final ordeals, as the hero faces death in a number of ways. Zack's selfishness dies as he gives up the chance for a personal athletic trophy in favor of helping another cadet over an obstacle. His relationship with his girlfriend seems to be dead, and he must survive the crushing blow of his best friend's suicide. As if that weren't enough, he also endures a final hand-to-hand, life-or-death battle with his drill instructor, but survives it all and is transformed into the gallant "officer and gentleman" of the title.

12. RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR

The hero Returns to the Ordinary World, but the journey is meaningless unless she brings back some **Elixir**, treasure, or lesson from the Special World. The Elixir is a magic potion with the power to heal. It may be a great treasure like the Grail that magically heals the wounded land, or it simply might be knowledge or experience that could be useful to the community someday.

Dorothy returns to Kansas with the knowledge that she is loved, and that "There's no place like home." E.T. returns home with the experience of friendship with humans. Luke Skywalker defeats Darth Vader (for the time being) and restores peace and order to the galaxy.

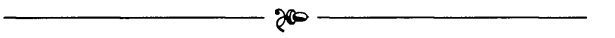
Zack Mayo wins his commission and leaves the Special World of the training base with a new perspective. In the sparkling new uniform of an officer (with a new attitude to match) he literally sweeps his girlfriend off her feet and carries her away.

Sometimes the Elixir is treasure won on the quest, but it may be love, freedom, wisdom, or the knowledge that the Special World exists and can be survived. Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell.

Unless something is brought back from the Ordeal in the Inmost Cave, the hero is doomed to repeat the adventure. Many comedies use this ending, as a foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place.

To recap the Hero's Journey:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.
3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
4. are encouraged by a MENTOR to
5. CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where
6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
8. where they endure the ORDEAL.
9. They take possession of their REWARD and
10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World.



The Hero's Journey is a skeletal framework that should be fleshed out with the details and surprises of the individual story. The structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely. The order of the stages given here is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power.

The values of the Hero's Journey are what's important. The images of the basic version — young heroes seeking magic swords from old wizards, maidens risking death to save loved ones, knights riding off to fight evil dragons in deep caves, and so on — are just symbols of universal life experiences. The symbols can be changed infinitely to suit the story at hand and the needs of the society.

The Hero's Journey is easily translated to contemporary dramas, comedies, romances, or action-adventures by substituting modern equivalents for the symbolic

The archetypes can also be regarded as personified symbols of various human qualities. Like the major arcana cards of the Tarot, they stand for the aspects of a complete human personality. Every good story reflects the total human story, the universal human condition of being born into this world, growing, learning, struggling to become an individual, and dying. Stories can be read as metaphors for the general human situation, with characters who embody universal, archetypal qualities, comprehensible to the group as well as the individual.

THE MOST COMMON AND USEFUL ARCHETYPES

For the storyteller, certain character archetypes are indispensable tools of the trade. You can't tell stories without them. The archetypes that occur most frequently in stories, and that seem to be the most useful for the writer to understand, are:

HERO
MENTOR (Wise Old Man or Woman)
THRESHOLD GUARDIAN
HERALD
SHAPESHIFTER
SHADOW
ALLY
TRICKSTER

There are, of course, many more archetypes; as many as there are human qualities to dramatize in stories. Fairy tales are crowded with archetypal figures: the Wolf, the Hunter, the Good Mother, the Wicked Stepmother, the Fairy Godmother, the Witch, the Prince or Princess, the Greedy Innkeeper, and so forth, who perform highly specialized functions. Jung and others have identified many psychological archetypes, such as the *Puer Aeternus* or eternal boy, who can be found in myths as the ever-youthful Cupid, in stories as characters such as Peter Pan, and in life as men who never want to grow up.

Particular genres of modern stories have their specialized character types, such as the "Whore with the Heart of Gold" or the "Arrogant West Point Lieutenant" in Westerns, the "Good Cop/Bad Cop" pairing in buddy pictures, or the "Tough but Fair Sergeant" in war movies.