

# The Hero Within: Tracing Joseph Campbell's Monomyth in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter

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**Abstract**—The monomyth, referred to as the “hero's journey,” created a paradigm that is used to identify the common characteristics of stories told in all cultures throughout history. In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell presented the idea that all myths and heroic stories share a base structure, regardless of culture, that includes a separation from the ordinary world; a series of transformative trials taken on behalf of others; and, ultimately, a return to the ordinary world, with the hero bearing some form of knowledge, insight or wisdom, that is beneficial to those who reside in the ordinary world. The following research will illustrate how the monomyth concept and the elements of the heroic journey presented in Campbell's research can be applied and reinterpreted to the first five books in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. This will not look at the *Harry Potter* Series as a whole, but will look at how the early part of Harry's journey forms a continual mythic cycle that is based on psychological maturation, ethical decision making and group effort.

The paper provides an analysis through careful textual examination of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in relation to Joseph Campbell's stages, which include departure, initiation, and return. The author argues that a number of similarities can be found between the two works, as Rowling was aware of the similarities. However, Rowling's development of these ideas has been substantially altered from the traditional mythology to better reflect the social/emotional issues facing modern readers. *Harry Potter* is an example of how a character's journey can be influenced not just by external factors, but also by emotions such as guilt, fear, and confusion, which create an expectation that the character will succeed at everything he or she undertakes.

The paper also points out that in Tolkien's work, as well as in Rowling's writings, Levine has made clear the idea that people are able to have choices and will be responsible for making those choices, and that working together is necessary in order to achieve goals. For instance, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Lionel Barrymore offers some inspiring messages through his actions and words. However, the traditional

view of the hero as an individual male can be challenged by showing equal respect for women and providing them with opportunities for heroic action.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that through examining both Rowling's use of Campbell's monomyth and her creation of a new myth, readers today can continue to enjoy written stories that use these structures. The author believes that the ethical implications of Campbell's monomyth serve as a continuing source of inspiration for readers.

**Index Terms**—Joseph Campbell, Monomyth, Hero's Journey, *Harry Potter*, J.K. Rowling, Mythic Structure, Ethical Choice, Modern Literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

Myths have had a large impact on how humans understand the world historically and across all cultures. Before there was any form of writing, societies were using myths to explain where they came from, why they acted the ways that they did (morality), why they suffer, and the battle between good and evil. Myths are still used in today's society to tell stories, but they exist in many current literatures as reimagined versions of their previous forms. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell argues that all of the world's myths share a common narrative pattern. He calls this pattern the “monomyth” or the “hero's journey”. According to Campbell, every heroic narrative follows this basic structure: The hero leaves the normal world, goes to a place called adventure, faces tests, meets beings who reveal who he is, returns home to change the way people think about themselves and others. This structure has become one of the main tools used by literary and cultural analysts to analyze personal growth and the moral transformation of the characters in a story.

The Harry Potter series, written by J.K. Rowling, is one of the largest/most successful literary events of the 20th and 21st centuries. Although this series may be considered "children's" or "young adult" fantasy by some classifications, the series examines a broad spectrum of themes that include power, loss, prejudice, and ethical responsibility. The main character in the series is Harry Potter, an orphan living with a neglectful family. As Harry learns that he is part of a magical society that has been hidden from him, he will face the evil forces that caused his family's demise. This journey already recalls the archetypes of Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. In contrast to Campbell's traditional hero, Rowling's characters develop and redefine to fit the contemporary social and emotional context.

The significance of Campbell's monomyth in relation to the Harry Potter series goes beyond that of plot structure; it also demonstrates the same theme that exists from both works of literature. Harry's journey from Privet Drive to Hogwarts represents the Hero Leaving Home stage of Campbell's Monomyth, and the Magical Mentor, Trials, and Moral Challenge stages correspond with the initiation stages of Campbell's Monomyth, however, Harry's transformation does not fit into the traditional Classical Hero mold because throughout his entire journey, he suffers from doubt, vulnerability, and emotional pain, whereas the classic heroic archetype represents confidence and strength. Rowling places a great emphasis on the psychological aspects of heroism to illustrate that although heroes may appear invincible and unbreakable, true heroism lies in the ability to endure adversity while remaining steadfast in doing what is right.

