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Go The Distance: The Hero's Journey

Benjamin S. Keefer

From being a Greek farm boy to evolving into a godly hero, Disney's Hercules stands as a strong example of the hero's journey. In their Hercules film, Disney takes the Greek myth of Hercules and takes a big, creative twist on the tale—creating an almost entirely new story of their own. For most of his young life, after Hades and his henchmen took Hercules away from his parents Zeus and Hera, Hercules only knows of a modest life as a regular boy. He lives as an outcast from the other teenagers because of his different abilities. Rather than feeling special with his great strength, he only feels more alienated and alone in the world. However, he goes on a journey to find out who he is supposed to be. He meets his father, Zeus, and ends up becoming a great hero after facing many trials and growing greatly as a person (inside and out)[1].

Hercules is a quintessential example of the hero's journey archetype. The hero's journey is a central archetype and formula to many fairy tales, myths, and many other stories in human culture such as those found in books, television, and videogames. I believe that the hero's journey, like that of Hercules and other tales, is not only one of the most important fairy tale archetypes, but that it is also important to human culture and society.

Before getting into the details and themes of Hercules, however, the formula of the hero's journey should be reviewed. The basic formula for the hero's journey is often quite similar across different tales, and of course many stories simply make small, creative changes. The prevalence of the hero's journey for so long and the power of its themes suggest that it is one of the strongest fairy tale archetypes. The concept and term of "the hero's journey"[2] was originally introduced and coined by Joseph Campbell.[3] He analyzed tales throughout history

and noticed a strong correlation between them—the formula he dubbed as the “monomyth,” or “hero’s journey.”[4] There are a few different versions of this formula. One such hero’s journey formula, very similar to Campbell’s, was summarized by Christopher Vogler, a writer at Disney, in 1985 as a Disney studio memo.[5] The formula is in twelve parts. First is the “ordinary world,” which is the protagonist’s normal life before the call of adventure.[6] Second, the call of adventure. The protagonist is called to action by some crisis or problem, beckoning them to step out to an adventure. Third, the protagonist is fearful of the adventure, and initially refuses to change. The fourth piece of the formula is a meeting with the mentor. This is when the protagonist meets with some kind of teacher and begins to learn the skills they need to conquer their obstacles. The fifth step is crossing the first threshold into a “special world,” where the hero steps out and is challenged by a big, new world to travel. Sometimes, it can even be another realm, or simply an expansion of the outside world. Sixth in the formula is a combination of tests, allies, and enemies. The new hero faces challenges to help test their abilities and grow, enemies to defeat, and allies to help them along the way. Seventh along the journey is the travel to the “innermost cave.” This basically translates to whatever setting houses the main antagonist or danger, or a dungeon of sorts that the hero enters to face a great test after they have grown. Eighth is the ordeal, which is the fight inside the “innermost cave.” It is by this time often that the hero experiences their greatest change or transformation of maturity. Ninth is the reward for overcoming the ordeal. This could be a sought after power or object, or maybe the person whom the hero wanted to save; the reason for their journey in the first place. Tenth in the formula is the road back home to their life, which then leads into the eleventh piece. This is “the resurrection,” which is a final test that requires the hero to recall everything they learned over their whole

journey and use all of their skills and strength to overcome this final task. Finally, the twelfth and final part of the formula is “the return with the elixir,” which is when the hero brings back a power to help their people back home and make their world a better place.[7] Overall, this is roughly the most common twelve-part formula of the hero’s journey archetype. In my mind, the monomyth is a metaphor for life, all of its hardships, and the courage we need to muster to prevail. This is why the hero’s journey is so important.

The hero’s journey truly matters to our society. In life, we all face challenges big and small. Over the years, we have to overcome great obstacles—whether it is the loss of a loved one, succeeding in difficult tasks at work or school, or the difficulty of simply becoming the fulfilled person one may want to be. These are our calls to action. Whether or not we accept the call, every person has their own journey and challenges in life. For some people, it can touch their heart and empower it. Through metaphor and analogy, these tales can teach us lessons for life. The hero’s journey gives people hope, and it provides role models with the courage and strength to push forward. In the message of the hero’s journey, I personally find encouragement and inspiration in my own life. Especially now, the hero’s journey serves as an example of strength to look to while I am at college. College is a challenging step up from my previous chapter in life, and it has already proven to be a difficult road to travel. As I go through each day, sometimes the path can get bumpy and rough. Sometimes, I get tired and worry that I might fail. But, heroes like Hercules serve as an inspiration to persevere. I do my best to muster the courage and strength to keep working hard to continue moving forward. Like Hercules, we all need to “go the distance.” As stated previously, Hercules is a powerful example of the hero’s journey archetype.

