

## 12 Stages of the Hero's Journey

### 1.) THE ORDINARY WORLD

Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary, mundane world and into a Special World, new and alien. This is the familiar "fish out of water" idea which has spawned countless films and TV shows ("The Fugitive", "The Beverly Hillbillies", *Mx Smith Goes to Washington*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Witness*, *48 Hours*, *Trading Places*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, etc.)

If you're going to show a fish out of his customary element, you first have to show him in that **Ordinary World** to create a vivid contrast with the strange new world he is about to enter.

### 2.) THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Once presented with a **Call to Adventure**, she can no longer remain indefinitely in the comfort of the Ordinary World.

### 3. REFUSAL OF THE CALL (THE RELUCTANT HERO)

This one is about fear. Often at this point the hero balks at the threshold of adventure, **Refusing the Call** or expressing reluctance. After all, she is facing the greatest of all fears, terror of the unknown. The hero has not yet fully committed to the journey and may still be thinking of turning back. Some other influence — a change in circumstances, a further offense against the natural order of things, or the encouragement of a Mentor — is required to get her past this turning point of fear.

In romantic comedies, the hero may express reluctance to get involved (maybe because of the pain of a previous relationship). In a detective story, the private eye may at first turn down the case, only to take it on later against his better judgment.

#### 4. MENTOR (THE WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN)

By this time many stories will have introduced a Merlin-like character who is the hero's Mentor. The relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the most common themes in mythology, and one of the richest in its symbolic value. It stands for the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, god and man.

The function of Mentors is to prepare the hero to face the unknown. They may give advice, guidance or magical equipment.

However the Mentor can only go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the unknown alone. Sometimes the Mentor is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going.

#### 5.) CROSSING THE FIRST THRESHOLD

Now the hero finally commits to the adventure and fully enters the Special World of the story for the first time by Crossing the First Threshold. He agrees to face the consequences of dealing with the problem or challenge posed in the Call to Adventure. This is the moment when the story takes off and the adventure really gets going. The balloon goes up, the ship sails, the romance begins, the plane or the spaceship soars off, the wagon train gets rolling.

Movies are often built in three acts, which can be regarded as representing 1) the hero's decision to act, 2) the action itself, and 3) the consequences of the action. The First Threshold marks the turning point between Acts One and Two. The hero, having overcome fear, has decided to confront the problem and take action. She is now committed to the journey and there's no turning back.



### 6) TESTS, ALLIES AND ENEMIES

Once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and Tests, makes Allies and Enemies, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World.

Scenes like these allow for character development as we watch the hero and his companions react under stress.

### 7.) APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE

The hero comes at last to the edge of a dangerous place, sometimes deep underground, where the object of the quest is hidden. Often it's the headquarters of the hero's greatest enemy, the most dangerous spot in the Special World, the Inmost Cave. When the hero enters that fearful place he will cross the second major threshold. Heroes often pause at the gate to prepare, plan, and outwit the villain's guards. This is the phase of Approach.

In mythology the Inmost Cave may represent the land of the dead. The hero may have to descend into hell to rescue a loved one (Orpheus), into a cave to fight a dragon and win a treasure (Sigurd in Norse myth), or into a labyrinth to confront a monster (Theseus and the Minotaur).

### 8.) THE SUPREME ORDEAL

Here the fortunes of the hero hit bottom in a direct confrontation with his greatest fear. He faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a hostile force. The Supreme Ordeal is a "black moment" for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die. The hero, like Jonah, is "in the belly of the beast."

This is a critical moment in any story, an Ordeal in which the hero must die or appear to die so that she can be born again. It's a major source of the magic of the heroic myth. The experiences of the preceding stages have led us, the audience, to identify with the hero and her fate. What happens to the hero happens to us. We are encouraged to experience the brink-of-death moment with her. Our emotions are temporarily depressed so that they can be revived by the hero's return from death. The result of this revival is a feeling of elation and exhilaration.

Every story needs such a life-or-death moment in which the hero or his goals are in mortal jeopardy.

### 9.) REWARD (SEIZING THE SWORD)

Having survived death, beaten the dragon, or slain the Minotaur, hero and audience have cause to celebrate. The hero now takes possession of the treasure she has come seeking, her Reward. It might be a special weapon like a magic sword, or a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land.

Sometimes the "sword" is knowledge and experience that leads to greater understanding and a reconciliation with hostile forces.

Plural:



### 10.) THE ROAD BACK

The hero's not out of the woods yet. We're crossing into Act Three now as the hero begins to deal with the consequences of confronting the dark forces of the Supreme Ordeal. If she has not yet managed to reconcile with the parent, the gods, or the hostile forces; they may come raging after her. Some of the best chase scenes spring up at this point, as the hero is pursued on The Road Back by the vengeful forces she has disturbed by Seizing the sword, the elixir or the treasure.

This stage marks the decision to return to the Ordinary World. The hero realizes that the Special World must eventually be left behind, and there are still dangers, temptations, and tests ahead.

### 11.) RESURRECTION

In ancient times, hunters and warriors had to be purified before they returned to their communities, because they had blood on their hands. The hero who has been to the realm of the dead must be reborn and cleansed in one last Ordeal of death and Resurrection before returning to the Ordinary World of the living.

This is often a second life-and-death moment, almost a replay of the death and rebirth of The Supreme Ordeal. Death and darkness get in one last, desperate shot before being finally defeated. It's a kind of final exam for the hero, who must be tested once more to see if he has really learned the lessons of the Supreme Ordeal.

The hero is transformed by these moments of death-and-rebirth, and is able to return to ordinary life reborn as a new being with new insights.

### 12.) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR

The hero Returns to the Ordinary World, but the journey is meaningless unless she brings back some Elixir, treasure, or lesson from the Special World. The Elixir is a magic potion with the power to heal. It may be a great treasure like the Grail that magically heals the wounded land, or it simply might be knowledge or experience that could be useful to the community someday. Sometimes the Elixir is treasure won on the quest, but it may be love, freedom, wisdom, or the knowledge that the Special World exists and can be survived. Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell.