

The hero's journey starts with Joseph Campbell

By The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.24.17

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TOP IMAGE: Luke Skywalker takes the hero's journey in the "Star Wars" films. Director George Lucas was influenced by Joseph Campbell's work. Photo: Getty Images. SECOND IMAGE: Campbell in 1973. He published several books on mythology. Photo: AP Images. THIRD IMAGE: An illustration of Campbell's famous hero's journey story structure. LAST IMAGE: Campbell's book, "The Power of Myth," based on the PBS series of the same name that was filmed on Skywalker Ranch, which is owned by "Star Wars" creator Lucas. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

When you tell someone a story, do you plan it out beforehand so that it will sound good? Do you carefully plot what you will say, in a certain order? Or does the story seem to tell itself, as if you understood the structure of stories by instinct?

This is what American mythologist, writer and professor Joseph Campbell was interested in. Campbell was inspired as a child by Native American culture and artifacts. He spent his life comparing myths and religions from around the world in an attempt to understand people and their fascination with stories.

Campbell published numerous books, including "The Mythic Image" (1974) and "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (1949). He also wrote "The Power of Myth" (1988) with journalist Bill Moyers.

Campbell's writing was influenced by many historical figures. Among them were James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Pablo Picasso, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. These writers, artists, and psychologists inspired Campbell's theories.

The Stages Of A Hero's Story

Campbell's variety of influences made his work important in a number of different fields.

In particular, his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" has inspired many filmmakers.

In this book, Campbell studies hundreds of fairy tales, folktales and legends in order to discover a common pattern in the structure of stories. Campbell calls this pattern the "monomyth." The monomyth is the typical path a story takes, across all cultures and religions. It is also known as the "hero's journey."

The hero's journey has three stages, which are separation, initiation and return. They offer a way to understand the path of the main character in a story. The journey usually includes a symbolic death and rebirth of the character. The religious idea of cleansing is also important, giving a sense of the character transforming from old to new. This transformation is also known as the character arc.

Campbell summarizes the monomythic character journey as follows:

A hero leaves the ordinary world and ventures into a region of magic and wonder. There he faces fabulous forces and wins a victory. The hero returns from his adventure with the power to help his fellow man.

Within this overall structure, Campbell proposes 17 story stages. They include the Call to Adventure; the Road of Trials; Temptation; Magic Flight; and Return.

During the journey, the character undergoes physical and emotional battles. These struggles work together to bring the hero to a better understanding of his life and place in the world.

The Birth Of The Blockbuster

Hollywood filmmaker George Lucas said Campbell's theories influenced his work. Philosopher John Shelton Lawrence wrote that Lucas admired Campbell. Lucas felt that a "mythic decline" in modern movies left young people without the "moral anchor" found in the films of his youth, Lawrence wrote.

Screenwriter Keith Cunningham wrote that Campbell's influence on Lucas' work caused the birth of the blockbuster mentality in Hollywood. A high-concept, high-stakes approach to storytelling began.

In 1983, Lucas invited Campbell to California to watch his "Star Wars" trilogy. They discussed the mythical structure used in the films. The conversation led to the PBS television series "The Power of Myth" (1988).

In the series, Campbell tells journalist Moyers that humans look for meaning in stories that will help them move forward in life. For Campbell, the ancient stories of the past are still important today.

This series was eventually published as a book of the same name.

The Writer's Work In Film

In the early 1990s, screenwriting author Christopher Vogler studied Campbell's work at the University of Southern California. Vogler was working in Hollywood as a story analyst at the time. He saw connections between the hero's journey and the scripts he was reading.

Vogler wrote a short document about how Campbell's work related to Hollywood for himself and his friends. The response was so overwhelming that he turned the document into a book, "The Writer's Journey" (2007). It became one of the most successful screenwriting books of all time.

The book adapts Campbell's 17-stage monomyth into a 12-stage model for writing the hero's journey in film.

A Lasting Impact On Storytelling

Joseph Campbell died more than 25 years ago, but his work is still studied around the world.

The next time you tell a story, think about the way you are telling it and why. And if you haven't read Campbell's work, try it and see if you think his ideas were on the mark.

There's a good chance that whatever story you're telling, it's some kind of hero's journey.

Quiz

- 1 Which option is an accurate summary of the section "The Birth Of The Blockbuster"?
- (A) Many screenwriters have been inspired to make movies that follow the ideas in Joseph Campbell's books. George Lucas's "Star Wars" is one example. Some of these movies have been turned into popular television shows, like "The Power of Myth."
 - (B) George Lucas and Joseph Campbell worked together to identify examples of the hero's journey in Hollywood. Campbell later wrote a book about his experiences with Lucas, which led to a popular TV series called "The Power of Myth."
 - (C) George Lucas was inspired by Joseph Campbell's ideas about the hero's journey and changed moviemaking. Lucas and Campbell discussed myths and the "Star Wars" trilogy together. This led to the TV series "The Power of Myth," where Campbell discussed how humans learn from stories.
 - (D) Some screenwriters were upset when George Lucas used the hero's journey as part of his "Star Wars" trilogy. They thought he was taking Campbell's ideas to use as his own. However, Campbell explained in his TV show "The Power of Myth" that people have been using the idea of the hero's journey for a long time.

- 2 Which two excerpts contain central ideas of the article?

1. *Campbell was inspired as a child by Native American culture and artifacts.*
2. *In particular, his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" has inspired many filmmakers.*
3. *Campbell studies hundreds of fairy tales, folktales and legends in order to discover a common pattern in the structure of stories.*
4. *Lucas felt that a "mythic decline" in modern movies left young people without the "moral anchor" found in the films of his youth, Lawrence wrote.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

3 Look at the diagram labeled "The Hero's Journey."

Which conclusion is supported by BOTH the diagram and the article?

- (A) The hero is able to refuse the call to adventure and go on a different kind of journey.
- (B) Most heroes have assistance from magical helpers and mentors on the journey.
- (C) The hero's journey is divided clearly into three stages in all existing myths and stories.
- (D) Most of the hero's struggles take place in the unknown region of magic and wonder.

4 Look at the diagram labeled "The Hero's Journey."

Which selection from the article is BEST illustrated by the diagram?

- (A) Campbell's variety of influences made his work important in a number of different fields. In particular, his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" has inspired many filmmakers.
- (B) The journey usually includes a symbolic death and rebirth of the character. The religious idea of cleansing is also important, giving a sense of the character transforming from old to new.
- (C) Within this overall structure, Campbell proposes 17 story stages. They include the Call to Adventure; the Road of Trials; Temptation; Magic Flight; and Return.
- (D) Vogler was working in Hollywood as a story analyst at the time. He saw connections between the hero's journey and the scripts he was reading.