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Hero Mythology



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reared by a surrogate family of commoners and his life is in danger during childhood. The gender of the hero can be both male and female, with male heroes overrepresented in certain cultures and/or genres and also in the scholarship.

Synonyms

[Hero's Journey](#); [Hero's Quest](#); [Heroic Myth](#); [Heroic Narrative Pattern](#); [Monomyth](#)

Definition

Heroic Monomyth is a narrative pattern found in myth, legend, folktale, fairy tale, and fiction consisting in the characteristic “there and back again” journey of the main protagonist. The hero leaves the world known to him, crosses a dangerous threshold, and enters a (mysterious, magical, or just foreign) Otherworld. The hero is assisted by helpers and receives gifts from donors while confronting trials and challenges. At the pivot of the journey, the hero undergoes symbolic death and rebirth, is marked, and transformed, but wins a boon to be brought back across the threshold into the world of everyday reality. Extended forms of hero's myth contain also details about the conception and birth of the hero, who typically has divine or otherwise special parents but is being

The Hero's Journey: The Discovery of the Pattern and the Scholarship

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous authors have noticed reoccurring patterns and motifs in the mythological and legendary narratives about heroes and various proposals for how the “archetype” is to be constructed were presented by scholars such as J. G. von Hahn (1876), Adolf Bauer (1882), Emmanuel Cosquin (1908), and Alexander Haggerty Krappe (1933) – for full list, see Dundes (1990). The most influential theorists formulating the heroic narrative pattern are Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, Vladimir Propp, and Joseph Campbell, whose core theses are summarized in the chapters below.

Hand in hand with the various models of the hero's journey came also various explanations for its existence. The spread of the story could be explained by the common cultural heritage of the Indo-Europeans (Von Hahn 1876) combined with the diffusion of the narrative pattern beyond the borders of the cultural–linguistic area. Others suggested the origin in the supposedly widespread ancient rituals of warrior's initiation and/or king's enthronement (Lord Raglan 1934). The relative

stability of the pattern has been also interpreted as a result of certain constant features of human psychology (Rank 1990, [orig. 1909]). These theories are now outdated, at least in their original form and ambition; however, each of them captures one aspect, which probably plays a role in the development of the pattern.

A different type of explanation is suggested by narratologists: The stability of the structure could be caused either by its basic nature (the simplest adventure story that works) or genre constraints, fixed clichés given by the heroic legend or folktale genres (Propp 1968). However, the question still remains why the clichés and formulas developed in this particular way.

The hero's journey was popularized by Joseph Campbell in the 1960s and especially in the 1980s when George Lucas, the writer and director of the *Star Wars*, confessed that Campbell's work was a great inspiration to him. While Campbell's book became widely read, the academia turned away from the topic. According to the critics, Campbell's presentation of the hero's journey was too universalistic, too infused with mysticism and spirituality, too generalizing and was not based on any systematic study but was rather a product of intuitive and impressionistic thinking (Segal 1987, 5). At the same time, the scholarly trends in general turned away from grand universalistic theories of this sort.

While the hero's journey model can be and still is used in quality academic scholarship (e.g., Pagé 2018), it remains most popular outside the academia – in the genres of self-help books (Craig 2017; Smith 2018), screenwriter's and fiction writer's guides (Vogler 2020), or as a useful tool in psychotherapy (Williams 2019).