This research paper will discuss the first five Harry Potter books all together to demonstrate how the first five books collectively form the foundation for Harry's Heroic Journey. In addition, this research paper will demonstrate how the first five books show Harry's movement from innocence to moral awareness and from passive receiver of events to active resistance against evil. This research paper will focus on the first five Harry Potter books, as they show Harry's progression through Campbell's Monomyth and will provide the reader with a clear understanding of Harry's Modern Heroic Journey. This research paper seeks to determine the different ways in which

Rowling has built a character that resembles the Heroic Archetype, but also to explore how she has been able to do this through different stages of Challenge and Self-Discovery.

This approach also allows us to consider how the monomyth operates as an on-going process as opposed to simply a moment in time. Similarly, the second dimension of this study is to examine how Rowling's work reflects a revision of traditional ideals of heroism. Campbell's monomyth, and many other works of literature before it, have been focused on individual triumph and destiny; in contrast, Rowling's Harry Potter emphasizes choice, friendship, and cooperative action. For instance, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley both play a critical role in Harry's success and survival, providing a counterargument to the notion of the "solitary hero." Rowling also explores issues of authority within institutions through the Ministry of Magic. Through the lens of the Harry Potter series, Rowling raises questions about how institutional power is used to suppress the truth and moral responsibility, thus reflecting some of the contemporary concerns around governance, resistance, and ethical authority.

This paper seeks to establish that Joseph Campbell's monomyth is present in the first five books of the Harry Potter series, thereby showing how Rowling adapted and repurposed mythic archetypes to reflect modern ways of thinking. Furthermore, the paper argues for the existence of Harry Potter as a modern mythology. The hero's journey is preserved in Harry Potter but is redefined by Rowling as being ethical, emotional, and collaborative in nature. By doing so, Rowling ensures that the monomyth is still relevant and evolves to address the complexities of a modern-day human experience.

## II. DEPARTURE ACROSS THE FIRST FIVE BOOKS

The first stage of the Hero's Journey is called "Departure" by Campbell, and involves leaving the comfortable world that you grew up in, and entering a completely unfamiliar place to experience adventure and transformation. In Rowling's Harry Potter books, Harry's selection from Privet Drive as an example of a Departure because it brings Harry out of his ordinary, gloomy, and dangerous existence with his family into

an extraordinary world of magic at Hogwarts. From the beginning of Harry's life, he has experienced a lack of love, emotional/psychological neglect, and has been denied a chance at being loved by the Dursleys because he has never been given a proper family. Harry has lived his entire early life without a home and being confined to the Dursleys, who never treat him as a proper person and are constantly abusing him; therefore, when Harry first receives his acceptance letter to Hogwarts, it represents not only a physical invitation to attend a magical school but also an opportunity to completely change Harry's life, from an empty, alienated, and emotionally abused child to an accepting, positive, and loving friend. The Dursleys attempt to physically stop Harry from attending Hogwarts shows the tension between not being able to accept the magic at Hogwarts versus the opportunity for new beginnings; Campbell says that to be a true hero, you must leave your familiar, comfortable setting and venture forth into a new world full of possible adventures.

The introduction of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone represents the early stages of the Process of Departure with the intention of displaying the liminal progression that takes place. The image of Platform 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> defines a threshold or a "gateway" between two worlds. The Hogwarts Express is representative of the liminal journey as described in Campbell's model, as the Express provides a passageway for Harry from security to an environment where he will face challenges and make necessary changes to himself. As part of this liminal passage, Harry develops friendships and allies (Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger), which represent foreshadowing of how important both socially and relatively are the people whom Harry will share in his journey. These friendships developed upon leaving the mundane world demonstrate not only a departure in terms of a person's physical existence, but the departure from the isolation depicted in Campbell's retreat. In addition to the first book, as the Departure stage continues to evolve within Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, the introduction of a danger that is more substantial is introduced through Harry's re-entry into Hogwarts, as well as a portrayal of the other world becoming more dangerous and challenging. When contrasted with the first time Harry enters Hogwarts, his second year is depicted as a place filled with deception, danger, and hidden dangers. Discovering

the Chamber of Secrets and the threat posed by the Basilisk represents Harry's first true confrontation with evil. The Departure phase of the Heroic Journey proves that the act of leaving home is not just a one-time event. Throughout the journey, the Hero is constantly experiencing a push and pull between two opposite ideals: Safety vs. Risk; Familiarity vs. The Unknown. As Harry advances on his journey, he is faced with repeated Thresholds that test his Courage and Morality as well as his Identity as a potential Hero.

