**The Monomyth and the Movies**

**Overview**

Because of the success of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* in using the hero quest story as a framework for a movie plot, film schools around the world have been teaching and pushing this template for screen writers to form their stories.

The book that inspired Lucas and is used in most film writing schools is Joseph Campbell’s academic work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

In the forward to his college text, *188 Stage Hero’s Journey (Monomyth) – Smart Screenplay Writing*, Kal Bishop writes that the monomyth is the template upon which the vast majority of successful stories and Hollywood blockbusters are based.

The terminology of the monomyth is most often metaphoric and applies to all successful stories and screenplays, from *The Godfather* (1972) to *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) to *Annie Hall* (1977) to *Lord of the Rings* (2003) to *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) to *Thelma and Louise* (1991) to *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

In the thinking of most screenplay teachers and movie critics, there is only one story, and all stories can fit into the pattern of the monomyth.

By using the framework of the hero’s journey, the writer gains constructural advantages.

**Structure of the monomyth:**

1) attempts to tap into the unconscious expectations the audience

2) gives the writer more structural elements on which to hang his plot than simply 3 or 4 acts, plot points, mid-point and so on

3) gives the writer a tangible process for building and releasing dissonance (establishing and achieving catharses, of which there are usually 4)

4) Tells the writer what to write. For example, at a certain stage of the story, the focus should be on the Call to Adventure and the micro-elements within

Campbell’s archetypal story has become so pervasive in the movie industry that critics are starting to complain of its overuse. However, writers, producers, and directors continue to use it because the framework continues to bring rewards, both financial and artistic.

**The Monomyth Template (Characteristics/Traits)**

**The Hero:** someone who has given his life to something larger than himself/herself & performs a series of deeds

1) Spiritual Hero: male or female, with a special birth

or remarkable childhood, shows early signs of being special, has uncommon access to other

planes of being – telepathic, talks to God, etc.

(Examples: Luke Skywalker, Wyatt Earp, the

Golden Child)

2) Warrior – Lover Hero: ordinary person, usually a

stepchild or neglected youngest child, special in

some way, such as being especially clever, kind or

resourceful, often receives these gifts through

some sort of initiation/ training in the military or

police academy or criminal gang, or spy school or

… (Examples: Han Solo, Doc Holiday, Indiana

Jones)

**Hero will perform 2 types of deeds:**

1) Physical act of heroism – for example, saving a life

at the risk of his own life

2) Spiritual act of heroism – for example, finding an

exceptional way of experiencing life and then

returning to tell the world

**Quest =** a journey taken in search of something of value, such as a beautiful prince or princess; a treasure or magical charm; an abstract concept, such as the meaning of life; or simply searching for one’s “roots,” such as a parent that the hero has never known

**Two parts to every personality:** a light and a dark side

So, **2 versions of the hero quest** exist, one positive and the other negative. In the positive version the hero performs heroic deeds in service to some higher calling: his family, nation, the truth, etc. (Examples: Luke Skywalker, Francis Mayes, Wyatt Earp, *The Gladiator*). In the negative version, the hero uses his powers to harm society, family, country, etc. His quest becomes negative when he gives in to the temptations offered by the enemy, or by his own obsessions and needs (Annikan Skywalker, Michael Corleone of *The Godfather*, *Scarface*’s Tony Montana, and the drug-addicted, obsessive rock-diva in *The Rose*).

**STEPS of the Monomyth (the Hero’s Journey)**

**1) Special birth or upbringing** – heroes are almost always drawn from extremes, either a prince or a pauper. Sometimes, hero is child of distinguished parents but because of some difficulty surrounding his birth, such as a prophecy or curse, he is sent far away into the wilderness or wasteland to be reared in humble circumstances

Examples:

\* Luke Skywalker, son of Darth Vader and a queen; he and his sister are hidden and raised on separate frontier worlds

\* Moses is born a slave but raised a prince

\* Michael Corleone is the son of Don Vito Corleone but is raised not to be a gangster

\* Annikan Skywalker is born of a virgin (in Episode 1, when Guigon asks Annikan’s mother who the father was, she replies, “He had no father.” She goes on to explain that she just became pregnant.