The Birth of the Hero (Otto Rank)

Otto Rank (1884–1939), one of Sigmund Freud's disciples, focuses in his book *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (orig. 1909) primarily on the birth and early life of the hero. From an analysis of a number of heroic narratives (Sargon, Moses, Karna, Oedipus, Paris, Telephus, Perseus, Gilgamesh, Cyrus, Tristan, Romulus, Heracles, Jesus,

Siegfried, Lohengrin), he distills the following formula: The hero is the child of noble parents, and his father is usually a king (or god). His birth was preceded by difficulties, such as a long period of infertility, or secret intercourse between his parents, who thus broke a ban or a taboo. Before conception or during pregnancy, a prophecy or dream appears that warns against the birth of the hero, usually because the birth of a son brings a threat turned against the father or a father-like figure. The hero is almost always sent by water into the unknown soon after birth (in the rest of the cases, he is abandoned in the wilderness). He is rescued by animals or commoners (shepherds) and is nursed by an animal mother (e.g., *lupa capitolina*, the capitoline she-wolf who reared Romulus and Remus) or a woman of low birth. When he grows up, he finds his original parents, exacts revenge on his father (or a dark father-like figure), and achieves honors.

It is probably not surprising that Rank understands this pattern as an expression of the fulfillment of oedipal fantasies (sexual rivalry of the son with the father) and as a consequence of separation anxiety. The child feels that he or she is not being loved properly, and so many children may develop fantasies of having been adopted and having their real, much better parents elsewhere.

Regardless of the reason for the emergence of the heroic birth pattern, its widespread occurrence in the Western literature and pop culture is striking. Contemporary fictional heroes like Superman, Harry Potter, or Luke Skywalker follow this pattern very closely.

The Three Parts of Life (Lord Raglan)

Independently of Rank (Segal 1990, xxiv), lord Raglan (1885–1964) in his book *The Hero* (2003, [orig. 1936]) arrives at a very similar structure to Rank in terms of the hero's birth and youth. Unlike Rank, however, Raglan does not focus solely on the beginning of the hero's life but follows him all the way from birth to death. The hero's journey sequence can be summarized in 22 points:

The hero's mother is a maiden of royal lineage (1), his father is a king (2) – a close relative of his mother (3), but usually he is only a stepfather, for in reality the hero is a son of a god (5), the circumstances of the hero's birth are unusual or miraculous (4), his stepfather or other paternal figure seeks his life (6) and the hero is sent or escapes to a distant land (8) where he is raised by surrogate parents; the hero is unaware of his true parentage (9), returns to his native kingdom after reaching adulthood (10), defeats an old king, giant, dragon, or other monster (11), marries a princess (12), and becomes king (13). He reigns uneventfully (14), prescribes new laws (15), but later loses the favor of the people or the gods (16), is banished (17), and dies a mysterious death (18), usually on a hilltop (19); his children, if any, do not succeed him (20), his body is not buried (21), yet many tombs and sepulchers are named after him (22).

Raglan uses more myths and legends than Rank to construct his formula (but omits Jesus for fear of publisher and reader reaction). He gives each hero an individual score based on how close his story is to the ideal type obtained through the intersection of common themes. Raglan's formula is more comprehensive than Rank's and includes all three parts of human life: childhood, adulthood, and the end of life, which correspond to three initiations: The childhood initiation is the symbolic birth to surrogate parents, his arrival on the water; the adult initiation is the symbolic death and rebirth in the heroic ordeal; and the third initiation is the final ordeal, ending in a mysterious death. All the major rites of passage in human life are thus contained in the formula: i. baptism (i.e., the symbolic admission of the child into the family and society, whatever the ritual is called), ii. initiation into adulthood followed by marriage, and iii. Burial. In all three cases, it is a journey to the Otherworld, but each time in a slightly different way. The formula itself works in a loop, as the hero defeats the old king in his youth, ushering in a new era of abundance, but at the end of his life he himself becomes the old king and must perish according to the same logic: "the king must die."

Raglan follows J.G. Frazer (1900) in his grand theory of myth: All myths are reflections of rituals and all the important rituals are based on a symbolic logic of similarities – e.g., the king is magically connected to the land and prosperity and also to the year cycle. To magically enhance prosperity, the old king must be killed and replaced with a new one, a fresh source of creative powers. According to Frazer, this replacement had to be done every year, not literally, but symbolically, to help the crops grow. According to Frazer and Raglan, this imitative magic focused on prosperity was once widespread throughout the world, which explains the ubiquity of the structure of the hero's quest and the motif of the dying king.

