

# The Hero's Journey

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The Hero's Journey is a collection of events that lead the main protagonist in a film's storyline. It directs the protagonist in a different direction at different stages of the Hero's Journey to help the continuity, and pacing of the film. There is usually a similar pattern between all films that use the Hero's Journey layout, and when used effectively, it helps the film tell a more interesting story.

The stages of the Hero's Journey follow a basic layout:

Innocence

Separation

Refusal

Crossing of the first threshold

The Belly of the Whale

Initiation

Death

Meeting of the Goddess

Atonement

Apotheosis

Return

Refusal

Magic flight

Mastery of two worlds

Freedom

Many films use this basic theme when a story revolves around the protagonist. The reason why this layout is used so much is because of the smooth flow of the storyline, and showing the development of character. Each of the stages in the Hero's Journey are like signs which help direct the story of the film to a different location, and at the same time, can help the director find the best way to approach the following scene to showcase the protagonist. An example would be like the transition from the stage of Innocence to Separation, one director might make it a vicious transition with lots of blood and violence and very negative scenes, causing the audience to feel very distraught and trembling with sadness; which in hand might make the audience feel

more attached to the protagonist. On the other hand, another director might decide to make it more subtle, and have the transition take place with soft scenes that depict a slight loss over time, something not so obvious so that the audience does not realize of the transition of the story into the next phase, thus creating a sense of continuity.

Traditionally, the stage of Innocence means the world of a child. It tries to give the sense that the protagonist is in his most innocent form before the trials and obstacles that lay before him. The stage of Innocence does not necessarily mean that the protagonist is innocent; it means to show the original state of the protagonist's character before he takes his Hero's Journey. There are usually references to children in the form of child-like actions or scenes to portray the stage of Innocence. This example is obvious in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, where the protagonist wakes up and the television is showing an old black and white cartoon. Not only that, but he wakes up to have his machines or gadgets wake him up, and make him coffee and his breakfast, as if he is like a little child being taken care of, or pampered.

In Jim Jarmusch's film *Ghost Dog*, the stage of Innocence can be identified when the protagonist's hit is watching an old black and white cartoon in his bedroom at the beginning of the film. This all takes place right before the protagonist quietly and efficiently knocks him off, and leaves his witness alive, which can also be a sign that the protagonist is unaware of his actions, like a child. This sends a message that the protagonist is someone who is very straight forward, who does not hold back, and that he does not fear death.

The call to adventure, or Separation, follows the stage of Innocence in a sense that the character now has an objective which will cast him further into the depths of the film's plot. This event is triggered when the protagonist makes a decision (usually out of character) and winds up being torn from their normal comfortable environment and has to deal with many situations which they normally would not have to. Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, which shows the protagonist in a situation with three different storylines and endings, is a really high intensity film. In each of the three scenarios, the protagonist, Lola, has to make choices which all have different consequences and rewards for her and the people involved. The time of separation in this film occurs when Lola wakes up and answers a phone call from her boyfriend Manni. Everything up until the phone call is pretty subtle, but when the Lola answers the phone, all hell breaks loose. The next seventy minutes is a montage of scenes where the film shows Lola running non-stop.

Lola has to deal with the great task of having to come up with a large sum of money in twenty minutes or her boyfriend gets the shovel. Normally her day probably would not be so intense, but without that, there would be no story. Her Hero's Journey is a real obstacle in a sense that her call to adventure literally is a "phone" call to adventure.

When the protagonist has a realization of an obstacle ahead of him which he does not normally deal with, he instantly doubts his ability to do so or is reluctant to do so. This stage of the Hero's Journey is called the Refusal. The stage of Refusal comes from doubt, or the inner fear of the protagonist, it surfaces here for the first time because of the uncommonness of the situation. The root of doubt for the protagonist is the fear of whether or not he is able to accomplish the next task at hand.

