

# Star Wars: The Quest of a Modern Hero

by David B. Doroquez

On the verge of the premiere of the new Star Wars prequel Episode I: The Phantom Menace, it may be appropriate to expound upon the Star Wars saga. Star Wars is a modern myth or, at least, exemplifies the various characteristics that are common to myths. In particular, the original trilogy illustrated the workings of a heroic myth. The plight of the hero Luke Skywalker and his quest to learn the ways of the Force is representative of many heroic myths, including the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Quest of the Holy Grail, the Odyssey, Biblical stories, and more. There are several things common that tie these myths together.

In his authoritative analysis of the life of the journey and transformation of the hero, Joseph Campbell asserted that there are distinct phases that are commonplace within the hero cycle. These phases along the hero's journey include (1) the Departure, (2) the Initiation, and (3) the Return. In the Departure, the hero is called to adventure. He moves from his place of origin to the outer world where the unknown lies. In the Initiation, the hero is tested, as he realizes the faith, order, and adventure to which he has found himself to be a participant. In the Return, the hero often arrives home after the journey—often triumphant—utilizing the trials and tribulations encountered during the journey to build a bright, new future. Obviously, not every heroic myth can attest to heeding this pattern. Patterns are templates, but do not cage in the human imagination implicit in a heroic myth.

Although it may not necessarily have been George Lucas' intention nor has any effort on his part been necessary, the Star Wars saga has transformed into a modern myth. Even the faith of the Force may have become a modern cult, with many faithful believers. As myths touched and applied to the lives of the people from which traditional myths originated; the mythology of Star Wars speaks to the people of today as well. Maybe the new prequel trilogy, starting with the Phantom Menace, will speak to the upcoming generations. Simply put, Ewan McGregor (Obi-wan Kenobi) said, "It's not some sh-- like Independence Day or Godzilla. Star Wars is like modern fairy tales and fables. It's a complete entity of its own, and it so has to do with my generation" (Roston, 96).

## The Myth: A Brief Definition of Terms

The definition of a myth is quite a daunting and horrendous task. No definition can be quite adequate. Probably the greatest task in the study of mythology is the complete definition of myth. Myth is all encompassing, yet we must make due with a basic definition. A myth can be defined as a traditional story that has been passed down from one generation to another. The myth may evolve as time progresses and as it is passed down. Myths maybe interpretations of dreams, natural events, history, people, etc. that are explained in more human terms that may apply to that society. If one wanted to adopt a broad definition of myth, one could look to Lauri Honko's definition that outlines all of the interpretations of mythology as well as modern theories of myth. For example, myth is a source of cognitive categories, form of symbolic expression, is worldview, and more (Honko, 47). Myth may even be a projection of the subconscious. According to Carl Jung, "Myth is a product of the collective unconscious expressed symbolically

in archetypal images, and hence it is a universal natural phenomenon" (Hudson, 197). That is, myths come from archetypes that we find in our dreams because men are being "closely alike in their unconscious psychology in spite of wide differences in their conscious level" (198). Still, even myth we may find may have structure—heavily analyzed by structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss, who says that myth does possess some definitive structure analogous to the structure and form of music. This pattern is common and speaks to the masses. He says:

[A] myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time . . . But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present as well as the future. (Levi-Strauss, "Structural," 120).

Since we have laid the groundwork through definition, we can now move on with our task. I will talk about the "hero", but note that what I term the "hero" may just as easily be substituted with "heroine."

### **Departure: A New Hope**

The facts that much of the plot and characters in Star Wars can seek their origins as far back as three or four thousand years ago is no coincidence. Rather, Lucas consciously set out to "recreate myths and the classical mythological motifs" (Lucas and Moyers, 90). The motifs that exist in Star Wars exist today as they did thousands of years ago. We may just as easily say "thousands of years ago in Mesopotamia" or "yesterday in Santa Clara University" as we say "a long time in a galaxy far, far away."