The Functions and Characters (Vladimir Propp)

Soviet folklorist Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (1895–1970) is the author of a formula derived from the formal analysis of several hundred Russian fairy tales (*Morphology of the Folktale* 1968, orig. 1928). It is therefore source material of a different type than that used by Rank or Raglan. The core of Propp's formula concerns only the quest itself, the hero's birth is often outside the focus of the fairy tale, and as fairy tales usually end with a wedding and a happy ending, the third phase of the hero's life is absent. Propp comes up with the radical thesis that even though there can be great many colorful characters in fairy tales, functionally there are only seven: the *hero*, the *villain*, the *princess*, the *dispatcher*, the *donor*, the *helper*, and the *false hero*. The hero's story is structured into three basic units: In the first part of the story, the hero is at home and the *villain* attempts to cause harm by seducing or deceiving the hero or someone close to him. The villain eventually succeeds and the *lack* occurs: Someone is kidnapped, something is stolen, and a problem appears. The hero sets out on a journey to the Otherworld (sent by the *dispatcher*) and on the way he must enlist a *helper* or helpers and receive powerful magical items from the *donor*, to help him on his quest. The climax of the journey to the Otherworld is then a

confrontation with the villain, during which the hero is wounded or marked, but he eventually prevails. He must travel back from the Otherworld, but back home he finds the *false hero* boasting of the deeds performed by the hero. The false hero thus plays the role of a kind of villain for the last third of the story. He must also be confronted and triumphed over. The sign the hero has received in the previous encounter with the villain serves as proof of his deeds and plays a crucial role. In the end, the hero is completely victorious, undergoing a positive transformation and winning the hand of the princess.

One of the interesting insights that emerge from a closer look at the 31-function structure presented by Propp is its “fractal” nature: the basic pattern is composed of three elements: (1) appearance of a lack – (2) difficult task – (3) removal of the initial lack. This pattern appears many times in every story, sometimes nested several times within itself. The hero, whose parents have been kidnapped by the villain (lack), must defeat the villain (difficult task) in order to get the parents back (removal of the lack), but on the way to get them he needs a magical resource (lack), which he must obtain by completing a difficult task given by the donor. Likewise, the king often assigns the hero a difficult task to prove that he is the true hero in the third phase of the story. Even the villain himself has his own cycle: At the beginning, for example, he lacks a princess, so he must complete the difficult task of kidnapping her to make up for his lack. However, the kidnapping process itself often has preparatory phases forming further villain micro-cycles. The fairy tale itself can therefore have a very intricate structure, but in fact is composed only of these interlaced triads and only seven character roles.

The Monomyth (Joseph Campbell)

American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1972 [orig. 1949]) offers a formula, which he calls “The Monomyth,” meaning a universal structure of heroic myth. This pattern, like Propp’s, is concerned virtually only with the hero’s

journey itself; the hero’s birth and death are mentioned, but only as an external framework, the focus of which is the journey to the Otherworld. Unlike Propp, however, Campbell draws his examples from stories of the genres used by Rank and Raglan, that is, not from fairy tales but from heroic myths and legends. That said, unlike all the other authors mentioned, “Campbell’s formula is a synthetic, artificial composite that Campbell cannot apply *in toto* to any one hero” (Dundes 1990, 187).

Campbell’s formula has a total of 17 items divided into three successive sections corresponding to the three phases of initiation (separation–liminality–reintegration; more on this below).

The story begins with phase (1) “The Call to Adventure”: The hero is suddenly presented with the possibility of a journey to the mysterious, but also terrifying, Otherworld. The hero’s first reaction, (2) “Refusal of the Call,” is hesitation and reluctance to embark on the journey. Then comes (3) Supernatural Aid, often in the form of a helper or a wise person who assists the hero on his way; this is a function similar to the *dispatcher* or *helper* in Propp’s model. Now the hero can Cross the Threshold (4), finally leaving the everyday world. This is when the first of the symbolic deaths occurs, (5), “Belly of the Whale.” The hero is temporarily devoured by a monster or, for example, hammered into a barrel and thrown into the sea.

