

The Hero's Journey: Archetypes

By Lisa Paitz Spindler

Sources & References

Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell
The Hero Myth Cycle by Diana Dominguez
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The Myth Quest model for writing works well for character-driven stories. This worksheet can be used not only for the protagonist, but also for secondary characters. The quests of secondary characters may not possess every quest element, but the protagonist's quest should possess nearly all of the quest elements. The most important elements are emphasized with red type.

The steps of the Hero Myth Quest are taken directly from Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the explanations of the steps are my interpretation of those phases. All versions of current and past articles on this web site are Copyright © 1997-1999 by Lisa A. Paitz Spindler. If you have questions, visit the U.S. Trademark and Copyright Office or read *10 Big Myths About Copyright Explained* By Brad Templeton.

The Archetypes

"The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate to the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them 'motifs. . . in the field of comparative religion they have been defined. . . as 'categories of the imagination.' Adolf Bastian long ago called them 'elementary' or 'primordial thoughts.' From these references, it should be clear enough that my idea of the archetype -- literally a pre-existent form -- does not stand alone, but is something that is recognized and named in other fields of knowledge." (from Carl Jung's 1936 lecture on "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious," *Collected Works*, Vol. 9.i, pars. 87-110.)

Archetypes are common character types, symbols and relationships that appear often in stories modern and ancient. The psychologist Carl Jung coined the term *archetype* and suggested that they sprung from what he called the *collective unconscious* similar to the personal unconscious. Vogler explains that *"fairy tales and myths are like the dreams of an entire culture, springing from the collective unconscious. . . The concept of archetypes is an indispensable tool for understanding the purpose or function of characters in a story."*

Vogler points out that archetypes are like "masks" that characters wear at different points in the story. Some characters may only wear one mask, while others may switch back and forth depending on their function, but also depending on how they grow and change: *"Another way to look at the classic archetypes is that they are facets of the hero's (or the writer's) personality. The other characters represent possibilities for the hero, good or ill."* For example, the hero may at some point wear the mask of the Mentor to another character at the end of a story, passing on the wisdom s/he has learned during their adventure.

There are many kinds of archetypes, but Vogler concentrates on the following broad ones:

- (a) Hero
- (b) Mentor
- (c) Herald/Harbinger
- (d) Threshold Guardian
- (e) Shapeshifter
- (f) Trickster/Fool
- (g) Shadow

(a) The Hero: Vogler says (p. 35) that “. . .the word ‘hero’ is Greek, from the root that means ‘to protect and to serve.’ A hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others. . . At the root the idea of Hero is connected with self-sacrifice.” This is the character with which the audience should identify most. There are seven basic types of heroes (although many heroes are a combination of these groupings):

- Willing Hero -- King Arthur; Leelu from *The Fifth Element*; Hercules
- Unwilling Hero -- Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit*, Phillippe Gaston from *Ladyhawke*
- Cynical Anti-hero -- Han Solo from *Star Wars*
- Tragic Anti-hero --Lestat from Ann Rices' *Vampire Chronicles*; Darth Vader from *Star Wars*
- Group-oriented Hero -- CuChulainn from Irish myth.
- Loner Hero --Indiana Jones, Xena from *Xena: Warrior Princess*
- Catalyst Hero -- Any mentor (s/he's the hero of their own stories)

Discussion:

1. What are some examples of the six types of hero?
2. What hero type is the character of Han Solo in *Star Wars*?
3. Give an example from print or film of types of personality flaws of heroes in film or print. What is Han Solo's flaw? Darth Vader? Briar Rose? Indiana Jones?
4. Give an example of sacrifices heroes have made in their adventures. For instance, what kind of sacrifice does Harry make in the film *Armageddon* and why? How does he grow as a person from this sacrifice?
5. In your own writing, how well do you know your hero? Which type does s/he fall under?

(b) The Mentor: The dictionary defines *mentor* as (1) in Greek legend, the loyal friend and wise adviser of Odysseus (Ulysses), and teacher and guardian of Odysseus' son Telemachus; (2) a wise, loyal adviser. Vogler goes even further and explains that the character of Mentor in *The Odyssey* is actually a disguise for the goddess Athena (the goddess of wisdom, skills and warfare).

The Mentor is often personified as a Wise Old Man or Woman (Crone), such as Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars* or the Cinderella's Fairy Godmother. "*Mentors represent the Self,*" Vogler says, and are the "*aspect of personality that is connected with all things.*" This character often acts as the Hero's conscience, pointing out the consequences of possible actions. The Mentor is what the Hero may become if s/he follows the Road of Heroes.

Mentors have two major responsibilities: (1) Teaching, and (2) Gift-giving. To fulfill these responsibilities, the Mentor may test the Hero, so that the Gifts bestowed are earned, or the Mentor may motivate the Hero when s/he is fearful, perhaps when the Hero is considering Refusing the Call to Adventure. Sometimes the Mentor provides the Hero with important information from the past. The Hero may also remember important lessons learned early in life as a kind of "inner mentor" or personal code.

