



Quest of the Goddess: Is There a Unique Journey for the Heroine in Popular Fiction?

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Abstract

The hero's journey has long been applied to fictional stories as based on the work of Joseph Campbell, and later, Christopher Vogler. It is part of a writer's tool kit when constructing a fictional story. Typically, the hero answers a call to adventure, goes on his quest, overcomes challenges and temptations, has a revelation, transforms, then returns home with knowledge to share with the community. The heroine's journey can be regarded as similar – according to Maureen Murdock (1990), however, there is a focus on the separation of the feminine which leads to an over-identification with the masculine. The journey becomes centred on the reconciliation with the feminine and the reincorporation of the masculine, so there is harmony between the feminine and masculine in the heroine resulting in a strengthening in personal identity. When planning my creative novels I apply the hero's journey to my main characters, both male and female. However, I have begun to question if the hero's journey is an adequate model for the feminine perspective. For example, is there a need for a heroine's journey to allow the heroine to undergo a unique transformation that connects her to her own feminine wisdom and power? Or is the hero's journey adequate for any character regardless of gender in contemporary fiction? This paper will explore how the heroine's journey can be applied to leading female roles in popular fiction, and consider whether or not gender is enough to suggest there needs to be a different journey for the heroine.

Keywords

heroine's journey, hero's journey, popular fiction, goddess, quest, femininity, masculinity

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Quest of the Goddess: Is There a Unique Journey for the Heroine in Popular Fiction?

When constructing a story writers use many tools to ensure there is a cohesive plot and character development, whether they are writing novels, scripts or computer games. The hero's journey is one of these tools, which was first presented by Joseph Campbell (1949) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Since then, Christopher Vogler (2007) has promoted his version based on Campbell's theory, *The Writer's Journey*, with a focus on storytelling, in particular scriptwriting. The hero's journey allows writers to plan their story according to a model, ensuring there is a universal shared experience that readers or viewers can connect with and therefore present a story that will have greater popularity (Vogler 2007). By using such a model, the story has a more natural flow, allowing people to connect to the character(s) journey(s) and be swept along by the storytelling.

The hero's journey has been credited for the success of franchises such as the *Star Wars* movies (Vogler 2007) and is a tried and tested model, which allows for numerous variations and enhances the diversity of storytelling. Typically, the journey was primarily used for males, but recently it has also been applied to female characters. Jung believed there was no need for an equivalent journey for women because they already embody the feminine (Murdock 1990). However, as the application of the hero's journey increased in storytelling, so did the questioning of the lack of a model for the heroine's journey; simply making the hero a woman only skimmed the surface of the potential emotional material that could be used to enhance storytelling.

Maureen Murdock's (1990) version *The Heroine's Journey* has been used as a means of self-development for women, giving them an alternative journey of self-awareness. There have also been similar versions such as the one put forth by Hudson (2010) in *The Virgin's Promise*. Both models overlook gender and focus instead on the feminine and masculine aspects, and the journey as a means to allow the main character to develop psychological independence.

As a writer, I have used the hero's journey for both male and female characters, and it has served as a helpful tool to sustain the flow of the story and character development. However, I started contemplating if the hero's journey was suitable for a female character, and if I could get more out of my characters on the page if I was using the heroine's journey instead. With an emphasis on developing strong female characters in books and film I began to investigate if there is a limit on the female's journey if they are forced to undergo the hero's journey, and what other options would there be for female character development if there was a more suitable journey they could take, in developing characters more easily identifiable with readers. Also, I wanted to see if the journey transcended gender, and if male characters could successfully undertake the heroine's journey. Ultimately, I sought to explore if this method was being applied in popular fiction already, and if so, could the heroine's journey be used more readily to enrich popular fiction.

The Hero's Journey

Campbell (1949) introduced the idea of a monomyth with his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* which details the fundamental journey of the hero, outlining the basic narrative that can apply to stories across different cultures and languages. The broad and basic framework is that the hero sets out on an adventure, overcomes challenges victoriously, and returns home a changed person. Christopher Vogler (2007) developed this narrative into a model which could be applied to stories, and facilitate what are often chaotic ideas to be moulded into a cohesive story, becoming a helpful tool for writers.

In Vogler's (2007) most recent version of the hero's journey he describes eight basic archetypes, and within these character groups there are different versions the writer can choose to develop as suitable to the story. These archetypes are typically repeating images and/or behaviours, which are seen in storytelling in the past and present. Archetypes have both positive and negative sides, which add to their complexity. Archetypes – the symbols, the images, the patterns or behaviour – have been considered by Jung (1947) to be part of the collective unconscious and an integral part of the makeup of the human psyche. This is why people are drawn to archetypes, fostering emotional connections and building meaning around these. This is important when developing stories – the more people are drawn to the story because they can relate to characters and their journeys, the more popular the creative narrative becomes.