What follows is the journey through the Otherworld itself (6; “The Road of Trials”), full of dangers and challenges, often including temporary failure on the hero’s part. Then comes an encounter with a fascinating female being (7; “Meeting with the Goddess”), whose beauty and appeal captivate the hero. The hero must resist the temptation (8; “Woman as the Temptress”). What follows is the (sometimes confrontational) encounter with the father fig. (9; “Atonement with the Father”). After these trials the hero is transformed (10; “Apotheosis”). He receives a powerful elixir, the Mead of Poetry, the Golden Fleece, etc. (11; “The Ultimate Boon”).

The hero is seemingly at the height of his power and is content in the Otherworld, so his

initial impulse is not to return (12; “Refusal of the Return”), just as he did not want to leave the everyday world at the beginning of his journey. The temptation to stay is strong; it takes more effort to be able to return to normality than was to leave it. The hero eventually escapes from the Otherworld (13; “The Magic Flight”), pursued by wrathful guards. As with the journey to the Otherworld, he needs the assistance of a wise guide or faithful helper (14; “Rescue from Without”). He finally evades his pursuers and successfully returns to the everyday world (15; “The Crossing of the Return Threshold”), but the last barrier itself, like “The Belly of the Whale,” is also a moment of symbolic death: The hero flies at the last moment between the colliding rocks and loses something valuable in the process, is scarred, and symbolically castrated, bearing the mark of the initiate. Because the hero resisted both the inertia of his initial position and the exalted state found in the Otherworld, he finds an inner balance (16; “Master of Two Worlds”). He has not become a god. He is not perfect, but whole. What the journey has brought him is the freedom to live, to be creative, to fulfill his destiny without fear, and to help others through what he has learned (17; “Freedom to Live”).

As can be seen from this summary, Campbell’s pattern is infused with psychological, mystical, and self-developmental messages and implications and thus works as a kind of a bridge from the earlier mythographic and folkloristic scholarship into the contemporary self-actualizational and therapeutic focus.

When we look at what all four patterns have in common, the outlined structure could lend itself easily to a Freudian interpretation, since the most important confrontation of the hero in the Otherworld (the killing of the dragon, ogre, or evil king) could be seen as a thinly veiled patricide. In case of the Raglan and Rank patterns the highest score has (so the closest to the prototypical form is) the myth of Oedipus. This is, however, strongly contested by Jean Joseph Goux.

The Failed Hero (Jean Joseph Goux)

The French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux (*1943) provides an important commentary on the problem of the heroic monomyth (1993). Goux observes that the myth of Oedipus, which is the prototype of the monomyth in Rank and Raglan, is actually an exception in the context of other Greek heroic myths. For the other heroes (Perseus, Bellerophon, Jason, etc.) do not kill the old king, but instead accept the task of killing the monster given by the old king. Oedipus, however, manages to kill the *dispatcher* before he can accept any task from him. The other heroes are tasked with killing mostly female monsters (Gorgon, Chimera, Echidna, etc.), while Oedipus kills a human man. Oedipus later does defeat the Sphinx, but purely by reason, by solving a riddle, not heroically in a duel, and the Sphinx commits suicide. Goux infers from this that the normal course of action (based on most myths) is for the hero to acknowledge paternal authority, to accept the heroic task of killing the monstrous feminine, which Goux argues is a representation of the pernicious aspect of the mother – the young man’s captor, who wants to be tied to him forever by the umbilical cord. The hero, therefore, finally cuts himself off from his mother through this act and enters the adult world. The paternal figure cannot help but pay homage to the hero after the task is completed, and the hero’s initiation is brought to a successful conclusion. He has “defeated” his father by accomplishing a difficult task, thus channeling his youthful aggression toward developmental goals and not toward a family member. As a result, the hero acquires a wife who is not his mother.