There can be several types of Mentor:

- Dark Mentor -- anti-heroic character, the inversion of heroic values
- Fallen Mentor -- characters who are having difficulty with their own heroic journey
- Continuing Mentor -- recurring characters in a series of stories
- Multiple Mentors -- a hero may have more than one Mentor, learning a new skill from each one
- Comic Mentor -- often a type of advising sidekick to the Hero
- Shaman -- helper who aids the Hero in seeking a guiding vision to help him/her on the journey

Discussion:

1. Can you think of Mentor characters in your favorite stories and/or movies? What type of Mentors are they and why?

2. How do these Mentors test the Hero? How does Obi-Wan Kenobi test Luke Skywalker? How does Merlin test Arthur? How does Dr. Henry Higgins test Eliza Dolittle in *My Fair Lady*?
3. Joseph Campbell refers to the Hero's Meeting with the Mentor stage as Supernatural Aid. What kinds of gifts do your favorite Mentors bestow on their Heroes? (For instance, Obi-Kenobi gives Luke his father's lightsaber.)
4. In the examples you mentioned, is the assistance a one-time event, or does the Mentor appear throughout the journey?
5. Is the Mentor an internal aspect of the hero? In what ways?
6. Who is the Mentor in your own story? Can you point to a Mentor in your own life? What qualities does your Mentor have that you would like to incorporate into your story?

(c) Herald/Harbinger: The Herald/Harbinger as a carrier of the power of destiny plays an integral part in the beginning of a story and the transformation of the main character. The chance or planned meeting with the Herald initiates the journey and therefore the story. An animal, such as serpent or dragon often represents this figure. According to Vogler, "*Herald characters issue challenges and announce the coming of significant change.*" (p. 61) Heralds are the characters, and it can be more than one, or inner voices of the main character compelling him/her to follow the Call to Adventure, which begins the hero's journey. Psychologically, the Herald can be a character's inner knowledge that change is needed, or a feeling of restfulness, a need for a change of scene in his/her life. This archetype also can be portrayed as the character's awareness of impending danger, propelling the protagonist into action. All of these examples serve as a character's motivation for change.

There can be several types of Herald:

- Negative – a Shadow or Threshold Guardian (issuing a challenge or trying to trick the Hero)
- Positive – the Mentor in disguise (needing the Hero's help or fulfilling his own quest)
- Neutral – an Ally or Threshold Guardian (the Hero has found his/her own way to the First Threshold)

Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of the Herald? Can you think of different types of Heralds?
2. What are some examples of how a Hero can encounter a Herald? Can you think of some examples from literature or film?
3. What is an example of an internal Herald, the inner voice of the Hero yearning for change?
4. Who is the Herald in your story? Is there more than one if your Hero is a reluctant one? Who are the Heralds in some of your favorite stories and why?

(d) The Threshold Guardian: For the hero to grow and move along the path, he must pass into other worlds and over new thresholds, new ways of thinking and being. Gatekeepers guard passage to each of these thresholds. These gatekeepers are also called Threshold Guardians, and they test the hero to ensure his worthiness to pass into the next phase of the journey, they are agents of transformation who can wear many types of masks.

Threshold Guardians "*present a menacing face to the hero, but if properly understood, they can be overcome, bypassed, or even turned into allies.*" (p. 57) They are usually not the main villains, but rather henchmen, "*lesser thugs and mercenaries hired to guard access to the chief's headquarters In rare cases they may be secret helpers placed in the hero's path to test her willingness and skill.*" (p. 57) Wearing these masks, Threshold Guardians may be Shapeshifters and Tricksters.

Threshold Guardians aren't always characters. They "*may represent the ordinary obstacles we all face in the world around us: bad weather, bad luck, prejudice, oppression*" On a psychological level Threshold Guardians are the Hero's "*internal demons: the neuroses, emotional scars, vices, dependencies, and self-limitations that hold back [the hero's] growth and progress.*" (p. 58)

Threshold Guardians can be turned into Allies, and a "fully evolved [hero] feel[s] compassion for [his] apparent enemies and transcend[s] [them] rather than destroy[s] them." (p. 59)

Discussion:

1. What are some examples of how a Hero can deal with a Threshold Guardian? Can you think of some examples from literature or film? (hint: p. 58) What are some examples of Threshold Guardians who are elements, such as weather?
2. In "The Last of the Mohicans," how is the character Major Duncan Hayward the rival (a type of Threshold Guardian) to Hero Nathaniel Poe? How does Nathaniel resolve this conflict? (Reference to the movie is just as valid here as a reference to the novel by James Fenimore Cooper.)
3. What is often the purpose of the Threshold Guardian? Can you think of different types of Threshold Guardian?
4. Who are the Threshold Guardians in your story? Who are the Threshold Guardians in some of your favorite stories and why?