In other words, we can probably look at Jung's theory of myth, which is heavily involved with the unconscious. The hero may be representative of our striving to become perfect and to overcome the obstacles that we encounter in our own conscious lives. Of the child hero, Jung said, "The child motif represents the preconscious, childhood aspects of the collective psyche" (Hudson, 207). This repetition of the child motif unites man's conscious and unconscious mind by placing the image of childhood before man's eyes. In Star Wars, the child hero that we meet up with is Luke Skywalker (Episode IV: A New Hope) or Anakin Skywalker (Episode I: The Phantom Menace). In the child hero, we can see innocence. When the hero is called to adventure, then he may lose that innocence and open himself to a wider world. It is these losses of innocence that may lead the child hero to grow up to triumph and virtue, as in the case of Luke, or fall to evil and sin, as in the case of the Anakin-turned-Darth Vader. In the case of triumph, Campbell indicates that the hero has gone beyond normal achievement. The hero has given his life to "something bigger than oneself" (Campbell and Moyers, 151). It maybe this attainment of a higher level that we unconsciously seek to attain something greater than what we are dealt with in our daily lives. Through dreams and myth, we can visualize how the unconscious and conscious mind meet by looking to the heroic myth.

Common to the theme of the heroic myth Campbell illustrates the Departure. The hero is oftentimes called to adventure. The hero is called to move away from his current state of knowledge and insight to travel to some different land and consciousness. The call to adventure may come along merely by chance or even by a blunder. For example, in the Frog King,

Campbell finds that the Princess has been called to an adventure not yet realized when she meets the Frog who retrieves her stray golden ball that fell in the pond (Campbell, 51). According to Freud, blunders are not mere chance but are unsuppressed desires and conflicts; "they are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs . . . The blunder may amount to the opening of destiny" (Campbell, 51). In Star Wars, the opening of Destiny for Luke Skywalker may be the point when he purchased the two droids, C3PO and R2D2, from the Jawas. The blunder of Luke encountering the message encoded by R2D2 of Princess Leia's call for help to Obi-Wan Kenobi was a call to adventure. The archetypal fair maiden in distress arouses Luke to go on this adventure with the R2D2 droid as "herald" (Campbell, 51). According to Mary Henderson, Luke is representative of the Fool, the first card of a Tarot card deck: "an inexperienced youth setting out on a journey; the way ahead is unknown, and the youth is completely unaware of the dangers that await him" (Henderson, 22).

The call to adventure is very important because it symbolizes the movement of the story. Without a departure from the present state, the hero does not grow or go beyond the state of life he is in. The chance of the call to adventure may take different forms. These can be found by heralds, such as the Frog in the Frog King or the many hermits that call the Knights of the Round Table in the Quest of the Holy Grail.

In the Bible's Exodus, Moses is called to adventure from atop Mount Sinai, the Lord says to him, "Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). This vision of traversing the mountain to attain the call to adventure and to later go down the mountain to undergo or proceed with the adventure is one motif that is found many times in myths and in Biblical stories. This can be seen also in the Gospel of Matthew with the commissioning of the Disciples: "The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them . . . Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 16, 19).

But, it is not necessary for the hero to climb a mountain or to have an adventure *before* the adventure. Rather, the call to adventure simply comes to the hero, as it did with Luke Skywalker. The call may not necessarily fortuitous either. Tragedy can strike. In the story of the Biblical Job, Job finds that his sons and daughters have been slaughtered; his wife leaves him because he still clings to his innocence (Mitchell, 7-9). On the other hand, the heroic myth of Job is not consisting of a journey that allows the character to travel around. The journey is an inward journey; the call is an inward call to analyze faith and loyalty to his God that has given so much and has taken so much away.

We are made to believe that this call to adventure is a push to move in one direction or another. Campbell sites that we have a choice. In the Quest of the Holy Grail, Lancelot refuses the call when faced whether or not he should pull the sword Excalibur from the great stone along the lake (Sandars, Grail, 35). Galahad then takes on the challenge and meets the call to adventure. In the Bible, we find that Jesus refuses a call when Satan tempted him (Matthew 4: 1-11).

There will be no doubt that Anakin in the new Star Wars movie will be called to adventure. Most likely it will be by a Jedi who finds that he is strong with the Force. These motifs are common. Luke's call led him to be adventure because he was "a new hope" to build justice from of an Empire bent on evil and corruption.