According to Goux, Oedipus is therefore an example of the failure of the initiation process – instead of symbolically killing his mother (i.e., separating from her), the hero kills his father. The other heroes have learned to express their violence physically and against monsters, and thus perform heroic acts. However, Oedipus turns his violence against a man, his own father, and very unheroically murders him. As a result, then, his confrontation with the monstrous Sphinx

is purely intellectual and lacks the dimension of liberating violence. Because he has killed his (literal) father and not his (symbolic) mother, he necessarily ends up in the arms of his literal mother, from whom he has been unable to separate himself, and thus, the tragedy is complete.

The Heroine

As readers may have noticed, in all the theories and formulas mentioned, the female heroine is completely ignored. The authors of the theories were men and wrote from a male perspective. However, the bias is not completely caused by the scholars, as the source material itself – the heroic myth and legend of the Indo-European and Semitic cultural areas – is itself predominantly male-centered. It is only in the genre of folktale where we find female protagonists sometimes as often as male ones. In the heroic legends, female protagonists exist, but rarely travel to Otherworlds to struggle with monsters and bring booty. Heroines of this sort are rather exceptions proving the rule.

In response to this lack of studies about female heroines by Campbell and his predecessors, there have been a number of publications by female authors that attempt to outline what such a heroine story looks like (Murdock 1990; Frankel 2010; Gould 2006; Estés 1996). These authors are mostly Jungians, therapists, and work within the alternative spirituality milieu. Their works are written in an even more popularizing style than Campbell's, and typically contain a strong element of self-help genre. How do the authors deal with the subject?

Maureen Murdock (*1945), for example, offers essentially a two-phase cycle that begins like Campbell's, with the heroine trying to emulate men and behave in a conquering and proactive manner, but at the height of her seemingly successful career she suddenly experiences a breakdown and is confronted with feelings of inner emptiness. It is because the heroine has neglected her womanhood that she must turn to. It is clear from this brief characterization that the formula is not primarily inspired by heroic

myths and legends, but rather by the author's therapeutic experiences. Even though the formula seems primarily tailored to contemporary women trying to reconcile career and family, we would find parallels in myths and legends. Examples include the type of heroine who disguises herself as a man in her youth, such as Hervör from the Old Norse *Saga of Hervör* (Tolkien 1960) or Mulan, the protagonist of the Chinese *Ballad of Mulan* (Kwa 2010). These heroines take on a male role for a limited time, succeed in a man's world, but eventually put down their armor and sword and become women again. This initiatory transvestitism makes sense in terms of the inverse logic associated with liminality – after all, some male heroes (Thor, Achilles) dress up as women as part of their initiation.

According to Valerie Frankel (*1965), however, such masquerading as a man is not the true virtue of the heroine: “[T]he heroine's true role is to be neither hero nor his prize” (Frankel 2010, 3). Her model assumes an inversion of the masculine. While the male must confront and integrate his Anima, representing intuition, emotion, and subtlety, the female heroine must integrate the Animus, the source of inner strength and rationality. While the hero's mentor is a wise old man, the heroine has a feminine mentor at her disposal. While the hero gets a magic sword, the heroine gets magic nuts. However, there is one clear asymmetry – the absence of physical combat in most women's stories. The exceptions are the legendary warriors mentioned above and then the goddesses. In the realm of mythology, we find armed and fighting goddesses quite often (Inanna, Anat, Kālī, Durgā, Morrigan, Bellona, Sekhmet, etc.), while in the realm of folklore and legend, which is closer to the values and conditions of the real world, heroines display cunning, patience, or firm determination rather than physical strength.