**2) The Call to Adventure**

In mythology, the hero’s journey begins with “a call to

adventure.” Destiny’s herald, usually something

ordinary – a frog, a deer, a humble droid – carries an

important message for the one who is prepared to

receive it.

Examples:

\* As *Star Wars: A New Hope* begins, a battle in space

rages between the evil powers of darkness (the Galactic Empire) and the forces of good (the Rebel Alliance). Princess Leia sends a plea for help to Jedi Knight Obi Wan Kenobi on the planet of Tatooine. The hand of Fate, in the form of Jawa traders, brings her message to Luke Skywalker, a young farm boy. When Luke sees the message hologram, he is drawn into the quest to rescue the princess and ultimately save the galaxy.

\* Wyatt Earp is called to the adventure by his brothers.

\* Dorothy is called by her little dog, Toto.

**3) The Wise and Helpful Guide**

Often the young, inexperienced hero finds in the early

stages of the adventure that he cannot proceed without aid. Gods or goddesses often aid the hero, or it may be a hermit, wizard, shepherd, or special animal who appears to supply the hero with the tools and advice required to succeed. He often gives the hero a goal. The guide does not stay with the hero until the end because ultimately, the hero must face and conquer evil alone.

Examples:

\* Obi Wan Kenobi to Luke Skywalker. By telling Luke that his father was a star pilot and Jedi Knight, Obi Wan gives Luke a goal: he aspires to be a Jedi Knight like his father.

\* Hera to Jason of Argonaut fame

\* Gandolf to Bilbo in the Lord of the Rings

\* Don Vito Corleone to Michael Corleone

\* Katherine, the actress who advises Francis Mayes in *Under the Tuscan Sun*

**4) The Magic Talisman**

The guide passes on the tools necessary for success. Often such tools have magic properties or a deep symbolic meaning.

Examples:

\* Obi Wan passes the light saber from father to son.

\* Dorothy’s ruby slippers

\* The Don’s chair

\* Wyatt Earp’s Buntline Special (even used as recently as 2016 in the tv show “Wynona”)

**5) The Refusal of the Call**

The hero or heroine may at first refuse to face the challenges, but will suffer greatly for this refusal before answering the call. Eventually, the hero will be forced by circumstances to undertake the quest.

Examples:

\* Hercules will lose his wife and children.

\* Luke Skywalker will lose his foster parents, Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, cutting him off from his old life and giving him motivation to join Ben and the droids in their quest to rescue the princess and save the rebellion. He is now cut off from his old life; there is no way to go back.

\* Dorothy will lose “home.”

\* Michael Corleone will almost lose his father.

\* Francis Mayes will endure exile in a divorcee apartment.

**6) The First Threshold**

Even before committing himself to the journey, the hero will face obstacles. Entry into the realm of adventure and the spirit is always guarded. The hero always has to defeat the first obstacle or cross the first threshold before he can set out.

Examples:

\* Luke Skywalker must have a ship and shipmates. Mos Eisley represents another threshold that Luke must cross in order to begin the journey. Here he finds a ship and an unlikely pair of hero partners.

\* Francis Mayes has to purchase the Italian villa.

\* Neo in The Matrix has to pass through “the rabbit hole”

\* Anne Darrow will have to survive her kidnapping and sacrifice before she can really start her adventure (*King Kong*)

**7) Threshold Guardians**

Part way through the hero’s journey, he/she must endure a long and dangerous path of trials, tests, and ordeals.

Examples:

\* In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone has to defeat the crime commission.

\* Hercules’s seven labors

\* In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Jason fights the hydra.

\* In *Star Wars*, the Sand People, the Storm Troopers, the Bantha and a host of others must be defeated.

**8) Hero Partners**

Often subservient (rank below) to the hero but at the same time co-equal in their own rights, accompany the hero to the “house” of evil, but ultimately, the hero has to battle the evil villain alone.

Examples:

\* Han Solo to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*

\* R2D2, Chewbacca, C3PO to Luke in *Star Wars*

\* Doc Holiday to Wyatt Earp

**9) Mystical Insight**

Often spiritual heroes are given mystical insight available only to a few. Can be special training that gives the hero a new view of life and new skills with which to deal with life. Each time the hero gains insight, he/she is transformed into a new person. The hero of the monomyth must go through these changes in order to progress

Examples:

\* Luke Skywalker and the force

\* The Gladiator’s military training

\* James Bond going to spy school

**10) The Temptation**

The quest never goes smoothly because the hero will be tempted to leave the “true path” by succumbing (giving in) to some kind of temptation – a beautiful woman, easier lifestyle, etc.