In John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China*, the all American trucker and main protagonist Jack Burton has to decide whether he can save his friend's fiancé's from the clutches of an immortal sorcerer and get his truck back at the same time. His first reaction to the whole situation is that of doubt, where he goes off on a tangent in probably his greatest monologue scene of the film where he explains all the impossible events that just happened recently. The Stage of refusal is usually a temporary stage of the Hero's Journey to really test the character of the protagonist and is the first major step in his development. It is also used to control the flow and pace of the film so that the film has a rest period before the next rising action point.

The Crossing of the first threshold is the first obstacle that the protagonist has to overcome after the realization of his Hero's Journey. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, does a unique job of portraying the Hero's Journey for the protagonist Jeffrey Beaumont. It would appear that he mixes up the stages to create a sense of slight confusion. Jeffrey's crossing of the first threshold occurs when he decides to enter into the apartment of a disturbed woman by the name of Dorothy Vallens. He pretends that he is a bug exterminator and manages to enter her apartment with little suspicion, and in the process, also steals the extra set of keys in the kitchen when another person of interest enters the apartment; diverting Dorothy's attention.

For the next three phases, *Jacob's Ladder* by Adrian Lyne composes the Hero's Journey very well to show a great feat of storytelling unseen in most modern mainstream films. *The Belly of the Whale* is the realization that the protagonist is in some deep trouble. For the protagonist Jacob, he is torn by ominous and disturbing hallucination like sightings of demons out to get him. He comes to the realization that there is something odd, that there is something not quite right in his world. With the appearances of these demons coming for him, mixed up with flashbacks of his days in Vietnam, he feels that there may be a connection.

Jacob's Initiation in the Hero's Journey is when he and his girlfriend Jezebel attend a friend's house party. In this scene, Jacob encounters a fortune teller which tells him that he should already be dead. The stage of Initiation is like a test, used to gauge a certain character trait of the protagonist; in this case it would be Jacob's faith. It is also a set of trials and ordeals the protagonist must face. A confused Jacob hits the dance floor, but refuses to dance with his girlfriend, whom finds someone else to dance with. Jacob then notices someone of particular interest in the back of the room, this

person fades in and out and starts acting hysterically, shaking his head. Unsure whether the person was a hallucination or not, Jacob focuses his attention to Jezebel. The following scenes show her having dance-sex with a man whom turns into a giant demon, with wings, a tail and all.

Too much for Jacob to handle, he freaks out. He arrives home, falls into a seizure, and goes into convulsions. When he is placed into the bathtub full of icy water, dreams or memories of his past begin to surface. This point in the film would be considered his symbolic Death, where the protagonist removes all the ties that bind him. In this state, he finds himself waking up beside his wife Sarah, and believes everything in the film to this point was just a dream.

His wife Sarah can be considered to be the Goddess figure in the film. The Goddess figure of a film is particularly a female, whom has a motherly or feminine influence on the protagonist. In some films the main, influential, female figure may have a negative effect on the protagonist. When the female influence is portrayed in this manner, she would be considered the Whore figure, which tempts the protagonist into sin rather than helping him positively. Sarah also symbolizes a time in Jacob's life when he felt the most fulfilled; this is usually used as a clue to discover his inner sins later on in the film. In any case, her appearance in the film happens to occur whenever Jacob is in dire need of some sort of salvation, so her role is definitely that of a Goddess, whereas Jezebel can be considered the Whore.

In any Hero's Journey, there are things that the protagonist has done in his past that he wished he could have taken back. Clues as to what these sins may be are usually shown before his symbolic death and even sometimes during the appearance of the Goddess figure. The next stage in the Hero's Journey deals with Atonement, where the protagonist has a chance to redeem himself for a past sin or an action that has waved heavily on his character and conscious.

In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, there is one main protagonist, but there are multiple Hero's Journeys that some of the other characters in the film undergo. One of protagonists is the drunken old man known in the film as the Mayor. He is first portrayed as a drunken old man, but the story of his past, and pain is explained in a bit of dialogue which begins to show more depth to his character.

