

## So what is a hero or heroine and how to write about him or her?

An analysis of an heroic myth as exemplar of mythic ideas using the concepts of Jung, Joseph Campbell, and their application to writing fiction by Christopher Vogler. See also [http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero's\\_journey.htm](http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero's_journey.htm)

Do these models work?

### Introduction

I have chosen the relatively well known Greek myth of Herakles (Hercules, in Roman myth), and the Joseph Campbell-Vogler model for analysis based on the original work of Jung. I have done this because I believe this model of all the ones available, is most suited to my writing ambitions in terms of plot development. If inadequacies in the model-theory arise, I will indicate where I consider the model inadequate for some points in the story – noting the possibility that all models may be underdetermining any story. I do not feel I have to select a myth that does justice to any model; the models should do justice to the phenomena they aspire to explain or they should vacate the field.

### The Story of Herakles

Briefly, the origin of Herakles is as follows: he was conceived from a union between a human woman, Alkmene, and the mighty Zeus, chief of the Gods. Alkmene must have been quite something, because Zeus extended his stay with her for three nights – not his normal practice when engaging in sexual liaisons with human women. Perhaps this was due to Alkmene being the granddaughter of Perseus, another mighty hero. She probably gave as good as she got.

Hera, consort-wife of Zeus, naturally disapproving of her husband's infidelities, upon discovering what Zeus had been up to with Alkmene, sent two serpents to kill the infant Herakles (known as Alcides at the time) in his cot.

Being a Goddess herself, she should have known better. Herakles disposed of the serpents by crushing each of them with his hands. He hardly raised a sweat – not a child (or adult) to shake hands with, let us remember from now on. Hera loathed Herakles all of his mortal life, because he reminded her of Zeus's infidelities.

Herakles grew up so strong in his body and powerful in his actions, that he soon became a hero without equal – not surprising when you take into account his pedigree.

However, he may have been too powerful, or maybe he had poor coordination, because he was often dangerous (fatally so, in some cases) to innocent people around him. He also had a bad temper, and later when living in Thebes and married to Megara, daughter of Creon, he killed his own children in a rage (caused, it is thought, by the actions of Hera). He may have also killed poor Megara. Grief-stricken, he went into voluntary exile – for a while. It is also said that he lost control of his strength and killed his mentor, the centaur Chiron, while driving away other centaurs (Leeming, 2005). Not a hero in whose presence one should relax.

In the beginning, for his own and the community's safety, his foster father Amphitryon sent him

away to guard his oxen. Herakles could not help himself, and got into a fight with a cattle-devouring monster lion, which naturally enough he killed, furthering his reputation as a hero (there were no animal rights activists in those days).

Herakles skinned the lion and wore it, using its head as a helmet, and went on to accomplish numerous more deeds of valour, including the famous 'Twelve Labours of Herakles'. These were, without details: the fight and killing of the Nemean Lion (one supposes lions must have been plentiful in ancient Greece or he had a particular antipathy to these beasts), fight against the Hydra, the capture of the Arcadian Stag, the capture of the Erymanthian Boar, the cleaning of the Augean stables (he must have loved that), the killing of the Stymphalian Birds, the capture of the Cretan Bull, the capture of the Mares of Diomedes, the seizing of the girdle of Hippolyta (worth seeing, one imagines), the capture of the Cattle of Geryones, the obtaining of the golden apples of the Hesperides, and the descent into the underworld to retrieve Cerberus (he was accompanied by Hermes and Athena).

It was the Oracle at Delphi which told Herakles he must serve Eurystheus of Tiryns so as to 'purify himself and to achieve immortality' (Leeming, 2005). His name 'Herakles' meant 'Hera's Glory' and this may have been an attempt to placate the Goddess. Hera may have considered it an insulting, ironic reminder of his origins, but in the end it may have worked, because Hera agreed to allow him to ascend to Olympus and become a God – as predicted by the Oracle (like becoming a peer of the realm in the House of Lords).

After the 'Labours' he returned to Thebes, but in a mad fit, he killed his friend Iphitus and went on another course of purification (I do not think these courses were doing him much good). He lived dressed as a woman and servant of the Queen of Lybia. This was followed by more feats of valour, such as helping the Gods in their war with the Giants. There came another marriage, more killing of innocent bystanders (a boy this time), more exile (at least he was sorry), and a final, fatal encounter with the centaur, Nessus (the Revenge of the Centaurs).

When Herakles shot Nessus with a poisoned arrow (dipped in the blood of the Hydra) for trying to rape his wife Deianeira, the centaur was quite put out. Before he died, he gave Deianeira his blood mixed with his semen, so it could be made into a potion to ensure her husband's fidelity. Deianeira, obviously none too bright, soaked the shirt of Herakles in this potion and gave it to him to wear.

