

## **Narrative and Film** **‘Discovering legends in his own lifetime’**

**A memo for Disney analysing storytelling acquired cult status in Hollywood and has been turned into a book. Rupert Widdicombe (Sunday Times 4.9.94), abridged by MM.**

[Christopher Vogler](#) in 1985 penned a famous memo, as newly appointed ‘story analyst’ for Disney’s animation division.

Buried deep in almost every story from almost every culture, Vogler wrote, there is a universal story form – a ‘mythic structure’. It has existed since stories were first told and is present in today’s blockbuster movies.

Disney’s development executives took up the memo, to be followed by other studios.

Vogler wrote up his findings as *‘The Winter’s Journey’* (1992)

Many writers had managed to hit on the same formula before, more by instinct than anything else. Vogler’s jobs had led him to read fairy-tales epic poems and Norse and Celtic myths as well as novels and comics. He noticed common elements including familiar characters and situations. “I became aware that there was a pattern or template, but the overall plan eluded me,” he said.

Reading ‘The Hero with a Thousand Faces’ by American mythologist [Joseph Campbell](#) was another inspiration. Campbell had discovered a ‘monomyth’ which he called the Hero’s Journey.

### **Vogler identified 12 stages of the journey (see below).**

The Journey begins in the Ordinary World. The hero is in some ways incomplete or unsatisfied, and is presented with The Call to Adventure. Hero’s first reaction is Refuse the Call. Enter the Mentor to encourage the reluctant hero to prepare for the journey. Hero becomes committed by Crossing the First Threshold into a world where different rules apply and Tests, Allies and Enemies are encountered.

After many adventures the hero comes to a dangerous place, where that which is sought resides – the Approach to the Inmost Cave and inside faces the Supreme Ordeal and takes possession of the Reward. The dark forces regroup to endanger the Road Back. There is one more ordeal of death and rebirth – the Resurrection, which must be faced before the hero can return, transformed, back to the ordinary world, with the treasure or lesson learned – the Return with Elixir.

Campbell produced a complex narrative model, but Vogler simplified this to an ‘adaptation for film model’.

*“Campbell believed every culture takes the basic structure and puts it into its own landscape. I suppose that is what I did with his work, I translated it into movie terms.”*

### **OTHER NARRATOLOGISTS**

Established Media Studies Structuralists:

- [Propp](#),
- [Todorov](#),
- [Levi-Strauss](#),
- **Barthes**.
- **Aristotle’s** ‘Poetics’ and
- **Ronald B. Tobias’s** ‘20 Masterplots and How to Build Them’ .
- **Kipling** defined 69 types of story;
- **Northrop Frye** (American critic) said four.

- See also **Cadweli**.

**Campbell** said there is only one, and prefers to define archetypal elements rather than classify plots:

The **Mentor** could be more than one person such as Obi Wan in Star Wars, but might be more than one person, an object or piece of advice remembered.

Call to Adventure might be Romeo meeting Juliet or warning ignored by Julius Caesar. The Supreme Ordeal might be on drill square in Officer and a Gentleman.

The adventure of Luke Skywalker aboard Death Star is based on Campbell (George Lucas was a fan). Vogler says this scene (Luke escaping from the Deathstar sewage pit), the Supreme Ordeal, lies at heart of Hero's journey.

“The secret is that heroes must die so they can be reborn.” In many stories, this ‘death’ is metaphorical, an experiences that transforms. Death and rebirth is the ‘story’ that has been told and retold through the ages of man. Campbell, who was deeply influenced by Jung, traced it back to the earliest myths and believed the journey was an inherited form, part of the “collective unconsciousness.”

Vogler says these stories with structures evolved as survival tools. Storytelling was a way of preparing the young for the ordeal of leaving the community to hunt or gather.

The Resurrection, the second ordeal at the climax of most stories, may have had origins in ritual purification of returning hunters (MM takes this with pinch of salt), often involving period of quarantine in a dark place, a symbolic death before rebirth into the community.

Stories appeal to urban man because they appear “genetically encoded. We can identify with the story because we are all on the journey.”

Vogler worked on the Lion King, which he called Bamlet – Bambi meets Hamlet. During production he stressed importance of baboon shaman as Mentor to the hero lion.

Vogler warns that the formula is a buried roadmap rather than a cookbook. The deeply embedded story should act as a blueprint.

With more outlets for stories via cable and satellite, Hollywood cranked up its output to produce so called ‘software’ to fill its schedules. By 1994, Disney was turning out 40 features a year from 15 (and was aiming at 60).

The need to create satisfactory stories in bulk has made creating stories a big business. Writers now rely on story analysts’ books explaining the three-act structure with advice on where to put turning points and inciting incidents for maximum effect.

Software has been evolved including ‘Plots Unlimited’. Writers can browse its data file. This method has been called ‘creative bankruptcy’ and is responsible for **formulaic** form of modern films.

It was claimed lazy executives used Vogler’s work as a cure-all. Writers defend themselves by pointing out how difficult it is to produce a really good script.

Director Brian Gibson said: “Writing one is extraordinarily difficult to do – a good script needs its own voice, its own vision, thematic consistency and novel characters...and all in 110 pages.”

***“Understanding the archetypes can help you to make your story more powerful – and avoid the clichés.”***

[http://www.alevelmedia.co.uk/page\\_1269723454978.html](http://www.alevelmedia.co.uk/page_1269723454978.html)

## **The 12 Steps of the Hero's Journey**

CASE STUDIES – see original article for Four Weddings, Wizard of Oz, Star Wars and Romancing the Stone.

- 1. Ordinary World.** L. Skywalker bored on remote farm. His parents are assumed dead and feels incomplete.
- 2. Call To Adventure** Luke finds Leia's plea for help in R2D2.
- 3. Refusal of the Call.** Luke won't take up Obi's challenge because uncle and aunt need him.
- 4. Meeting the Mentor.** Luke puts himself in hands of Obi and learns about The Force.
- 5. Crossing The First Threshold.** Luke takes up challenge when stormtroopers barbecue aunt and uncle.
- 6. Tests, Allies, Enemies.** They meet Han, Wookie and Jabba.
- 7. Approach to the Inmost Cave.** Adventures which culminate in breakout from Deathstar.
- 8. Supreme Ordeal.** Series of adventures in Deathstar including near-death in garbage compactor.
- 9. Reward (Seizing the Sword).** Luke and Co escape with information about Deathstar destruction, but lose Obi-Wan.
- 10. Road Back.** Worst not over. Deathstar is in range of rebel base and must be destroyed.
- 11. Resurrection.** Luke trusts the force and sacrifices old part of personality – his dependence on machines.
- 12. Return with Elixir.** Luke and friends decorated as heroes. Luke's internal elixir is new self-knowledge and control of the Force.

Youtube link to [Joseph Campbell and George Lucas](#)



Image taken from: <http://www.gaiacommunitycollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/hero-3-joseph-campbell.jpg>