Analysis of the Hero Pattern: A Brief History

While a number of 19th century mythologists and folklorists studied the similarities in heroic stories from around the world, it wasn’t until the early 20th century that researchers tried to understand why hero stories were similar. In this deeper analysis, four scholars stand out: Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell. Each approached the journey pattern with a different philosophy: Rank used Freudian analysis, Raglan espoused the myth-ritual theory of Sir James Frazer; Jung explored their archetypal, subconscious implications, and Campbell employed a variety of philosophies including Jungian psychology, Eastern philosophy, and anthropology.

Otto Rank

Otto Rank (1884-1939) was perhaps the first scholar to develop a theory of the heroic journey pattern based on its psychological origins and meanings. Rank was a close friend and follower of Sigmund Freud. As a result, his analysis of hero myths reflects Freud’s theories and his own belief that the universality of the hero pattern is a result of the commonality of the human psyche. He felt that to understand the formation of hero myths, one must go back to their ultimate source: the individual imagination. For Rank, there was only one tool for this: Freud’s psychoanalytic method.

In The Myth of the Birth of a Hero (1909), Rank analyzed and compared variants of the heroic myths and dreams. This relationship led Rank to interpret the heroic myths in the same way that Freud interpreted dreams, with a focus on early childhood and myth as a fantastical fulfillment of the Oedipal wish. In this context, the hero becomes an innocent victim of his noble parents or of fate, and he becomes heroic not by winning the throne but by killing his father. To develop this theory, Rank looked at fifteen hero stories, all from the west and all male. The pattern he developed included these elements:

1. the hero is born of distinguished, often noble, parents,
2. difficulties precede his conception (continence, barrenness, prohibited relationship)
3. a prophecy cautions against his birth because his life poses a danger to his father or some authority,
4. he is surrendered to water in a box of some sort,
5. he is saved by animals or peasants,
6. when he is grown, he finds his true parents,
7. he takes his revenge on his father and is acclaimed a hero, and
8. he finally achieves rank and honors, often assuming rule.

Rank made significant contributions to the study of hero myths, but his orthodox Freudian views limited his model in many ways. For example, like Freud’s psychological model, Rank’s heroic pattern focused only the first part of life, forcing him to ignore such great, adult mythic heroes as Odysseus and Aeneas. In addition, Rank’s pattern did not even match all of his own examples. In only four of Rank’s myths does the hero kill or cause the death of his father and in only four others does the hero marry his mother. Despite this, Rank did lay the groundwork for later study.

Lord Raglan

Lord Raglan, the title given Fitzroy Richard Somerset, was an English nobleman and folklorist. He developed a theory of hero myths which relied on the work of British anthropologist Sir James Frazier. In The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama (1936), Raglan argued that all myths were tied to rituals and that mythic heroes were not real people, but fictional characters created in stories as the narrative component of rituals.

Raglan studied twelve hero stories, all from the west, including Oedipus, Theseus, Romulus, Hercules, Joseph, and Moses. He concluded that the fact that “the life of the mythic hero can be divided up into a series of well-marked features and incidents...strongly suggests a ritual pattern.” He developed a heroic pattern that included twenty-two stages related to three significant periods in the hero’s life, all connected with ritual or rites of passage: incidents connected to birth, incidents connected with his accession to the throne, and incidents connected to his death.

Incident related to his birth
1. The hero’s mother is royal and usually virgin;
2. His father is a king or great ruler, and
3. may be a close relative of his mother.
4. The circumstances surrounding his birth are unusual, and
5. he is regarded to be the son of a god.
6. At birth someone, usually his father or maternal grandfather, attempts to kill the child, but
7. the child is saved and taken to a safe place.

Incidents related to his accession to power
8. The hero is raised by foster-parents in a far country.
9. His childhood remains a mystery, but
10. at adulthood, he return to (or goes to) his future kingdom.
11. There, he wins a great victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or savage beast.
12. He marries a princess, who is often the daughter of his predecessor, and
13. he becomes the king.
14. He rules uneventfully for a period of time, and
15. prescribes laws, but
16. eventually, he angers the gods and/or his subjects, and
17. is driven from both his throne and his city.