Vogler's (2007) eight archetypes include: Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shapeshifter, Shadow, Ally and Trickster. Archetypes play an important role as they force the hero on their quest, and either help or hinder them. Ultimately, they assist the hero's transformation with additional knowledge and skills. It is these archetypes which help to develop the journey, as well as the reader's or viewer's connection to the characters emotionally and in a meaningful way. Without archetypes the journey would not occur, or there would need to be other forces, such as natural elements (e.g. floods, fire), or animals (e.g. faithful dog, enduring horse) to take their place. In the movie *Dante's Peak* (1997), for example, volcanologist Harry and Mayor Rachel are forced into a quest of saving the town of Dante's Peak when the volcano erupts.

Based on Vogler's (2007) works on the writer's journey in scriptwriting, there is a notion that the hero will sacrifice something of himself for the benefits of others; in doing so he will change himself, and that change will then be reflected in the community. He is also there to protect and serve. As a writer, the hero's journey model assists with the planning of a story, and helps to highlight weaker points in the character's development and therefore in the story. Because this is not a hard and fast model, there is flexibility for variations which increase the options available for the writer to choose what happens with the characters and the story. Writing is often a balance between the conscious and unconscious; this means the story that ends up on the page after the first draft is not necessarily anything like the story that gets published. The character might not undergo any sort of transformation, or the story is fragmented. In order to locate where the story can be fixed, a model like the hero's journey is helpful because it takes what was a complicated, sometimes chaotic process, and arranges it into a more linear form to guide the editing processes towards constructing a coherent story.

Writers sometimes do what can be referred to as 'writing their way into a story.' They start with an idea and launch into writing, then realise that they do not know where the story is going;

there could be no options, or too many options for narrative development. They might keep writing, persevering, or they can pause and use a model like the hero's journey to get inspiration and direction. Life is not a linear journey where the pieces fall into place easily; because of this, while stories reflect aspects of life which audiences can relate to, they need to be constructed in such a way as to make sense and convey certain feelings and symbols, as well as allow the viewers to go on their own journey with the characters. A model like the hero's journey helps to achieve this.

Stages in the Hero's Journey

Vogler (2007) has outlined the hero's journey typically starting with scenes that offer an insight into the hero's everyday life, *the ordinary world*. In his or her ordinary world the hero might be feeling uneasy; for example, when Dorothy gets into trouble with Miss Gulch in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) there is unrest in her life. It is important to have the reader sympathise with the hero. In some stories, when there is a negative or broken hero, this level of sympathy is important so as not to alienate the audience.

Then there is a *call to adventure*, when the hero must come to the realisation that changes lie ahead. The *refusal of the call* comes next when the hero may hesitate to take up action. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) the main protagonist, Frodo, starts his journey as the reluctant hero because he does not see himself as a hero, and does not believe he has the skills to destroy the ring and go up against such a powerful enemy (Sauron). The purpose of the quest is that the hero does not possess the skills, supplies, knowledge, or even confidence for the quest ahead, so he *meets with a mentor* before commencing; Frodo has a number of mentors throughout his journey, including Samwise, Strider and Gandalf.

It is at the *crossing of the first threshold* when the hero finally leaves his everyday life, and this usually aligns with the end of Act One. In *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), the threshold occurs when Frodo leaves the Shire for the first time in his life to go to the Prancing Pony to meet Gandalf. There is a sense of uncertainty as he begins walking in an unfamiliar landscape, and there is also danger as Frodo is being chased by the Nazgûl; this forces him to leave his comfort zone and go on the journey even if he has not completely made up his mind that he wants to do this. It is at this point in the story where there is no return for the hero – he will complete the adventure or fail doing so.

The next part of the journey occurs in the *special (or new) world*, where everything is unfamiliar to the hero and they need to explore, and there are *tests, allies and enemies*. This is when the hero makes friends and fights with enemies, bringing him closer to the point of his transformation. The hero is gradually moving towards *the innermost cave*, the path that will lead him to peril. *The ordeal* is the point where he faces his darkest moment and has the choice to be reborn or die. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), this moment is signified by Frodo considering sacrificing himself to ensure the ring is destroyed. It is at this point in the story where the hero faces his greatest fears, and undergoes a symbolic death (also known as *surviving in the belly of the whale*), where the hero is reborn with new knowledge and skills. This is his *reward* for surviving death; in *The Return of the King* (2003), the ring is finally destroyed and consequently Sauron is defeated.