A completely different perspective on the problem is offered by Maria Tatar in her book *The Heroine with 1001 Faces* (2021). The title alludes to the story of Scheherazade, a heroine that used her cunning storytelling to keep her alive. Tatar's book is a consciously feminist and post-modern text, which offers a counternarrative to Campbell – not only by talking about the ignored

female protagonists, but also by showing that the definition of heroism was itself male-centered and that we have to look at the material differently to find an inexhaustible treasure trove of stories about female heroes. Tatar does not offer any pattern or story structure that we could summarize here, yet she comments on many motifs and themes mentioned in Campbell's book in critical perspective.

To sum up, even though the stories of the hero and heroine have their respective differences, the basic structure of the rite of passage is common to them. The heroine, like the hero, goes through a series of difficult trials, symbolically dies and is reborn. The motif of descent into the underworld (Inanna, Psyche) occurs in the female stories and in the male ones (Orpheus, Väinämöinen).

The Rituals of Initiation

Raglan, Propp, Campbell, Goux, and most of the authors writing about the female heroes all agree on the close relationship of the heroic journey and the initiatory structure. Initiations are rituals marking a passage from one state to the other – from childhood to adulthood, from novice to adept, from commoner to shaman or chieftain, etc. (Eliade 2005). Since the seminal study of the phenomenon (Van Gennep 1960 [orig. 1909]), the process has been analyzed as having three basic phases: separation, liminality, and reintegration. In the case of puberty rites, for example, the initiates are first separated from their mothers and from the society, they are transported to the initiatory hut or wilderness where they undergo trials of various sorts, encounter ancestral spirits and gods, and are wounded. The wound is a *pars-pro-toto* representing their symbolic death. What is killed in this encounter is their old self, which has to make space for the new identity that is to be born. The initiates are then reintegrated into society as persons with radically modified religious and social status.

The liminal phase has been a subject of further analysis by Turner (2017 [orig. 1969]) who analyzed the symbolism of liminality: As this phase is outside of the structure of everyday life with its

hierarchies, it is called by Turner anti-structure. The initiates are then either stripped of any status (e.g., are naked and nameless), or their status is inverted (from humans to animals, from living to dead, from male to female, and from female to male). The temporary gender inversion is a motif we find also in the heroic legends (see Heroine above). According to Turner, liminality is a chaotic space outside the system, which is sacred and dangerous as it transcends the system. It can be both destructive and regenerative. It initiates who go through liminality as it were absorb its sacredness and then bring it back to society. Their elevated status is explained by their close touch with the sphere outside the ordinary reality.

As can be seen from the prototypical puberty initiation sketched above, the similarity to the monomythical pattern is striking. While for some author this serves as an argument for the ancient origin of the heroic pattern and its derivation from ritual (Raglan 1934), another explanation is possible. According to Schjødt (2008), the three-phase initiatory scenario is an abstract structural pattern that is efficacious through its transformatory potential, which can be realized both on the level of practice and on the level of narration. In the case of narration, we readers or listeners identify with and thus psychically participate in the hero's story and acquire the experience of transformation in this form.

Conclusion

The hero's journey is a narrative pattern, which contains a moment of personal transformation in its core. In its prototypical form, it has a threefold structure similar to the initiatory triad of separation, liminality, and reintegration. The hero travels outside the domain of everyday reality into a dangerous domain of the Otherworld where he (or she) undergoes trials and is subjected to symbolic death and rebirth. The pattern can be found in many genres spanning from mythology, through heroic legend, folktale, and fairy tale. The pattern is prominently present also in modern or contemporary genres that bear similarity to myth and legend – i.e., in the stories of fictional

heroes like Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins, Superman, Luke Skywalker, or Katniss Everdeen.

The model of the Monomyth is inseparably connected to Joseph Campbell, who played an ambivalent role in the history of scholarship: On the one hand, he made the hero's journey widely popular, but on the other hand his contribution caused the academics to turn away from the study of the topic as it became overly infused with spiritual and self-help messages.

Cross-References

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