

## MYTHOLOGY & THE STRUCTURE OF STORY

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Myths are the earliest stories that people created, and we have evidence that every ancient civilization had their own collection of myths. When American professor Joseph Campbell studied myths from all over the world, he noticed obvious differences in things like setting and language, and in the values that each culture stressed. But Campbell also saw the remarkable similarities in these myths. No matter where the stories came from, he recognized how they shared the same themes, lessons, and types of characters.

The stories that interested him the most were the “hero” myths, which ancient people would share to teach and inspire. While the settings and details were different, Campbell realized there was a basic story structure in these varied hero myths, and he divided the structure into different stages of what he called the “hero’s journey.” Campbell published *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* in 1949, which helped millions of readers see the connections between history, storytelling, and human behavior.

In the 1970s, screenwriter George Lucas actually used Campbell’s structure of the hero’s journey to help him craft his *Star Wars* movies, and the two men later became close friends. In fact, Lucas invited Campbell to his home, where they watched all three of the original *Star Wars* movies in one day!

Campbell didn’t “invent” the hero’s journey. He just knew so much about myths from different cultures that he could see patterns and trace the essential structure humans had used to create their stories. He also recognize that humans have a basic *need* to tell these stories: sharing experiences and ideas through language has always been a part of human society. Today, learning about the hero’s journey allows writers to create better stories and helps all of us analyze and appreciate the stories we read and watch. And perhaps most importantly, learning about the hero’s journey can help us better understand ourselves. After all, we are all on our own unique journeys and are the heroes in our own life stories.

“Joseph Campbell’s great accomplishment was to articulate clearly something that had been there all along—the life principles embedded in the structure of stories.”

Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, xv

## ARCHETYPES IN LITERATURE

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The word *archetype* is from the Greek “first pattern” or “first model.” The idea of an archetype can be traced all the way back to the Greek philosopher Plato, but in 1919, a Swiss man named Carl Jung connected the concept to the study of psychology and used the term archetype to mean “a model for people, behaviors, and personalities.” Jung’s archetypes are now seen as a way to identify and categorize characters when studying literature or writing. Seven of the most common archetypes are described here:

- 1) **Heroes** are the main characters—or protagonists—of the story. The action revolves around these heroes, and they are the ones who learn a lesson and change in some way over the course of the story.
- 2) **The herald** represents a challenge or opportunity for the hero. The herald may be the person who appears with some news or big announcement, or it may be an invitation to an event. So the herald—whether it’s a person or a thing—makes the hero aware that change is coming.

- 3) **Allies** are the friends who support the heroes on their journey. Allies often have skills or personalities that can help the hero, and they are the characters the heroes rely on in times of trouble.
- 4) **The mentors** impact the heroes by sharing wisdom, guidance, or advice. Mentors are typically older than the heroes and can serve as helpful counselors because they've overcome challenges in their own lives. (Mentor was actually a character in Homer's *Odyssey*; he was the father figure who helped raise Odysseus' son while Odysseus was off fighting in the Trojan War.)
- 5) **The villain** is the hero's enemy or antagonist. Villains represent the shadows or dark forces of the story, and these characters often have tragic or frightening histories of their own.
- 6) **Threshold guardians** are characters who delay, trick, or challenge the heroes and allies so they cannot cross "thresholds" into new domains in order to continue on their quests. These characters often work for the villain, and the hero must figure out a way to get past them or through them.
- 7) **Shapeshifters** are characters who can make the story more complex. Shapeshifters may start out supporting the hero but then "shift" into being untrustworthy, or they may start as a foe and "shift" to become an ally. In fantasy, shapeshifters may actually take on different forms, while in realistic works, it is the characters' attitudes or values that change.

## THE STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

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In Joseph Campbell's 1949 book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he laid out 17 stages of the hero's journey. In 1998, screenwriter Christopher Vogler published *The Writer's Journey* as a manual for those writing books and scripts, and he reworked Campbell's outline to contain 12 stages. Below is a 10-step version of the hero's journey that is ideal for introducing students to the concept of story structure, but keep in mind that the stages do not always follow in this exact order.

**The Ordinary World** is the hero's regular, common life. The hero may be either happy or unhappy in this environment, but it helps the audience to see the hero in this place in order to understand the changes and transformations that happen over the course of the story.

**The Call to Adventure** is a change or event connected to the herald archetype. The call may upset or threaten the hero's ordinary world and make them want to run or hide, or it can be an opportunity that makes the hero leap into the action.

**Enter the Mentor:** A character often arrives at a time when the hero needs to be convinced to take on the challenge or quest, or needs advice on how to begin the journey. That means the mentor archetype is often introduced right after the call to adventure, and the same mentor—or another version of a mentor—appears at other points of the story to keep the hero on the right path.

**Crossing the Threshold:** The hero crosses over some threshold, leaving his ordinary world to enter a new, unfamiliar situation. This part of the journey may involve travel, so a car, plane, train, or ship often represents the “bridging” between the two worlds. For more internal journeys, the crossing may be walking into a new building or getting out of bed on the first day of a new experience.

**Enemies** are often introduced soon after hero enters into the new situation. In fantasy stories, the enemy may be a dragon, witch, or alien. In realistic stories, the enemy may be a boss or foe. And in some stories, the enemy can actually be a natural element that must be faced and overcome, like a mountain or storm.

**The Allies** are the archetypal characters who support the hero. They help by offering different skills, ideas, or viewpoints, and can also be a “buddy” or “sidekick” to offer comic relief to the story.

**Passing Tests:** The hero and allies must face obstacles along their journey. These tests challenge the characters to summon their courage, apply knowledge they have gotten from mentors, and push themselves beyond their comfort zones. Heroes often struggle to pass these tests and may make mistakes along the way. Hopefully, however, they learn from these mistakes and can move forward.

**The Big Ordeal** is the main crisis the hero must face and is the climax of the story. In dramatic stories, things will likely get worse for the hero during the ordeal, and it may even be a life-threatening situation. Campbell called this stage the “inmost cave” because it traditionally took place in a dark, scary place that is the home or the territory of the enemy. In a comedy, the hero may have struggled up to this point, and the ordeal becomes a turning point where things work out for the best.

**The Reward** is what the hero receives after facing the big ordeal, defeating the enemy, and coming out successfully on the other side. Heroes may earn a treasure, be reunited with someone they love, or receive recognition after working hard to achieve a goal.

**The Journey Home** is the resolution, where the audience sees what happens to the hero after the ordeal. In some journeys, the hero returns happily to the ordinary world having changed for the better and in the position to be an ally or a mentor to others. In other stories, the hero moves on from an unhappy ordinary world to seek out new adventures. Sometimes, the journey home is more complicated, and the hero has to face additional tests or come to terms with their mistakes or flaws.

**Note about flawed heroes:** The protagonist of a story can be a flawed hero or even an anti-hero if they continue to make mistakes or poor choices. These can include not working well with allies, not listening to mentors’ advice, losing focus of the quest, or not recognizing or accepting the lessons they can learn when they are tested. And the true test of the hero is whether the big ordeal that they face involves the greater good or whether the hero has only selfish goals or is only seeking personal rewards.