This marks another point of no return in the story, usually aligning with the end of Act Two. The Hero leaves this special world, and returns to the ordinary world. The road back is marked

by a degree of urgency to return home; sometimes there is further pressure as the hero might lose the reward. At the end of *The Return of the King* (2003), the road home is marked by Frodo and Sam being rescued by Gandalf and the Eagles. *The resurrection* comes when the hero faces the challenge one last time and deals with it once and for all, either through a death and rebirth or another self-sacrifice; after being rescued, Frodo is unconscious for weeks and it is unknown if he will recover.

The journey ends with the hero returning home with something that will improve the community and life in the ordinary world, the *return with the elixir*. In *The Lord of the Rings* Frodo has helped to bring peace back to Middle Earth, and in particular his home, the Shire. He has also saved his home from destruction should the war with Sauron have continued.

There is also a version of the hero's journey which relates to the inner journey of the hero (Vogler 2007). Briefly, this involves the hero becoming aware of a problem and the need for change, resisting this change, overcoming his fear of change then committing to fixing the problem, experimenting with how to fix the problem, and facing the problem which leads to a death experience. The hero subsequently goes through a process during which he accepts the changes that occurred from addressing the problem, and encounters a new challenge and redirection before he finally returns home with mastery. This follows the fundamentals of the hero's journey as it is a quest-focussed journey.

There are many examples of the hero's journey in popular fiction with both males and females in the role of the hero: *Star Wars* (1977, 1980, 1983, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2015), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001). The development of the hero's journey by Campbell (1949) and Vogler (2007) inadvertently highlighted the need for a matching journey for the heroine. While the hero in stories can be either male or female, there is still a need for a specific journey for women that would give voice to unique trials women endure, to ensure that all perspectives are represented in storytelling. Without a counterpart journey for the heroine these stories are not being told, resulting in a gap in popular fiction. When creating new stories, part of the process for a writer is to look at what has not been told before. Incorporating the heroine's journey facilitates the representation of women's experiences in fiction and opens up dialogue about the stories of women's growth, fears, and understanding of their role in a household, community and society (Frankel 2010).

In the *Hunger Games* movies (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) the journey of the female lead Katniss Everdeen is, at first, more in line with the hero's journey; she is given a call to adventure which she answers when she volunteers for her sister to fight in the Hunger Games. Katniss becomes a female soldier, fighting for hers and her friend Peeta Mellark's lives, and against the Capitol for freedom for the people. She becomes a typical heroic symbol – nonetheless, just because she is female this is arguably not sufficient to render this a different perspective. The ending of the movie is more in line with the heroine's journey. By changing the ending in *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015) so that Katniss and Peeta end up together and happy with their own children, both characters make way for the feminine by embracing a more nurturing side which is needed after the horrors they experienced as soldiers, and for them to raise a family. This is a sneak peek of the heroine's journey and how it can be represented in popular fiction.

The Heroine's Journey

While there are overlaps between the hero's and heroine's journey, there are subtle differences that can enhance the characters and lead to richer storytelling. Fundamentally, the heroine's journey is a more spiritual, or inner journey compared to the hero's, which is largely an external quest.

In *The Virgin's Promise* by Kim Hudson (2010, 20), her version of the heroine's journey relates to the woman freeing herself from her family and becoming independent by connecting with her inner world: "She expands her values to include personal choice by developing her sensuality, creativity, and spirituality in a drive towards joy." According to Hudson (2010), the hero's journey is about gaining skills in bravery, becoming stronger and facing a fear of death. Maureen Murdock's (1990) *The Heroine's Journey* focuses on the separation of the feminine due to the over-identification with the masculine. The quest is about bringing the feminine and masculine into a harmonious balance within the heroine. The journey is about reaching a position of feeling whole, which is continuous and complex and may never finish in a lifetime.

Both versions of the heroine's journey offer a model specific to an inner journey. This results in the main character going against the status quo, or social and familial expectations, in order to follow their dream and embrace their personal power and identity, resulting in the community accepting them for being themselves. The heroine's journey is also about the heroine learning about suffering and how to endure it gracefully. She is not trying to achieve a physical goal; she is learning to persevere in her life, take back control, and live despite any suffering she may endure. By doing so, she develops her intuition, creativity and emotional intelligence, which are typically considered more feminine qualities (as opposed to logic, goal setting and critical thinking, developed in the hero's journey) (Murdock 1990). Frankel (2010, 20) describes how "the hero journeys for external fame, fortune, and power, [whereas] the heroine tries to regain her lost creative spirit ... once she hears the cries of her lost part of herself needing rescue her journey truly begins." It is not about killing to dominate, but using shrewdness and fortitude instead of violence. It is not about a woman being passive, but using the everyday objects available and using them to rule in her own domain (Frankel 2010).