**Incidents related to his death**
18. He suffers a mysterious death,
19. Often on top of a hill
20. His children, if he has any, do not succeed him.
21. His body is not buried, but nevertheless
22. He has one or more holy sepulchers.

Raglan believed that hero stories, because they are so similar, cannot be historically accurate, or at least cannot be proven. He felt that an individual hero (i.e., Buddha or Jesus) might have been real, but that mythical elements were added to his biography to honor him or to emphasize his heroic nature. Mythologizing was a ritualistic way to honor the hero.

**Carl Jung**

Carl Jung (1875-1961) saw the hero, and all myths, as projections of unconscious archetypes. According to Jung, life has “engraved” experiences into our subconscious where they become “forms without content” but with the potential to trigger specific actions or perceptions. He called these potential ways of being “archetypes,” which, in the right situation, we project onto our environment.

In the heroic myths, the hero is a projection of divine or semi-divine qualities onto a character so that the character appears more than human. In real life, because archetypes tend to appear as projections on people in the immediate environment, the hero appears as possessing greater personal qualities than he or she truly has. Thus, when we create a heroic myth, we don’t begin with a hero, but with the archetype of the hero which is projected onto a person or into a situation. We then “shape” the person and his or her history to conform to our archetypal need. The hero myth, then, is a manifestation of material which already exists in the unconscious, so what is symbolized is not the subject of the myth, but the heroic archetype (representing our own needs) projected onto the subject.

As a manifestation of unconscious activity, the hero myth reveals the unconscious. For Jung, myths are the interface between our conscious awareness and our unconscious drives and needs. They open the unconscious to us in one direction and open us to the unconscious in the other. A myth is effective when it engages us emotionally and resonates with some part of our personality. The hero, for example, arouses the heroic side of our personality, stimulating us toward action.

Projected archetypes can be helpful or destructive. If recognized for what they are, messengers of our unconscious, they can guide us to freedom. If unrecognized, they isolate us from our environment. The projection becomes “real,” blocking us from the reality of our own lives. We may, for example, see a person as heroic no so much because she is heroic but because we need her to be heroic. Our need causes us to superimpose a heroic image on the person, causing us to ignore or reject evidence to the contrary. Politicians and advertisers know this need only too well and work to elicit the heroic archetype to manipulate or exploit. Projections can make it nearly impossible for us to see what is real. “The more projections are thrust in between the subject and the environment,” Jung writes, “the harder it is for the ego to see through its illusions.”

In this archetypal view, the journey in the first half of life is a quest to break free of the projections (illusions) of archetypes. A powerful example of this from mythology occurs in the legend of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. As he nears perfect understanding, Siddhartha sits under the Tree of Enlightenment, engaged in a psychological battle with Mara, god of illusion. Siddhartha has resisted Mara’s challenges. Then Mara issues his last challenge, questioning Siddhartha’s right to attain enlightenment when he has duties as the son of a king. Siddhartha simply touches the earth with his fingers, a gesture symbolizing his connection with reality and his freedom from illusion: “Oh, housemaker!,” he tells Mara. “Now I have seen you! You shall build no more houses (protective projections or illusions) to hide the real world, and Siddhartha becomes the Buddha.

In the second half of life, paradoxically, the journey is atonement with the unconscious. Ego consciousness has reached maturity, and the individual is ready to begin integrating the ego consciousness and the unconscious to form the Self. So the goal of the second half of life is to return to one’s unconscious, from which we have been alienated.

**Joseph Campbell**

The most renowned researcher of the heroic journey was mythologist Joseph Campbell. Like Rank and Jung, Campbell’s model is based on the theories of psychoanalysis, but it also includes concepts from anthropology, and Eastern philosophy. He viewed the heroic journey as mythical and self-transcendent. Thus, they symbols we encounter in these myths, if properly understood, provide clues to discovering the quests we need to take in life. This view is thoroughly covered in his most famous book, *The Hero with 1000 Faces*.

