

Stages of the Hero

Birth: The hero is, in birth, part of the unknown. This is often expressed symbolically with caves, stables, graves, rocks, even the womb. The birth is a "miracle" no matter the circumstances. It is the gift of the gods (God). The process of birth itself is a struggle. The hero is often exposed to the forces of nature; in mythology, Mother earth or the gods (God). The final symbolism is the river - flowing through the canal - to life.

Childhood, Initiation and Divine Signs: The hero often grows outside the mainstream and is protected by outside forces. His/Her place in the scheme of life is often shown by divine signs. This is the time for the child to explore life in a protected atmosphere. The child is often instructed by a "wise-one". The stage usually ends in initiation, when the child proves him/herself worthy of moving on in life (Arthur pulls the sword from the stone). The hero is ready to explore the outside world.

Preparation, Meditation, Withdrawal and Refusal: Although the hero wishes to do well, to serve people and the world, he or she succumbs to personal fears and frustrations. It is during this phase that the teacher often gives up control and allows the hero to "sink or swim." It is the human qualities, virtues and vices, that struggle within him/her. The effort to accept the challenge is rewarded, although the hero usually withdraws from or tries to refuse the test. This time is often ended by the "rite of passage."

Trial and Quest: Symbolically, this phase is the summer of the hero's life. It is the stage most often written about. The hero goes out into the world "proving" himself worthy. He has "established his origins, found divine destiny within himself, and now must act on that destiny." The hero searches for the essence of life, for a personal balance with nature.

Death and the Scapegoat: Violence often marks this stage, whether actual death or inner struggle. In many literary works there is a loss of prosperity. The people and the land suffer for the loss of the hero. The death is mourned, but there is also a hope of return, of resurrection. There is the promise of new life.

Descent into the Underworld: This phase deals with man's own fears. The hero travels to the inner earth, or a symbol of it. He/She is like the "seed in winter," waiting for the right moment to return - alive and victorious. The stage is often represented as a time for self realization. The hero moves away from the mainstream to discover inner peace and strength.

Resurrection and Rebirth: As violently as the hero leaves the world, he bursts forth again. He/She is stronger in the knowledge of who he/she really is and what he/she can accomplish. The process of self-realization is complete - from the womb, the inner-earth, a new person is born. He/She is now an eternal human being, not just a mortal. The hero strives for and is closer to the final stage.

Ascension, Apotheosis and Atonement: This is the "logical" conclusion or phase of the hero's life. He/She receives a permanent place in the divine, the universe, eternity. This stage is a warning, a lesson to the reader, to concentrate on being one with the "creator." The hero shows us that one is only free when one is "free of the local, the material and the sectarian." At-one-ment with the cosmos is the goal.