As a writer, this means that there is a different model to consider when constructing a story, and it is one to turn to when I need inspiration or help finding areas of a story that need strengthening. It gives me a different set of perspectives to consider, such as how to represent the split of the masculine and feminine, or how to represent the yearning to connect with the feminine in a story. This extends my thinking about the options for events in a story in different directions, which brings up new levels of creativity to draw on. It brings me back closer to the root of storytelling and the elements which are needed to make up a story so I can take the reader on a journey they have not been on before. It marks a return to the fundamentals of stories and myths where I can look at the symbols and archetypes, play with images to feed my creativity, and then use this new perspective to write.

By understanding both models even more possibilities become available for the writer to choose from, and what direction to take the story or what events to put the character through. Furthermore, there is the option to use both the hero's and heroine's journey for characters within the same story, and even within one character; one might consider blending the models in order to bring fresh perspectives to typical storylines, while still maintaining a satisfying

ending and the experience of a complete journey (unless the story is one where the journey is incomplete, which is not often seen in popular fiction).

Stages in the Heroine's Journey

In Murdock's (1990) model the heroine's journey begins with a separation from the feminine. This can be represented by the heroine having a negative relationship with her mother or mother figure, due to illness, selfishness, or because she was abandoned by her mother, which leads to the rejection of the female body and the mother archetype. The heroine is also strongly told how she should be living her life, by friends, the community and society; this limits the growth of the character and morphs into the call for the need of the character to go on an inner journey. An example of such a popular female character is Danielle in *Ever After* (1998) who is living under the rules of her stepmother. A positive aspect of this, however, is that by doing the housework and taking care of the animals Danielle is learning how to run a household. This is an important skill for her to learn, because it makes her more desirable for a suitor. This is typical of Cinderella inspired stories like *Ever After* (1998), in which the protagonist is learning skills that will help her out of her situation, if she chooses to, and realise her own strength, abilities and self-worth (Frankel 2010).

The result is an *over-identification with the masculine*. The heroine achieves this by working hard, climbing the corporate ladder, being successful in a male-dominated job, and gains education, money and authority. To get to this point the heroine has *undertaken a road of trials*, and now that she has reached her male-orientated goals she experiences an *illusory boon of success*, where she questions if her success is enough to sustain her. Her spirit, her inner self, is experiencing emptiness, and she sees only an arid internal landscape ahead if she continues down this path. *Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity*, Danielle in *Ever After* (1998) is not content to allow her stepmother or stepsisters to ruin her parent's home. She might appear helpless, but she is awakening into action, and looking for options to change her situation. The heroine undergoes a symbolic death, and *initiation and descent to the Goddess* (or feminine). This is when the heroine goes on a wandering-like journey searching for meaning and where she fits in.

This can be a dark time and often full of isolation. The heroine may appear depressed as she searches for the discarded parts of herself, which are associated with the feminine. In *Ever After* (1998) Danielle is isolated and locked in the cellar to prevent her from going to the ball. She escapes, with the help of friends, and while she does not necessarily believe she is worthy because of the treatment from her stepmother, Danielle still dresses up, replacing her servant clothing with a beautiful angelic gown and attends the ball. There is an *urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine*. She is becoming free to explore her own voice, and make her own decisions. She is connecting to her inner voice, which speaks of the dreams that she wants to follow, and the split begins to heal between the masculine and feminine.

First, there is a healing of the mother/daughter split; then, a healing of the wounded masculine, where the masculine brings her closer to herself instead of forcing her to go down the path of male-orientated success. Finally, there is an *integration of the masculine and feminine*. In *Ever After* (1998) Danielle is sold into slavery to the landowner Pierre le Pieu. In this situation she realises her desire not to have this life and fights back. She uses the skills she has learnt – swordsmanship from her father and the hard labour from cleaning and farming – which make her strong, healthy and able to challenge her captor and escape. She is an independent

woman who does not need to be rescued by her prince. Her reward is that she becomes a princess, she does get her prince, and she also saves her father's estate from ruin. Because of the hardships she endured from her stepmother she also gets the opportunity to make a difference to those less fortunate than herself, especially in her role as a princess.