In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, the concept of Departure has become much more complicated due to the introduction of both Temporal and Psychological elements. The new revelation about Sirius Black and his connection to Harry's parents has moved the story beyond just the Magical Realm into an Ethical testament of Harry's past. By this point in his development, Harry is not just leaving the Dursleys' world; rather, as a Hero, Harry is now forced into a new Emotional territory that issues him the challenge to wrestle with the questions of Loyalty, Trust, and Moral Judgment. An example of the Externalization of Harry's Psychological challenges can be seen in the way Rowling utilizes the Dementors as personifications of Fear and Despair. In the Campbellian model of the Hero's Journey, these Psychological Challenges, which are represented by Harry's Internally driven trials, are indicative of the beginning stages of initiation contained within the Departure phase of the Hero's Journey and clearly illustrate the fluidity and psychological complexity of Rowling's conception of Harry Potter as a Hero.

The development of Departure described in the third and fourth books (Goblet of Fire and Order of the Phoenix), goes from simple difficulties to more complicated moral and social issues in Goblet of Fire, the Triwizard Tournament becomes a series of properly defined thresholds for which the hero is expected to enter, progressively moving into increasingly dangerous and morally ambiguous environments. The value of both the literal and the symbolic thresholds (like the maze and the dragons) serves to enforce the fact that the Departure is continuing to occur between someone who knows themselves and what they want and the person that is going on an adventure and must give something up. The death of Cedric Diggory is the final act before

Harry leaves his world of ordinary existence; Harry's world is different now and cannot return to what it was. This perfectly supports Campbell's assertion that there is no turning back after a hero leaves.

In the fifth Harry Potter book, Harry's Departure becomes more politically charged and is not solely a physical Departure but an ideological one too. Harry has no choice but to act without regard for authority when the Ministry of Magic denies Voldemort's return to power, and Dolores Umbridge creates heinous policies that put Harry's life and the lives of his friends in danger. Therefore, Rowling presents the "Departure" as both a journey through space and time. The hero's departure represents the abandonment of support from within an institution while simultaneously undertaking a moral journey in a new, unfamiliar environment where the definition of right and wrong is unclear. Furthermore, as Harry takes on the leadership role in Dumbledore's Army, his journey from student to resistance leader indicates that the hero's journey cannot be separated from the process of developing an ethical consciousness, which is achieved through physical movement and personal growth. Overall, Harry's "Departure" experiences throughout the first five Harry Potter books represent constant movement through physical and emotional challenges that expand his magical knowledge and moral understanding as he leaves the Dursleys' oppressive control. Rowling's rendering of the Departure stage simultaneously conforms to and diverges from Campbell's monomyth: she maintains the central structural aspect – separation from the ordinary world – but infuses it with greater emotional density, social interconnectedness, and ethical implications for the hero in his/her/their crossing. In other words, Rowling's Departure has a much more complex and iterative approach than Campbell's and allows for future development of both the Initiation Stage and the Return Stage, as well as reflecting the moral and psychological realities that exist within modern-day adolescent life.

### III. ATONEMENT AND REVELATION

Joseph Campbell identified the stage of "atonement and revelation" as one of the most important from a psychological and ethical perspective in the hero's journey. It is at this point where the hero confronts their ultimate truths and the fears and figures of

authority they have internalized, to reach an understanding that will change who they are as a person and how they view the world. Throughout the first five books in the Harry Potter series, J.K. Rowling uses the main character's journey through this stage, as an emotional and moral reckoning. This period includes a character development strategy along with key outside events. Unlike many previous depictions of becoming a god or experiencing divine revelation, Rowling uses the ethical choices made by her characters and the impact of their grief, to illustrate that their struggles in coming to terms with personal loss must continue by taking responsibility for themselves and others.

Harry Potter's atonement process is largely influenced by his interactions with mentor figures such as Dumbledore. Initially, Dumbledore provides Harry with guidance and knowledge, but later in the series, it becomes clear that Dumbledore's motivations are not always clear, nor are they always justifiable. Harry discovers that Dumbledore has not been fully honest with him about the Prophecy, Voldemort's true nature, Harry's ancestry, and the nature of their relationship. As a result, Harry learns to question authority and to rely on his own judgement for moral choices. Campbell's definition of Atonement is that one must confront their father figure or authority, but in Rowling's case, the focus of this aspect of Harry's journey has shifted to developing ethical judgement rather than simply obeying one's father or ultimate authority. The realization by Harry that moral behavior requires independent thought and action constitutes a significant aspect of his atonement process.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Flame and Order of the Phoenix demonstrate how the discovery of something horrible in oneself complicates one's experience with sadness and the existence of the evil one faces. For example, when Cedric Diggory dies during the Triwizard Tournament, he becomes a turning point in Harry's journey toward understanding his own mortality, and the ephemeral nature of those he loves. This event shifts the traditional story arc from a "heroic victory" narrative to a recognition that the path toward moral clarity is often rife with sorrow and pain. As Sirius Black dies in the Order of the Phoenix, he is Harry's godfather and constitutes a key source of support; that trauma pushes Harry further along in his internal struggle. At these moments, Harry