Herakles suffered an agonizing death and Deianeira, in grief, hung herself. As with the Christian story of the ascension of Jesus Christ, Herakles was borne to heaven (Olympus) on a cloud. He became an immortal and was even finally accepted by Hera, who allowed him to marry her daughter Hebe (Leeming, 2005). One hesitates to say they lived happily ever after, but Herakles at least became a God of sorts, and his legend has lasted all these ages. It has even survived the predations of political correctness.

### **Outline of the Campbell Model**

Based on the ideas of Jung (Jacobi, 1973), Campbell proposed a universality of mythic themes, derived from archetypes in the collective unconscious of humanity (Campbell, 1988 and other works).

This was developed into a structure for the heroic myth embodying the concept of a journey and return. Campbell's theory about heroic myths was adapted by Vogler (Vogler, 2007), into a series of

useful plot development elements, which can be used to create heroic stories.

The important difference is that Campbell was explaining aspects of myth; Vogler is developing structures for the craft of storytelling.

### **Analysis - Correlation of Story and Model Stages**

I have created a table to help analyse the Herakles story in terms of the Campbell model. Individual interpretations of the story will result in different engagement with the model. I remain unconvinced that any model can do justice to the range of stories – including mythic stories. The models seem to try and impose a structure on what is a dynamic entity with individual characteristics.

Human creativity adds elements which cannot be embraced by a model which looks to what already is. I know of no model that can capture the creative ideas to come and their several iterations into new stories.

<u><i>Campbell's Stages – the theoretical model used</i></u>	<u><i>The Journey of Herakles</i></u>	<u><i>Comments</i></u>
<b>1) Ordinary World – the Beginning</b>	Illegitimate birth but of divine origin; adopted by mortals; efforts made to lead ordinary mortal life.	Destined for greatness through auspicious beginnings as his mother is a descendant of Perseus and father the chief of Gods – able to defy Hera's plan by his strength as an infant; in origin not an ordinary life; model application not complete.
<b>2) Called to adventure</b>	His life is steeped in adventures and conflicts from the beginning – being driven to extraordinary things even though stepfather attempts to make him ordinary.	The model is not a good fit because Herakles is not leading a quiet life or part of an ordinary milieu – fated to be a hero.
<b>3) Refusing the Call</b>	Herakles never refuses a call – especially if a fight is involved; in fact he relishes conflict from the beginning although he is repentant of 'collateral damage' he causes.	The model does not fit this aspect of Herakle's story. This 'refusal' is a dramatic flourish to add tension to a story – this 'refusal' is not a defining characteristic of Greek myths.
<b>4) The Mentor(s)</b>	Chiron the centaur; his stepfather helps him by sending him to mind cattle; Athena and Hermes assist him at critical points; the Oracle at Delphi provides ultimate 'guidance'.	This stage of the model fits the story of Herakles.
<b>5) Crossing the Threshold</b>	The critical threshold is reached	This stage of the model fits the

	and crossed when the Oracle at Delphi tells Herakles he must serve Eurystheus of Tiryns as a way of expiating his guilt at the killing of his children and possibly his wife.	story of Herakles. However, in terms of Vogler's stages for storytelling, we can state that there are a number of thresholds crossed by Herakles, and it is a moot point which one is the most critical point of no return. I assumed the point at which the twelve labours begin is best treated this way.
<b>6) Tests Allies and Enemies</b>	He has powerful allies in Hermes and Athena, but the help of the Gods is always ambivalent; no mortal or semi-mortal is as powerful as Herakles; there is no actual 'testing' of enemies, but Herakles is capable of cunning and shrewdly assesses his enemies before conflict. He has many encounters with enemies and potential friends	Only a partial fit to the model. You can argue that earlier 'adventures' were a preliminary to the 'threshold' adventures, but I think that is a stretch of the ideas of Campbell. His 'testing' encounters continue almost unabated from the time of his birth to his ascension. He's that kind of guy.
<b>7) Approaching the Inmost Cave</b>	Embarking on the twelve labours.	A reasonable fit for the Campbell model. The real journey has begun.
<b>8) Supreme Ordeal</b>	The descent into Hades may be considered as the most dangerous ordeal or challenge. Another option is the war against the Giants – although it seems this is small pickings for a Herakles. This aspect of the myth may be one of accretion by many retellings.	Not quite a fit for the Campbell model, except perhaps in the sense of Vogler. As a storyteller you would pick on particular event as the greatest ordeal; retrieving a particularly vicious mutt from the underworld is as good as any 'ordeal' chosen from the twelve labours.
<b>9) Reward</b>	There are two possibilities: Herakles is allowed to marry and settle down to what passes for a normal life for such as him; allowed to enter Olympus – Hera relents.	The latter fits the model, but pushes stages out of sequence. Former is out of sequence as well because it repeats a cycle of violence and another period of expiation. Model is poor at this point and so is the Vogel approach. Neither capture the version of the myth adequately. 'Reward' and 'Road Back' are intertwined