In his stage of Atonement, the Mayor is walking down the street of his neighbourhood and witnesses a little boy about to get hit by a car speeding around the corner. On instinct, he rushes in and pushes the boy, saving his life. The irony is that just for a brief moment after the Mayor has saved the boys life, the boys' mother appears and believes that the Mayor pushed her son down for no apparent reason. It later becomes resolved, but this action also proves the doubt in other people. On a positive not, this action also causes the Mayor to gain acknowledgement from the prime figure of interest in his Hero's Journey, Mamas' Sister. Usually, in the stage of

Atonement, the protagonist receives acknowledgement from the leading male figure or male influence in the story, but it can be considered to be the person for whom the protagonist looks up to most, or whom the protagonist wishes to be acknowledged from most.

When it comes time to meet the "Ultimate Boon," there is no time better than when the protagonist reaches Apotheosis, a level of glorification or higher rank. This stage of the Hero's Journey deals with the matter that the protagonist has received acknowledgement from the Ultimate Boon, or the leading influential male in the film's story. Not only that, but it would also concern with the fact that the Ultimate Boon has rewarded the protagonist in some way or another.

In Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, Sam Lowry, a seemingly patient, and gentle bureaucrat who works for the Ministry – a massive, paranoid, never-ending labyrinth like government – is actually the son of the former head honcho. When he finally accepts a promotion to rise in status so that he can help his love interest Jill Layton, he has to meet the main man himself, who happens to be his deceased father's best friend. When Sam enters the office, he is captivated by the massiveness that is this grandiose room, with a single desk at the end of the room, which showcases the importance of this one individual. Most people in their Hero's Journey would normally be mystified to be acknowledged by such a person, however, in Sam Lowry's case, all he cares is being able to help Jill, which gives a unique twist in the meeting of the Ultimate Boon.

Anyways, carrying on with the Hero's Journey, the next stage is Return; the protagonist now has almost pretty much found his ultimate goal in the film's story, and is trying to complete his Hero's Journey. He has received acknowledgement from the Ultimate Boon, and has acquired a greater value of his role in the plot of his own story. In the stage of Return, the protagonist might go back to a previous area, or try to finish a previous task.

For Jack Torrance in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, his Return is a continuation of his previous task, to kill his wife and kid. Not what one would expect from a film which clearly showcases the Hero's Journey, but in this case, Jack's journey is simply averted in a different direction; one towards the regression or destruction of his humanity, and his own character. This film is an excellent example of the Hero's Journey which shows the protagonist falling in a negative direction rather than climbing up in a positive one. Jack was already flawed to begin with, and his weaknesses such as alcohol and aggression are exposed as the film progresses. As he falls deeper into his own madness, he is directed by his own "Ultimate Boon" – the former caretaker of the Overlook Hotel in which Jack is now the caretaker – to kill his family. Having already failed in doing so the first time, Jack must now resume his task.

When Jack is fooled by his son and becomes lost in the hedge maze of the Overlook Hotel, he freaks out in an animal like behavior; he then sits down in the

freezing falling snow, as if he refuses to continue in his beastlike state. This stage is the second and final stage of Refusal the protagonist will go through in his Hero's Journey. In this stage, it can be defined that even with all the knowledge, and experience gained previous to this point it is still not enough for the protagonist to complete his task, so there is still that little bit of doubt lingering in the atmosphere. So, this stage of Refusal is the surfacing of that doubt once again showing up in the protagonist's character, and at the same time, seemingly proving that no matter how great we think we have become, we are all human, and so we can never be perfect, or complete all of our goals. For Jack, his Refusal is like a non-realization of his own human abilities, and the refusal to use reason in his actions. It can also mean his refusal to give up, or go back to being the person he once was.