Our culture, the culture of the human race as a whole, is absolutely full of stories about the hero's journey. Looking at human history and culture, we seem to be obsessed with heroes. Fantastical tales of heroism have provided inspiration and courage to countless generations of people. The tales can teach life lessons and make their readers into heroes in a way. Hercules, of course, is one of these many tales. However, I believe that some observation shows that Hercules takes a slightly different turn than the others. In the beginning of Disney's Hercules, the narrator says "The greatest and strongest of all these heroes was the mighty Hercules. But what is the measure of a true hero?"[8] As it turns out, the measure of a true hero is not the number of monsters killed or awards won. The true measure is found inside.

In the beginning of Hercules' tale, we see him as an outcast. His uncontrollable strength gets in the way of his relationships with people. He is called a "freak." [9] This period of time for Hercules, going along with the monomyth formula, is the "ordinary world." After an accident with Hercules' strength occurs, Hercules is ridiculed and feels horrible and misplaced. In response, his adopted mortal parents tell him the story of how they found him. As a baby, he was wearing a medallion with the symbol of the Gods, and so, he goes to the temple of Zeus to get his answers. Here, we see the "call to adventure" from the hero's journey formula. He discovers that Zeus is his father and the only way to reclaim his godhood is to "become a true hero on Earth." [10] However, there is more to that task than meets the eye. Zeus tells Hercules to find Philoctetes (Phil), the trainer of heroes. Hercules quickly sets out on his journey on the back of his winged horse, Pegasus. He meets Phil, the trainer of heroes, and this event represents the meeting of the mentor piece of the monomyth formula. Unlike the classical hero's journey formula, Hercules actually is not the reluctant one. Hercules finds Phil, and Phil is the one who is

initially very reluctant to take on another potentially disappointing “hero.” This is until Zeus sends down a lightning bolt to signal Phil that he needs to train Hercules. Over the course of what seems to be several months, Hercules goes from a scrawny-bodied kid to a big, muscular, buff, typical hero build. At this point in time, Hercules still has a very typical, two-dimensional view of what being a hero means. He shows this by saying “I wanna see battles and monsters! Rescue some damsels! You know, heroic stuff!”[11] He takes this attitude with him for his initial trials as a hero.

There are different types of heroes throughout fairy tales and myths. Maria Tatar, a Denison University graduate and literature professor at Harvard University, outlines the two basic types of heroes in fairy tales—“Among folklorists, it is the fashion to divide heroes into two distinct classes. There are active heroes and passive heroes...tricksters and simpletons. According to theory, the oppositions active/passive, seeker/victim, brave/timid, and naive/cunning serve as useful guides for classifying fairy-tale heroes.”[12] Similar to Tatar, we divided heroes into “fool” and “foolhardy.” Hercules starts out as a foolhardy hero. He shows himself to be both overconfident and brash in his initial trials.

I mostly agree with Tatar’s analysis of hero classification. In fairy tale history, all heroes lie in one of these classifications, or at least along a spectrum of sorts. As for Hercules, he is definitely the active, brave, seeker type of hero. But, he is also somewhat naive and foolhardy. He rushes into battle like a bull before really thinking. Over the course of the film, he grows as a person and evolves as a hero. Important to this change is the introduction of a very important character—a love interest. He first meets this woman soon after he crosses the first threshold, another sectional representation of the hero’s journey.

Disney's Hercules, I believe, makes an important change to set itself apart from many classic hero's journey tales. What sets Hercules apart is the introduction of Meg—the strong, independent, atypical female love interest of Hercules who evolves throughout the film and turns out to be the key to Hercules' heroic success and reclaimed godhood. In many fairy tales, the female is just a damsel in distress—a helpless princess who needs to be saved. A two-dimensional woman to reward the hero's efforts. Meg is a slightly different story. Meg's strong character, while in the grasp of a monstrous centaur, tells Hercules "I am a damsel, I am in distress, I can handle this. Have a nice day." [13] Immediately, we can recognize her as a much more independent character in her own right, rather than a side or secondary character revolving around the hero. Despite Meg's attempt at self-defense, Hercules ends up beating the centaur anyway, saving Meg. Hercules is infatuated with her, she flirts a bit with him, and then she goes on her way for the time being. It turns out that Meg is working for Hades, albeit reluctantly, since he owns her soul. Meg does serve as a love interest for Hercules, but she is even more than that. In a way, she is a double-edged sword to Hercules' journey. She is forced to do Hades' bidding, and causes Hercules' to get a little hazy-minded at times. But, she is also a source of great courage and support for Hercules.