## Initiation: The Empire Strikes Back

Lucas consciously borrowed themes from ancient mythology. He looked at themes found outlined in Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell writes, "Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell, 97). Through trials and tribulations a hero is able to be initiated fully into the organization, faith, or adventure that he has found himself in. In the case of Luke Skywalker, he finds that he can realize the ways of the Force by testing his abilities and confronting his adversaries. It is not only a time for physical growth, but is a mental and physical growth that is tacked along.

On the planet of Degobah in Episode V: *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke learns the ways of the Force from the 900-year old Jedi Master Yoda; Obi-Wan Kenobi on the planet Tatooine introduces him to the ways of the Force. In the *Phantom Menace*, Yoda says, "Always two there are: the master and the apprentice." This knight-apprentice theme may stem all the way back to Arthurian Legend. In the *Return of the King*, Arthur was made apprentice to learn the ways of chivalry and knighthood. He learned reason and education through his master Merlin. In the *Quest of the Holy Grail*, Lancelot teaches his new apprentice Galahad the ways to be a virtuous and honorable knight. But, those teachings did not necessarily make Galahad a great knight. It was only through facing adversaries and fears that he was able to grow.

The initiation is basically the heart of the heroic journey. Along the journey, the hero often meets gods or goddesses, temptresses, monsters, mystical animals, and more (Campbell, 109, 120; Henderson, 97, 102).

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh is called to a journey with Enkidu. He finds himself killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. He discovers his destiny: to find everlasting life. He meets up with various gods and goddesses including Shamash (the Sun God), Ninsun (his mother), Anu (the Sky God), and others. Further, Gilgamesh fails to be tempted by the temptress Ishtar (the Goddess of Love and War). Although, Gilgamesh falls short of this goal, he finds himself growing in intelligence, compassion, and knowledge. These are the ideals that the hero attains. It is not strength or virility.

It is the inward journey that can be the most significant thing discovered along the heroic journey. Luke learns that he must face his father who was once the human Anakin now half-man-half-machine Darth Vader, as revealed to him in the sacred grove on Degobah. Being able to handle all of the different obstacles and mental/psychological anguish is quite a task. Not many could get through such a daunting task. It is through inward bravery and perseverance that the hero is able to overcome these obstacles. Of course, a cast of characters often helps heroes. In *Star Wars*, it was Princess Leia, Han Solo, Chewbacca, C3PO, and R2D2. These characters are able to allow the hero to realize his potential and that the courage and valor can be found inward.

Through his experiences, Luke is transformed, Henderson writes:

He changes from an uninitiated farm boy in white, to a "hot" pilot in bright orange to a cool, calm Rebel commander in khaki. When he steps out of the mist at the beginning of the *Return of the Jedi*,

he as become a mysterious cloaked figure like his father . . .  
Perhaps they symbolize his growing acceptance of his shadow side  
and of Vader as his father. (Henderson, 190).

According to Jung, the shadow is a common archetypal character in mythology: "It represents the repressed, primitive, inferior side of the psyche and is mostly negative, though not wholly bad" (Hudson, 185-6). Lucas cited that he wanted Darth Vader, Darth Maul, and other evil characters to some villain that people can relate to. Darth Vader is the "evil within us" (Lucas and Moyers, 90). It is this Dark Side to his own personality that the hero seeks to conquer.

In Job, an outward journey from his home is not necessary. Rather, it is the inward journey of soul-searching that remains tantamount to resolving his crisis. His initiation is being able to argue forcibly with his friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. He is able to seek a resolution to his situation by remaining steadfast in his ideals and trusting in God. For Lancelot in the Quest of the Holy Grail, his inward journey was to have the will-power and honor to stay chaste and repent his sins so he can continue on with the Grail quest.

### **The Return: The Return of the Jedi**

It is interesting to see that Lucas placed Episodes IV, V, and VI in such an order that is very comparable to the themes that Campbell was illustrating. The Return of the Jedi identifies with Luke's return to his homeland Tatooine. Although he had triumphed in many battles, Luke is still not finished. He still has to face his father, the Emperor, and the threat of a new destructive Death Star. Luke must meet and face the challenge in order to complete his training as a Jedi Knight.