(e) Shapeshifter: The Shapeshifter and the Trickster can often be confused for one another perhaps because they have the same motive—to lure the hero either to his/her doom or to the Ultimate Boon/Reward, both being catalysts for change. Both types of characters can lead a hero through the quest, through an elusive game of hide-and-seek, constantly calling into question their own sincerity. The main difference is their *modus operandi*, or how they go about fulfilling their purpose in the story. Shapeshifters are protean and dangerous, sometimes in a sexual way and often are at least partially aware of their agenda. Shapeshifters often are a love interest to the main character and someone the protagonist doesn't quite understand both emotionally and physically. In this aspect, Shapeshifters are projections of the Hero's *anima* or *animus*, the Hero's opposing energy. According to Vogler, "[T]he *animus* and *anima* may be positive or negative figures who may be helpful to the hero or destructive to him. In some stories it's the task of the hero to figure out which side, positive or negative, he is dealing with."

The loyalties of both the Shapeshifter and the Trickster can be called into question, the Shapeshifter sometimes revealing their true loyalty at the end of the story—either as an Ally or as an emissary of the Shadow. Vogler labels some of the latter as *femmes* or *hommes fatales*, characters out for blood who may try to murder the Hero.

Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of the Shapeshifter?
2. What are some examples memorable Shapeshifters from literature or film?
3. How does the Shapeshifter differ from the Trickster?
4. Who is the Shapeshifter in your story? Who are the Shapeshifters in some of your favorite stories and why?

(f) Trickster/Fool: The main difference between the Trickster (or Fool) and the Shapeshifter is the Trickster's comic aspect. Like the Shapeshifter, this archetype is a catalyst for change, but rather than embody the elements of confusion with a purpose or agenda, the Trickster, according to Campbell, is the personification of Chaos or mischief for its own sake. Often Tricksters fall into situations haphazardly, usually without an ulterior motive. Seemingly contrary to this, Vogler says that "[T]ricksters may be servants or Allies working for the hero or Shadow, or they may be independent agents with their own skewed agendas." If the Shadow is seen as an agent of Chaos opposing the Hero as an agent of Order, this doesn't seem to be so contradictory. Perhaps the main difference between these two archetypes is that the Shapeshifter is a projection of the chaos of the *personal* unconsciousness while the Trickster or Fool is the personification of the chaos of the *collective* unconsciousness, or the randomness of the world. In this sense, the Shapeshifter personifies personal interests, positive or negative, while the Trickster is a projection of the World's interests and his/her proximity to the World Navel, the heart of the world, has driven him or her a little insane. The Shapeshifter may display some kind of insanity, but this is usually an effort or "smokescreen" to disguise their true motives and

agenda. Both Shapeshifters and Tricksters often begin their story lives as Threshold Guardians, keeping watch over the agents of transformation.

Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of the Trickster or Fool?
2. What are some examples memorable Tricksters from literature or film?
3. How does the Trickster differ from the Shapeshifter?
4. Who is the Trickster in your story? Who are the Tricksters in some of your favorite stories and why?

(g) Shadow: According to Vogler, *"the Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something."* Without the Shadow, there cannot be the Light, and if this Shadow (or Chaos) isn't expressed, the Shadow turns into the exiled villain, an externalized character in direct conflict with the Hero whose goal it is to destroy. The Hero must vanquish external Shadows (villains) while internal Shadows must be acknowledged. A contemporary example of this is the Darth Vader of Star Wars, who is the Shadow side of Luke Skywalker. In Return of the Jedi, Skywalker acknowledges his connection to Vader, but the villain, the Emperor, is destroyed. Vogler says *"Shadows can express positive as well as negative aspects. The Shadow in a person's psyche may be anything that has been suppressed, neglected, or forgotten. The Shadow shelters the healthy, natural feelings we believe we're not supposed to show. But healthy anger or grief, if suppressed in the territory of the Shadow, can turn to harmful energy that strikes out and undermines us in unexpected ways."*

Many Shadows start out as Shapeshifters or Threshold Guardians who venture across their liminal posts. In their own myths, they can believe they are agents of transformation instead of destruction. The qualities of the Shadow mirror the Hero's qualities and personify the traits the Hero refuses to acknowledge, negative or positive. Any character can wear the mask of the Shadow for different purposes in the story, but the character who wears it most often, and whose motivations are in direct conflict with the Hero's is the villain. A Mentor may act as the Shadow to teach a lesson to the Hero.

Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of the Shadow? What are the different aspects of the Shadow?
2. What are some examples memorable Shadows from literature or film?
3. Who is the Shadow in your story? What qualities does s/he mirror in the Hero?
4. What differentiates the villain from other types of Shadows?
5. Who are the Shadows in some of your favorite stories and why?