		at best in the Herakles myth.
<b>10) Road Back</b>	The ignominy of serving the Queen of Lybia and the conflict with Nessus are actually other critical 'ordeals'. The latter conflict and climax is Herakles's punishment for the past deception of his wife (presumed) and violent tendencies (undoubted).	Herakles perhaps learns a final lesson – not in the myth, but in the Vogler storytelling structure. A kind of denouement – the bad guy is still lurking in the background and comes forward for a final fling at our hero; naturally our hero wins but at the price of his life. A poor fit in terms of Cambell theory; poor fit for Vogler structure as well. There is never a 'Road Back' for this hero.
<b>11) Resurrection</b>	Herakles is returned to his world numerous times. A final resurrection does not do this. Ascends to Olympus to take his place among the Gods.	Very good fit if you look at the resurrection in a different way – resurrection is similar to Christian eschatology. It is not ppart of the Vogler idea – a purification so as to return to the world. Perhaps Herakles's world always was Olympus, but this is stretching a point.
<b>12) Return with the Elixir</b>	Not Applicable.	Herakles does not 'get' anything – in the literal or intellectual sense. Yet he is not doomed to repeat the journey endlessly (although there has been much repetition, thus scrambling the stages). The plug is pulled.
<b>13) Other Aspects</b>	In this myth there is only conflict followed by a short break followed by more conflict, until Herakles is done in; one assumes the Gods had enough of the violence and pulled the program from the air. Prudence and perhaps a reward for helping them with their war against the Giants, led to Herakles becoming a junior God.	Stages are scrambled, on whatever interpretation of the myth you settle. Some stages do not apply. This is not at variance with Vogler's 'do what you have to do to tell the story' approach, but it is difficult to fit the myth into the Campbell model. A simplified version of the Herakles myth is possible on the Vogler model. See below.

Simplified version of story: Herakles is born into an ordinary world but is really the son of a powerful super-being; he has mentors (Chiron, the Oracle) and powerful enemies (Hera); he discovers his powers, and for his safety is sent away; he gets into trouble anyway; he is made to

endure trials to make up for the faults in character and trouble he has caused; he returns triumphant and a wiser hero; he uses his newfound wisdom to rule his land with justice; but an enemy still lurks to do him harm; in saving his family and the city from this lurking enemy he is fatally wounded; the Gods save him, taking him up to Olympus.

Even in this more direct outline, stages have to be moved around. The 'just when you thought it was safe to get back into the water' approach is used – the bad guy has one final go at our hero and almost succeeds.

## **Conclusion**

The Campbell model is an incomplete fit for the Herakles myth. In my opinion, other models will not do any better. The models 'underexplain' or 'underdescribe' the myths and legendary stories (the data or phenomena the theories are supposed to explain).

As with Freudian psychoanalysis, the models create an interesting, coherent structure which seems to appeal to the logical aspect of our nature – our desire to explain phenomena in a tidy, complete way. However, when the theoretical models (psychoanalysis or literary-mythic) are applied to the real world, they fall short of explanatory or even descriptive power.

I treated the Campbell model in as generous a way as I could, shoehorning aspects of the Herakles myth into the relevant stages. However, the fit was inadequate overall. If the model cannot do justice to a myth as well known as that of Herakles, then it is an incomplete theory - a poor theory in describing the critical elements of myths as universal, archetypal motifs. Myths may indeed be aspects of a universal, human psyche; the theory does not describe this mythic foundation adequately.

Analysis of myth is one thing; storytelling as craft is another matter.

Vogler points out that the stages of mythic storytelling he has adapted from Campbell are not an inflexible, rigid, structure. They can and should be flexible; storytellers should feel free to play with the stages, even the order in which they occur (Vogler, 2007, p19-20). If the tale of Herakles were in fact a story made up by a writer following the guidelines of a 'Hero's Journey', then we would see stages repeated, more than one threshold; more than one ordeal; an ever closer inching towards the final ordeal and resurrection. Some stages of minor or no importance at all; others intensely experienced. That is the case with Herakles.

As an aid to storytelling, the Campbell model (and the others, in their way), and its adaptation by Vogler (Vogler, 2007), are useful for certain kinds of writing. They can be used to create the skeleton of plot-categories, upon which a writer can hang the details of character, background and event.

I consider all the models, even the partial ones, useful in that sense.

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