The protagonist has now recovered from his doubt, or at least has accepted his own weaknesses and now prepares for his last stand, the last set of major events, the Magic Flight. The Magic Flight is literally a rescue or escape of the protagonist. The Magic Flight can also mean that the protagonist is in the pursuit of his goal, but whatever the case, this stage is meant for the final decisive sequence of actions the protagonist takes, usually against the antagonist.

For Thomas Anderson, or Neo as he is known – in the Wachowski brothers The Matrix – his Magic Flight can be described as the event when he attempts to rescue Morpheus from the clutches of the Agents. It is probably the most spectacular collection of scenes as it gave way to the whole popularity of "Bullet Time." Anyway, Neo busts in with Trinity with guns blazing and they kill a lot of people on their way up the building. They manage to rescue Morpheus using a helicopter and attempt to escape from the clutches of the Agents – hence the term rescue and escape, the main terms for the stage of Magic Flight. Trinity and Morpheus manage to escape, but Neo is left to fend for himself against the Agents. Even though he fails to escape, Neo manages to complete his original task of rescuing Morpheus, thus completing his Magic Flight of the Hero's Journey.

The Matrix is also an excellent example of when the protagonist has achieved the stage of mastery of the two worlds; which means that he has a complete understanding of the forces of good and evil, and can go beyond them. At this time, the protagonist's character is now complete and he now utilizes the confidence he has gained, or the strength and power that he has obtained to totally complete his Hero's Journey. Neo is ambushed by Agent Smith and is shot several times in the chest; it appears that he dies. He gets up and now sees the world of the Matrix for what it really is and all of a sudden has the sudden realization that he has superhuman powers. He then defeats Agent Smith with little to no effort and scares off the other Agents. What this means is that Neo has finally come to the realization of the Matrix's existence, therefore he can also fully understand its capabilities, and be able to exceed its limits.

Neo's freedom is complete when he detaches himself from the limitations of the Matrix. It is symbolized quite clearly when he takes off to the skies like superman at the end of the film. This is the final stage of the Hero's Journey, when the protagonist has completed his objective, achieved all that he has desired, and is now free from the burden of his previous weaknesses, and doubts.

Another great example of the protagonist having mastery of the two worlds and gaining freedom is in the film *Pie*, by Darren Aronofsky. Here, the protagonist is a troubled genius by the name of Max Cohen. He lives a paranoid lifestyle behind a locked door trying to find the pattern between the link of nature and mathematics. At the end of the film, when it seems almost like he has gone into complete madness after escaping from the mobs of stock brokers searching for a quick buck and the Hasidic Jews searching for God, he finds himself back in his apartment, the most concentrated part of the film and of his Hero's Journey.

Max's recurring headache pains have surfaced once again, but this time, however, they are so powerful that the film depicts Max taking a power drill to his head. He directs it on his own will to his temple, which is the cause of his pain. The following scenes show a piercing white light symbolizing the sun and perhaps a hint of gnosis, that Max has reached what he was searching for, or that he is satisfied with the answer he has found – showing mastery of the two worlds, that of nature, and mathematics.

For the final stage in his Hero's Journey, Max's freedom is symbolized in a scene where he has removed all the hair from his head and for the first time in the film, he is simply relaxing, sitting on a park bench. While doing so, he is asked a question concerning mathematics, and with a clear smile showing no concern whatsoever, he only provides the answer, "I don't know." With that in mind, it symbolizes that his search or Hero's Journey has ended, regardless of having achieved any form of final resolution.

Though all of the films mentioned are of a different genre, time period, and story altogether, the Hero's Journey for each of the protagonists are actually quite similar. With the method of the Hero's Journey, the protagonist can either both exceed all expectations and achieve ultimate glory, or he can fall into a hell of his own mind, all the while in a desperate struggle to save what is left of his sanity. The Hero's Journey can be simple or complicated, but whatever the case, the Hero's Journey is the result of a long evolution from the story tellers of days gone past, and continues to evolve by the story tellers of today.

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