

THE WRITER'S JOURNEY
Mythic Structure for Storytellers & Screenwriters
by Christopher Vogler

"I invite you to join me on a Writer's Journey, a mission of discovery to explore and map the elusive borderlands between myth and modern storytelling. We will be guided by a simple idea: All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies. They are known collectively as The Hero's Journey. Understanding these elements and their use in modern writing is the object of our quest. Used wisely, these ancient tools of the storyteller's craft still have tremendous power to heal our people and make the world a better place."

Christopher Vogler
Introduction: Preparing For the Journey

THE STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

- **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.

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.

- **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.

The Call to Adventure establishes the stakes of the game, and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or the lover, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge, or change a life.

- **REFUSAL OF THE CALL**

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 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.

- **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.

- **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.

- **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.

Saloons and seedy bars seem to be good places for these transactions. Countless Westerns take the hero to a saloon where his manhood and determination are tested.

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

Of course not all tests, Alliances, and Enmities are confronted in bars. In many stories, these are simply encounters on the road.

- **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 the phase of the **Approach**.

Approach covers all the preparations for entering the Inmost Cave and confronting death or supreme danger.

- **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.

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 experience 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 life-or-death moment in which the hero or his goals are in moral jeopardy.

- **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.

- **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.

- **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.

- **RETURN WITH 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.

The Hero's Journey is a skeletal framework that should be fleshed out with the details and surprises of the individual story. The structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely. The order of the stages given here is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power.

The Hero's Journey is infinitely flexible, capable of endless variation without sacrificing any of its magic, and it will outlive us all.

THE ARCHETYPES

- **HERO**

The word **hero** is Greek, from a root that means "to protect and to serve".

A Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others, like a shepherd who will sacrifice to protect and serve his flock. At the root of the idea of **Hero** is connected with self-sacrifice.

- **MENTOR: WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN**

An archetype found frequently in dreams, myths, and stories is the **Mentor**, usually a positive figure who aids or trains the hero. Campbell's name for this force is the **Wise Old Man or Wise Old Woman**. This archetype is expressed in all those characters who teach and protect heroes and give them gifts. Whether it's God walking with Adam in the Garden of Eden, Merlin guiding King Arthur, the Fairy Godmother helping Cinderella, or a veteran sergeant giving advice to rookie cop, the relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the richest sources of entertainment in literature and film.

The word "Mentor" comes to us from *The Odyssey*. A character named Mentor guides the young hero, Telemachus, on his Hero's journey. In fact it's the goddess Athena who helps Telemachus, by assuming the form of Mentor. Mentors often speak in the voice of a god, or are inspired by divine wisdom. Good teachers and Mentors are **enthused**, in the original sense of the word. "Enthusiasm" is from the Greek **en theos**, meaning god-inspired, having a god in you, or being in the presence of a god.

- **THRESHOLD GUARDIAN**

All heroes encounter obstacles on the road to adventure. At each gateway to a new world there are powerful guardians at the threshold, placed to keep the unworthy from entering. They present a menacing face to the hero, but if properly understood, they can be overcome, bypassed, or even turned into allies. Many heroes (and many writers) encounter **Threshold Guardians**, and understanding their nature can help determine how to handle them.

Threshold Guardians are usually not the main villains or antagonists in stories. Often they will be lieutenants of the villain, lesser thugs or mercenaries hired to guard access to the chief's headquarters. They may also be neutral figures who are simply part of the landscape of the special world. In rare cases they may be secret helpers placed in the hero's path to test her willingness and skill.

- **HERALD**

Often a new force will appear in Act One to bring a challenge to the hero. This is the energy of the **Herald** archetype. Like the heralds of medieval chivalry, Herald characters issue challenges and announce the coming of significant change.

Typically, in the opening phase of a story, heroes have "gotten by" somehow. They have handled an imbalanced life through a series of defenses or coping mechanisms. Then all at once some new

energy enters the story that makes it impossible for the hero to simply get by any longer. A new person, condition, or information shifts the hero's balance, and nothing will ever be the same. A decision must be made, action taken, the conflict faced. A Call to Adventure has been delivered, often by a character who manifests the archetype of the Herald.

- **SHAPESHIFTER**

People often have trouble grasping the elusive archetype of the **Shapeshifter**, perhaps because its very nature is to be shifting and unstable. Its appearance and characteristics change as soon as you examine it closely. Nonetheless, the Shapeshifter is a powerful archetype and understanding its way can be helpful in storytelling and life.

Heroes frequently encounter figures, often of the opposite sex, whose primary characteristic is that they appear to change constantly from the hero's point of view. Often the hero's love interest or romantic partner will manifest the qualities of a Shapeshifter. We have all experienced relationships in which our partner is fickle, two-faced or bewilderingly changeable.

Shapeshifters change appearance or mood, and are difficult for the hero and the audience to pin down. They may mislead the hero or keep her guessing, and their loyalty or sincerity is often in question. An Ally or friend of the same sex as the hero may also act as a Shapeshifter in a buddy comedy or adventure. Wizards, witches, and ogres are traditional Shapeshifters in the world of fairy tales.

- **SHADOW**

The archetype known as the **Shadow** represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something. Often it's the home of the suppressed monsters of our inner world. Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. The qualities we have renounced and tried to root out still lurk within, operating in the Shadow world of the unconscious. The Shadow can also shelter positive qualities that are in hiding or that we have rejected for some reason.

The negative face of the Shadow in stories is projected onto characters called villains, antagonists, or enemies. Villains and enemies are usually dedicated to the death, destruction or defeat of the hero. Antagonists may not be quite so hostile---they may be Allies who are after the same goal but who disagree with hero's tactics. Antagonists and heroes in conflict are like horses in a team pulling in different directions, while villains and heroes in conflict are like trains on a head-on collision course.

- **TRICKSTER**

The Trickster archetype embodies the energies of mischief and desire for change. All the characters in stories who are primarily clowns or comical sidekicks express this archetype. The specialized form called the Trickster Hero is the leading figure in many myths and is very popular in folklore and fairy tales.

Note: In the book, Vogler also defines the psychological and dramatic function as well as the different kinds of each archetype.