Examples:

\* Luke Skywalker is tempted by the “power of the Dark Side of the Force.”

\* Hamlet’s indecision (giving in to fear)

\* Michael Corleone’s wife tries to sway him.

\* Dorothy can save herself much trouble if she would simply remove those ruby slippers.

**11) The Labyrinth**

The quest always involves a descent into the underworld or to some other frightening place. The hero may have to do this several times before achieving his goal, or this could be the ultimate stage of the hero’s journey.

Examples:

\* Luke visits the Mos Eisley cantina, the Death Star,

the Degobah cave, Cloud City, Jabba’s Palace, and the New Death Star

\* The heroine of *Clueless* attends a party in the

basement of a building

**12) Hero deeds and Dragon Slayers**

In myths and fairy tales, dragons guard treasure or

maidens, yet can use neither. They represent all the

arbitrary forces that hold the riches and creativity of

life in bondage, while wreaking senseless destruction. They keep the hero from the mates and wealth that he deserves and therefore have to be defeated before the quest can continue.

Examples:

Individual battles must be won (defeat of the

Threshold Guardians), but ultimately …

\* the evil empire must be destroyed so that the galaxy can again be free of tyranny (*Star Wars*)

\* the villa has to be rebuilt (*Under the Tuscan* *Sun*)

\* Michael Corleone must defeat the head of the five Mafia families of New York (*The Godfather*)

**13) The Use of Power**

Every person is given the powers necessary to get

him through life. The hero is also given mystical

insight or special powers equal to that of the dragon;

otherwise, he would not be able to defeat the beast.

THIS POWER is of a different sort and his use of this

force “for right not might” is what makes him a hero.

When he uses these powers to aid the “dragon,” he becomes the negative version of the hero, the good person who has given in to temptation. It is this use of power that decides whether the protagonist is a hero or villain.

Examples:

\* Each time Luke uses the power of the force in anger

or hatred, he loses in some way. Only when he

finds that quiet place detached from base emotions can he overcome his inner hatred and win.

\* Each time Annikan Skywalker uses his powers for negative purposes, he draws closer to the “dark side” and away from all those who love him.

\* When Michael Corleone uses his power for the

revenge-killing of his brother or in denying his ex-wife access to his children, he loses a little more of his soul.

**14) The Sacrifice**

In order to win, the hero must sacrifice something,

quite often, his very life.

Examples:

\* To win her independence and her new family,

Francis Mayes will have to give up Marcello, her Italian lover.

\* To defeat the Sicilian and Italian Mafias, Michael

Corleone will see his daughter murdered.

\* In *Star Wars*, Obi Wan Kenobi will give up his life so

that his compatriots can escape; Han Solo will be encased in carbonite and have to go through death and resurrection; Luke will lose his hand and finally accept death at the hands of the Emperor rather than join him; only the sacrifice of his father, Annikan Skywalker will save Luke’s

life.

**15) The Prize**

If the hero survives, he will return to society, often with something to share: new knowledge, renewed commitment, or greater compassion and wisdom. The hero may be rewarded with marital bliss in a royal wedding, or by living “happily every after,” or by learning a great “truth.”

If the hero walks on the “dark side,” he will ultimately lose the prize and, through his own dark acts, bring tragedy to himself.

Examples:

\* Francis Mayes will win a home, a new family, and a new life.

\* Michael Corleone has either killed or alienated all those around him. The prize for which he has sought hardest, family loyalty, will be denied him. In the end, he will lose his soul and die alone, isolated from all who once loved him.

\* In *Star Wars*, Han Solo and Luke will be recognized by their peers; Han Solo wins freedom for the galaxy and the princess; Luke Skywalker wins freedom for the galaxy and saves his father’s soul. It is also a logical assumption that Luke will re- establish the Jedi Knights.

\* Macbeth loses his marriage, his wife, the respect of his peers, love of his generals and ultimately his life, and his head.