experiences what Campbell designated as “the ultimate challenge.” However, Rowling reframes the ultimate challenge not just as an outward battle against evil, but as being confronted with all of the limitations that an individual has, the inevitability of experiencing loss, and the moral necessity of acting, in spite of being afraid.

Rowling depicts atonement in the development of Harry's self-awareness; his appreciation for his role in the larger moral and social context and the introduction of prophecy regarding Harry and Voldemort in the fifth book introduces an interesting conflict between predestination and personal responsibility. Where as many traditional "heroes" simply followed their predestined paths, Harry's response illustrates how we choose to act ethically even when the outcome is uncertain or does not guarantee success. While exploring the theme of prophecy in Harry's life, Rowling emphasizes how important it is for a person who has prophetic insight to combine this insight with moral reasoning and act accordingly.

Atonement includes reconciling oneself, particularly for Harry, who is fearful, insecure, and emotionally vulnerable. Additionally, the encounter with Dementors and mastering the Patronus Charm in the Prisoner of Azkaban serves as a symbolic manifestation of confronting the inner darkness and trauma within Harry himself. In this case, Rowling has integrated a Jungian aspect into Campbell's ideas; the hero integrates parts of the shadow into his being, turning despair and fear into fortitude and redemption. The reconciling of these psychological aspects represents the moral and ethical development during the hero's journey and illustrates how a heroic exterior is related to internal control.

Rowling's representation of atonement and knowledge of God is distinctively current. While Campbell stresses a series of stages which end in godhood, Rowling's portrayal of the hero's growth is based on how he developed his feelings and morality through connecting with people and being responsible for them and their wellbeing. The hero's epiphany is not one moment but part of an ongoing series of moments that come from thinking about how to deal with new problems that develop. After dealing with these difficulties, Harry has a much better understanding of the complexity of good and evil, the limits of man-made rule, and the importance of working together,

but he still realizes that he is not perfect; this shows, in a very clear way, how a hero is someone who can stand through tough times as well as win.

In conclusion, using the monomyth as a framework for understanding the first five Harry Potter books, we can see that through the Atonement and Revelation phase of development, J.K. Rowling engages deeply with the monomyth. Through his interactions with authority figures, his experiences with loss, his ethical dilemmas, and his internal fears, Harry achieves atonement through a multiplicity of psychological (emotional), moral (ethical), and social (societal) elements. As a result of her emphasis on ethics, emotional resilience, and moral responsibility, Rowling has applied Campbell's monomythic framework to present-day issues of concern. From this phase of development, we see that Harry develops insights about good and evil based upon his experiences in confronting evil in an ethically complex world, as opposed to the hero receiving the traditional transcendent/mystical reward. Through this phase of development, Rowling establishes the basis for the future growth of Harry, while highlighting the relevance of the hero's journey in relation to the contemporary adolescent experience and the increased focus on social conscience.

#### IV. THE RETURN: MORAL BURDEN RATHER THAN CLOSURE

The final stage of the hero's journey according to the original version of the hero's journey is that the hero returns home at the end of the journey and shares some form of a reward with the community. The story told through the Harry Potter books does not conclude with the end of Act 1 in Book 5. In addition to knowing that Voldemort has returned from the dead, Harry is continually rejected and refused by society because his truth triggers an irrational need for comfort and convenience, which is contrary to what has been established as a truth. By doing this, Rowling creates an illustration that not only shows that those who take a stand against tyranny and injustice will often end up dealing with additional burdens, but also that the traditional model of a hero receiving immediate support and validation from society is a misconception. Harry's ongoing efforts to oppose all known forms of evil, despite being ostracized and misunderstood, represent a higher view of what a hero

endures and how that continues to inspire other individuals who also wish to oppose evil.