Regarding the Return, Campbell writes:

If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. (Campbell, 196-7).

That is, the hero takes with him all his knowledge and experiences and lays them on the line when he returns home. Nothing is finished until the end. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns back to his home on the island of Ithaca, his entire ship and crew had been destroyed. His wife, the virtuous Penelope, was on the point of giving him up for dead; she was about to marry one of the many suitors. Yet, Odysseus was victorious. His son, Telemachos, comes of age and Penelope comes back to Odysseus (Homer).

As was found, Luke and the Rebel Alliance were finally triumphant in defeating the Empire. Yet, the hero is not necessarily going to be definitely happy or joyous on this occasion. He is still melancholy. For in many myths, victory comes with a price, the death of his father and the loss of his innocence when he was a teenager. In *Gilgamesh*, being able to complete his journey means that Enkidu must die. There is much sacrifice that occurs during a myth. Campbell said, "And this means not only experiencing sorrows oneself but participating with compassion in the

sorrows of others. Compassion is the awakening of the heart from bestial self-interest to humanity" (Campbell and Moyers, 201).

In the Return, once the hero has found what he has been searching for he can now put his faith in God or gods and lay down his sacrifice (Campbell, 238-9). Through such sacrifice he can live as we find Luke is able to live after the Star Wars are over.

## **Star Wars is a Modern Myth**

Although there is many disputes to date on whether or not Star Wars is a modern myth, it can be said that it someday will be at least be a modern myth. For Lucas' intentions was to culminate all of what we have learned through ancient mythology and incorporate such visions and archetypes into a whole and complete saga. Much literary criticism can be found here.

I have illustrated that Star Wars has basically the common pattern and structure implicit in the heroic myth. Heroic myths have the basic structure of the hero's journey taking the path of (1) Departure, (2) Initiation, and (3) Return. But, these three things may not necessarily mean that these are found solely in mythology. In fact, many of us undergo the cycle of departure, initiation, and return in our own daily lives. For example, as college students we are called to a life of education for four years. Through our education and social interactions, we are initiated as college students. But, finally we must return home to share what we have learned and to triumph over all of our trials and tribulations.

Thus, in line with Campbell's teaching, Star Wars may be a life model for the modern era. If myths consist of life models then Star Wars is or will be a myth. The stories and characters are classic, but the setting for the old issues and new issues (like the fight between man and machine) can be all illustrated in the heroic myth of Star Wars. With the upcoming prequel trilogy we will see if Star Wars can maintain its role as a myth illustrator or mythmaker.

## **Works Cited**

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. New York: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Campbell, Joseph and Moyers, Bill. The Power of Myth. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

Henderson, Mary. Star Wars: The Magic of Myth. New York: Bantam Books, 1997.

Homer. The Odyssey. Samuel Butler, trans.  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html>

Honko, Lauri. "The Semantic Span of the Concept of Myth." Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth. Alan Dundes, Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Hudson, Wilson M. "Jung of Myth and Mythic." Psychology and Myth. New York, Garland Publishing, 1996.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. Myth and Meaning. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." Theories of Myth. Robert A. Segal, Ed. Lancaster: Garland Series, 1996.

Lucas, George and Moyers, Bill. Of Myth and Men. April 26, 1999: 90-4.

Matarasso, P.M. The Quest of the Holy Grail. New York: Penguin Books, 1969.

Mitchell, Stephen. The Book of Job. New York: HarperCollins Books, 1992.

Raglan, Lord. "The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama, Part II." In Quest of the Hero. Robert A Segal, Ed. Princeton: Princeton Academic Press, 1990.

Roston, Tom. "Ewan McGregor: 'People wanted to touch my lightsaber, but I wouldn't let them. I got possessive.'" Premiere. May 1999: 96.

Sandars, N.K. The Epic of Gilgamesh. New York: Penguin Books, 1972.

Sandars, N.K. "Adapa: The Man." Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia.

*(Submitted to J. D. Pleins, Ph.D. SCTR 100 - Biblical Poetry and Mythology  
Spring 1999)*