Although he felt that Jungian psychology provided the best understanding of the heroic journey, Campbell differed from Jung on several points. One of the most important was that, unlike Jung, who saw the journey beginning even before birth and continuing until death, Campbell limits his heroic...
pattern to the second half of life. Early “quests” are only preparations for adulthood, so Campbell’s would-be hero is well settled in life when he or she hears the call to adventure.

Campbell’s model of the heroic pattern follows the three-stage pattern of the rite of passage. First, the initiate is separated from his known world. He then “breaks through” the veil of secondary illusions and discovers a source of enlightenment and power. Finally, a true hero, he returns to the everyday world with a gift that could transform his culture. Viewed in this context, the hero becomes a symbol for “that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life.” The quest of the supreme hero is to realize this potential in all people and to make it available to his culture.

To accomplish this goal, the hero goes on a quest. Campbell synthesized quest myths into a “composite adventure” or “monomyth” involving three stages: separation or departure, trials and victories, and return and reintegration with society. The first stage, separation and departure, begins with the Call to Adventure or the hero’s awakening to his true adventure. Campbell included in this stage Supernatural Aid, the synchronistic aid that arises for someone who has committed to his proper adventure. This stage ends when the adventurer crosses the first threshold into the unknown (called the Belly of the Wale or the realm of night).

The middle stage is the trail of challenges. Here, according to Campbell, the adventurer not only faces challenges and temptations, but he encounters the Goddess, who embodies both nurturing, protective power and the temptations to retreat into the protective arms of the mother. Once through the challenges, the adventurer reaches atonement or reconciliation with the Father, a symbol of self-responsibility or competence. Finally, the adventurer achieves apotheosis or the attainment of “godlike” power and the ultimate boon or gift that he will take back to his society.

In the third stage of the journey, the new hero returns to his culture. This stage, Return and Reintegration, is integral to Campbell’s heroic model if the flow of spiritual energy in the culture is to be maintained. Indeed, from the society’s point of view, the hero’s ability to return with life-reviving energies justifies his long absence from the community.

The return, however, may not be easy. Upon completing the journey, the hero may see the problems in his culture as too great to solve, so he will not sacrifice his state of bliss for the frustration and futility of the return. In other cases, the hero, like Prometheus, may avoid the transformation stage entirely, and seize the boon by violence, trickery or chance, and return with it to the world. In this case, the return will be disastrous for the would-be-hero because the powers he has destabilized will destroy him. A final possibility would be that the hero will return only to discover that she is ignored or misunderstood. Such a hero may see her career destroyed or even face the threat of death from a culture that cannot face the truth the hero has revealed.

Campbell also explored the implications of refusing or ignoring the call to adventure. The call is a message to us that our life is incomplete or imbalanced. It represents a reality we must face if we are to restore balance to our lives. We can recognize the call because after we have experienced it, the projects which had made life meaningful have simply lost their importance. As a result, the call may be rejected, but it cannot be dismissed without devastating consequences. Accepted, the call is a benevolent power that will help us relinquish our egocentrism to allow growth. Rejected, this power becomes a monster. As Campbell wrote, “One is harassed both day and night, by the divine being that is the image of the living self within the locked labyrinth of one’s own disoriented psyche.” We protect ourselves with a wall of anger, bitterness, and compulsiveness (i.e., work and addictions). We lose the power to act in our own interest. Our lives, not a wasteland, lose meaning, and though we may accomplish great material success, we cannot escape our own self-rejection. Without rescue, we face disintegration.

Campbell’s work on the heroic journey is the most comprehensive to date, and it has added immensely to our understanding of the pattern and its place in life. However, his view that life’s early quests are only preparation for adulthood ignores the adolescent quest for self-identity, which is the first great adventure a child faces. Identity development is a heroic journey of the highest order, especially in our standardized, consumer-driven, postmodern world.