In Thebes, Hercules defeats the mighty Hydra, which was a trap from Hades. After the defeat of this great beast, Hercules becomes rich and famous almost instantly. He goes on defeating monster after monster, saving whole towns of people. As a song in the movie says, he goes from "zero to hero." [14] He gains fame and riches, very true to another statement from Maria Tatar—"The trajectory of the hero's path leads him to the goal shared by all fairy tales, whether they chart the fortunes...enthroning the humble and enriching the impoverished." [15] Similarly

in Hercules, we see the once humble farm boy become wealthy, and also his family. In the film, there is a short scene showing that Hercules has sent much of his riches back home to his very poor adopted parents. Greece itself flourishes from Hercules' heroism. He may be a big hero now, but he has not lost his compassion by any means. He returns to Zeus' temple in hopes of being a true hero now, but Zeus has to tell him that he has not reached that point. Hercules' objects, saying "But, Father, I've beaten every single monster I've come up against. I'm the most famous person in all of Greece. I'm an action figure!"[16] But as Zeus replies, "I'm afraid being famous isn't the same as being a true hero...it's something you have to discover for yourself...look inside your heart."[17] For Hercules, this is a reflective moment that immediately changes his behavior. He starts to become less conceited and self-absorbed in his fame, and desires to find what truly matters. Hades offers Meg a deal she cannot refuse, her freedom, in order to get her to betray Hercules and find out his weaknesses. However, Hercules and Meg both fall in love with each other. Through this, Hades finds the weakness in Hercules—his heart. His love for Meg. But this so-called "weakness" ends up being Hercules' greatest power and ally.

Hercules, in an impossible choice, gives up his powers to Hades in order to save Meg, on the condition that she is safe. Being the noble hero he is, he takes a turn different from the classic hero's journey formula and basically sacrifices himself to save Meg. Hades takes this opportunity to release the destructive Titans upon Greece to destroy Zeus and Hercules. With this comes a pivotal point in the hero's journey tale, a "final battle" with the evil forces. But Hercules, in this final battle of destruction, is already so weakened that he is vulnerable and relatively powerless. When Hercules has lost his powers, Disney shows the contrast by making

his color palette very cold and gray looking. To try and save Hercules from getting himself killed, Meg gets on Pegasus to go and get Phil to help Hercules. Phil encourages Hercules, and he ends up defeating a Titan without his powers of strength. In this scene, we see Hercules begin to move towards his status as a true hero slowly, but surely. After Hercules sends the Titan falling, he is about to be killed by a falling pillar. Meg saves him, but sacrifices herself in the process. This breaks his contract with Hades, and Hercules gets his powers back. He and Zeus defeat the Titans together, but at a great cost. Meg dies. Hercules weeps at her side, but then realizes what he can do—go to the Underworld and retrieve Meg’s soul. He makes a deal with Hades that if he can get Meg out of the pool of dead souls, that she can live. Hades thinks this is impossible, because Hercules will die before he reaches her.

At the very last second, while swimming through the dark waters and quickly decaying, Hercules becomes a true hero. He immediately regains his godly powers and becomes immortal. He takes Meg from the pool of the dead and rises out, glowing in gold like the sun. Hades tries to stop him, but Hercules simply uppercuts him into the pool of death (he doesn’t die, of course, since he is a god himself, but he is officially defeated). Hercules returns Meg back to life, and they embrace. Through true love, Hercules has become a true hero, and completed his journey—the hero’s journey. Hercules and Meg are carried up to Mount Olympus so that he can rejoin the gods. In response to Hercules becoming a true hero and god again, Zeus states “For a true hero isn’t measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart.”[18] The elixir from the monomyth formula, for Hercules, is love. Rather than going back home with the gods, Hercules chooses to give up his godhood and stay on Earth with Meg. The dreams of Hercules,

Meg, and Phil all come true with the ending of this hero's journey. It is stories like this that I believe are important to people.

Unlike some hero's journey tales throughout history, with two dimensional heroes, Hercules evolves and becomes greater than them. This is where I believe Maria Tatar may have been too strict in her two-sided classification of heroes. They aren't always black and white, simple heroes, based on having one trait or the opposite. They do not have to be static characters.

However, Tatar made another very good point about what makes some of the most successful heroes: "...simpletons in the Grimms' fairy tales possess one character trait that sets them apart from their fraternal rivals: compassion...Of the various tests, tasks, and trials imposed on a hero, this first test figures as the most important, for it establishes his privileged status. Once he exhibits compassion...he can do no wrong." [19] Just so, Hercules started out as a typical foolhardy hero, but through his love and willpower, he grew as a character into something bigger and better. He risked his life to save his love. Like Tatar asserts, the compassion Hercules showed became his most important test, his greatest power, and allowed him to succeed on his journey to becoming a true hero. Some may criticize the repetition of the hero's journey formula, but from its great success and evolution over time, I believe it is simply powerful and too good to not reiterate. The life lessons and courageous role models serve as a tool for giving people hope, and teaching children that they can be heroes in their own special ways if they can just persevere through life's trials and make love their greatest ally. This makes the Disney Hercules movie special, heartwarming, and inspiring, which I believe stands as a testament to what the hero's journey can become in great tales. Like Hercules, we all need to go the distance in our own lives to become the people that we each are truly meant to be.

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