#### V. REVISIONS TO THE MONOMYTH: CHOICE, COMMUNITY, AND FEMININE AGENCY

Through the examination of Harry Potter, J.K. Rowling's adaptation of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or Hero's Journey, to include more expansive definitions of gender, choice and community, as well as the creation of female characters whose intelligence and ethics are just as courageous an act as physical dexterity, allows readers to see the place of female heroes within a framework that extends beyond physical interaction (or brutality) between male counterparts to include those acts born of moral conviction and feminist ideals (e.g., Hermione and the members of Dumbledore's Army). While Dumbledore's Army, as an extension of The Order of the Phoenix, is an example of collective heroism, it is an example of democratic heroism, as empowerment is derived from the group's collective action as opposed to the individualism of the original Heroic Journey.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Joseph Campbell's monomyth can be identified in volume one to volume five of the Harry Potter books, continuing the structure of Campbell's monomyth while innovatively challenging the ways in which Campbell describes the stages of the Hero's journey: Departure, Initiation, and Return. While Joseph Campbell conceives of the Journey in a linear fashion, as a 'climb' toward the ultimate goal of 'mastery', J.K. Rowling reconceptualizes the stages to demonstrate the emotional, societal, and ethical complexities of our modern world. Harry Potter's journey is rather than a linear path to success filled with emotional disturbances, moral decisions and collective struggles to redefine heroism for young adults of this generation. The way in which J.K. Rowling has recast the concept of the monomyth through a context of vulnerability, friendship, choice and resisting authority has allowed for the concept to become a vibrant and evolving narrative framework as the cultural sensibilities throughout our society have developed. Harry Potter is now a modern myth that connects to universal human experience; thus demonstrating that

Campbell's insight has maintained durability over time, as well as the need for myths to adapt as cultural sensibilities change.

The research conducted on the first five books of the Harry Potter series established that J.K. Rowling's story was created based on classical mythic story lines according to Joseph Campbell's monomyth (or "Hero's Journey") while reshaping them for the needs of a modern world by the moral, psychological, and social issues of the time. The arc of Harry's journey is defined as departing from home, initiation through trials, and returning Home, whereas the stages of Harry's journey display a conscious rejection of the traditional methods of developing the hero through an emphasis on the idyllic, individual-centered notions of victory. J.K. Rowling creates a new definition of heroism as a process with uncertainty, emotional vulnerability, ethical ambiguity, and the need for continued resistance, rather than the single event of the hero achieving victory.

The most critical finding of this study was that J.K. Rowling has reconfigured the monomyth to be an extended and incomplete journey, in contrast to classical heroes, who achieved resolution and became reintegrated into society. In the first five books of the Harry Potter series, Harry is psychologically changed as a result of Voldemort's return and the knowledge of that change is isolating rather than elevating. This disconnection of loneworthiness from truth and moral responsibility is highly relevant to contemporary realities, where people who fight against injustice can expect to be met with denial and hostility, rather than support.

Through her retelling of the classic Monomyth, Rowling places such emphasis on choice, that it is clear the distinction between being a "Hero" or not can only be viewed through the lens of one's conscious decision-making. Campbell's Monomyth seemingly creates a prescriptive pathway based on destiny, while the series instead stresses that Harry's noble deeds are due only to the choices that were made against evil, as well as through his loyalty to friends, and willingness to step up to do the right thing when no one else was there to support him. Therefore, the Monomyth becomes a narrative about moral agency instead of fate.

From her reinterpretation of the Monomyth, Rowling also challenges the belief in a singular hero that is prevalent in traditional mythology. By showcasing the

contributions of Hermione, Ron, and Dumbledore's Army, she suggests that heroism is not something to be achieved alone, but rather a collective action; in fact the characteristics we associate with "heroism" are actually the combined attributes of courage, knowledge and ability to resist in the face of opposition. Thus, through this model, the Monomyth is representative of our changing culture as we move toward a more communal and collectively responsible approach in the fight against evil and injustice.

The research in this article demonstrates that the function of myth as a way to understand human experience is still applicable today and that myths need to adapt in order to hold meaning. With the use of emotional depth, ethical ambiguity, and social critique, the author has shown that the true value of the monomyth is found in its adaptability and ability to change as society grows. The Harry Potter series is a modern myth that provides readers with insight into how to navigate a complex world filled with loss and moral ambiguity. Instead of portraying the hero in the classic sense as someone who vanquishes evil on a single occasion, the author shows that he is one who continues to demonstrate courage, compassion, and resistance amid ongoing challenges. In this way, the monomyth continues to live as a viable narrative form that can respond to the struggles of today.

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