



The Hero's Journey: A Tool to Get Developing Readers Under the Surface

As a college literature teacher, I sometimes have students in my classes who are there simply because they are getting their literature requirement “out of the way” (as they put it). But because I believe that a lifelong love of good literature is worthwhile, one of my goals is to help these students start to *enjoy* what they read in my classes. I want them to enjoy the practice of reading, and to be able to get under the surface of stories they encounter.

Many secondary teachers and home school parents feel the same way I do. They search for ways to get young people interested in stories and to help them see how the stories work so that they can understand the story on a deeper level—and enjoy it more.

One way that I’ve had success in getting young people more interested in the novels I teach is a story formula called the Hero’s Journey. This formula was articulated by Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist and writer who noticed certain patterns among myths and legends throughout the world. Campbell’s book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* was based on his findings. In the late 1970’s, a screenwriter named Christopher Vogler took Campbell’s formula and condensed it into a twelve-step formula that became influential among screenwriters. I use Vogler’s condensed formula in my classes.

When I have introduced this formula to my students, I’ve found that they connect with it immediately. Even students who previously showed little interest in literature start to open up, making connections to not just novels, but also narrative poetry (such as *Beowulf*), film, and even Biblical narrative.

Overview

Here's a summary of the Hero's Journey (in Vogler's condensed form). I should note that you probably won't find the steps exactly in this order in every story—but you will probably find a similar variation.

I. Separation from the Ordinary World

In the first stage of the story, the hero leaves his ordinary life in order to go on a journey or gain some sort of experience.

- 1. Ordinary World:** When the story begins, the hero is immature or inexperienced, simply going about his daily business.
- 2. Call to Adventure:** Somehow the hero receives a call to action or adventure—he is called to take up a quest or accomplish a task.
- 3. Refusal of the Call:** The hero is more interested in self-preservation, and initially refuses to go on the journey.
- 4. Meeting the Mentor:** The hero receives counsel from a mentor who encourages the hero to be willing to live for a higher cause—and accept the call to action.

II. Descent into the Special World

In this stage, the hero is confronted with tests and battles that try his courage and perseverance.

- 5. Crossing the Threshold:** The hero makes the decision to attempt the journey. He is changing his values and growing in virtue.
- 6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** On the journey, the hero faces trials, and he or she meets friends and enemies.
- 7. Approach to the Inmost Cave:** The hero approaches an isolated place where danger is most intense. At this point, the hero must be willing to suffer great loss—even death—for a cause that is greater than himself.
- 8. The Ordeal:** In this dangerous place, the hero is confronted with his or her greatest fear.
- 9. Reward:** The hero survives the ordeal and gains some sort of reward. At this point, the story shows that self-sacrificing virtue will be rewarded.

III. Return to the Ordinary World

In this stage, the hero returns to a normal existence once again, having gained something positive from his experience.

- 10. Road Back:** The hero plans to complete the journey home.
- 11. Resurrection:** The hero faces a final life-and-death ordeal, and amazingly survives. This is often a miraculous escape from death. Once again, the hero demonstrates self-sacrifice for a higher cause, and is rewarded for that courage.
- 12. Return with Elixir:** Having been transformed into someone who is virtuous, courageous, and self-sacrificing, the hero returns to the ordinary world with something that brings benefit to his community. It may be an object, or it may simply be the example of his life.

The Development of the Hero Through the Journey

As I introduce this story structure, most of my students immediately make connections to books they've read and movies they've seen. But then I shift the focus from the story structure to the development of the main character. We look at how the character *changes* through the Hero's Journey.

As we discuss the hero's development, we see that the hero's fundamental problem at the beginning of the story is his unwillingness to become committed to a cause that is bigger than himself. The hero *refuses* to change at first. But as he receives counsel from a mentor, and as his conscience prods him to do what is right, he starts to change his values and grow in nobility. By the end of the story, the main character has risked his life to do something good—and can truly be called a hero. He has become a different person, someone who is willing to die for something that is more important than self, and someone that the students can see, at least in some ways, as virtuous.

Hands-On Analysis

Here's a worksheet that I've used to get students familiar with using the Hero's Journey to analyze a story. In the chart I show how Bilbo (in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*) and Moses (in the Exodus story) both become less self-centered and more self-sacrificial through their journeys. As the students work through the worksheet, they can also take a favorite story of their own and see how it fits into the Hero's Journey structure.

	The Hobbit	The Exodus	A Favorite Story of Yours
SEPARATION			
Ordinary World	Bilbo sits on his doorstep, calm and content (and somewhat selfish).	Moses lives in Midian with his family.	
Call to Adventure	Gandalf unexpectedly invites him to accompany the dwarves on their journey to the Lonely Mountain. (Bilbo is invited to change his values to help others.)	God appears to Moses at the burning bush and calls Moses to deliver Israel from the Egyptians.	
Refusal of the Call	Bilbo is not very interested. He goes on the journey only when Gandalf essentially makes him go.	Moses tries to persuade God that he's not the one who should go.	
Meeting the Mentor	Gandalf encourages Bilbo to go.	During the story, Moses gets advice from his father-in-law Jethro, and many times he receives direction from God.	
DESCENT			
Crossing the Threshold	Bilbo finds himself running to the Green Dragon Inn and joining the dwarves.	Moses obeys God's call and goes to Egypt.	
Tests, Allies, and Enemies	Bilbo encounters trolls, goblins, elves, men, spiders, and so forth.	Moses encounters Aaron, magicians, Israelites, Pharaoh, and others.	
Approach the Inmost Cave	Bilbo must walk alone down the secret path to the heart of the Lonely Mountain, where the dragon Smaug lies.	As the Egyptians pursue, Moses must show great faith by leading Israel to a seemingly dead end at the Red Sea.	

The Ordeal	Bilbo holds a conversation with Smaug.	As Israel finishes crossing the Red Sea, the Egyptians are on their heels.	
Reward	Bilbo gains a goblet; more importantly, he <i>matures</i> in many ways as a result of his ordeals.	Because of Moses, the Israelites escape from slavery and their enemies are dead.	
RETURN			
Road Back	Bilbo continues his quest to help the dwarves.	Moses continues leading Israel toward Canaan.	
Resurrection	Bilbo miraculously survives the Battle of Five Armies.	When Israel thinks Moses is dead, he emerges from Mt. Sinai.	
Return with Elixir	Bilbo returns to Hobbiton with self-knowledge, wisdom, and gold.	Israel's trust (at least temporarily) in God; Moses' knowledge of having been used of God to deliver Israel.	

(Image at the top was used from [this website](#). However, I am not in any way endorsing that site.)