The Power of the Heroine's Journey

The heroine's journey is centred on battling with pain and intolerance, and enduring adversity to rescue loved ones (Frankel 2010). This journey is also about restoring what has been broken or injured (Chinen 1996). In mythology this is seen with Isis searching for the pieces of her beloved Osiris' body to resurrect him. This can also be seen in the ending of *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015); Katniss has restored power to the people and freed them from the constraints and greed of the Capitol. She has faced internal demons in order to have children and start raising a family with Peeta.

In the past, a marriage was the pinnacle for a woman; over time this has evolved so that women can have careers and now compete with men, with added pressure of not showing fear or emotion. They are forced to choose strength or femininity, but not both. By using the heroine's journey and applying it to both male and female characters, writers can provide examples of characters that are strong and balanced with emotions rather than suppressed.

In summary, the heroine's journey presents in stories when the main character (male or female) is on a journey to try and achieve their dreams instead of being influenced by what others (family, community, society) think they should be. The main character begins with an unwillingness to disrupt the ordered world, choosing to conform, until she realises she has to give up what she dreams, and then has to choose whether or not to be true to herself and change her world. When she does follow her dreams, she is accepted for who she is in her community, and as a result her creativity, sexuality and spirituality are awakened (Hudson 2010; Murdoch 1990).

Sometimes the impact of the story is with a failed or incomplete heroine's journey. In *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) Ennis does not accept his homosexual lover because of social expectations. In *The Dressmaker* (2015) Tilly is not accepted by the community, even when she returns as an adult. In *The Imitation Game* (2014) Alan's sexual orientation is not in line with society's expectations at the time, which results in constraints that prevent him from carrying out the work he loves, leading him to take his own life. Even though the heroine's journey was not completed, these stories are just as powerful and still have an emotional impact with audiences, adding to the variations of the journey that can be used in popular fiction.

The heroine's journey offers a different perspective, which results in new ways to connect with readers and viewers and draw them into fresh journeys. The heroine's journey is particularly suited for those inner journeys, such as personal identity, for example in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013). While Walter might be out travelling in the world, following clues, chasing a photographer, the inner journey he goes on is one of self-awareness and identity, and the external adventure leads to him finding out about himself and accept who he is in the world.

In the movie *Eddie the Eagle* (2016), Eddie draws on his own skills and tenacity to work against the odds of achieving his dream of being an athlete in the Olympics, and he refuses to conform

to everyone else's expectations that he is not capable of being a strong enough athlete to make the Olympic team.

Using the heroine's journey alongside the hero's journey gives a greater variety of character arcs for the writer to choose from, and mixing up between genders results in further choices in constructing a story. The heroine's journey lends itself to the exploration of particular themes such as privilege and oppression, showing a more internal struggle rather than an external one, where the hero fights against change in a community. For example in *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), Jess wanted to play football; not only is that frowned upon because she is a girl, but also by her Indian culture.

Instead of the heroine's journey being gender-driven the focus can be on masculine and feminine traits. The heroine's journey does not stand alone but works in conjunction with other aspects of storytelling, such as world-building, character development, and the conflict and motivation of characters, and can be applied to minor characters in the story. It is a model that can be used to enhance storytelling and provide a source of inspiration for writers.

The heroine's journey can also be used to mirror contemporary society. In the modern world where there is a lack of sense of community, a separation from nature, a feeling of isolation and a need to belong, it is the heroine's journey that can act as a model for this reflection in popular fiction. It provides a framework for thinking about how to address these aspects and offer insights in a fictional setting on how characters might live in the modern world as individuals, strong in their own sense of identity and still part of a community (Frankel 2010). For writers, this is a different way of thinking resulting in new ideas to incorporate into stories.

The heroine's journey can provide role models suitable for women to help them reconnect with the feminine and strong female characters which were once present in the old myths, such as the goddess Isis, or in folktales such as *Bluebeard* and *Six Swans* (Frankel 2010). In order to help develop such strong female characters there is a need for a different model like the heroine's journey to best represent strong women in a balance of femininity and masculinity, and pre-empt their confinement into a highly masculinised role. Following the heroine's journey helps the writer to step out of the usual boundaries into more unfamiliar territory, which in turn increases creativity, as well as the representation of women in fiction in a way that is more in line with contemporary life, or what is aspired to in society.

Both the hero's and heroine's journeys are helpful when constructing a story, and help inspire new perspectives on ways in which characters develop and go on journeys which the audience can connect with. For instance, writers could have the main male character go on the hero's journey at the same time the main female character goes on a heroine's; they can then reverse the two genders for each of the models adding in more variety and options that can be explored within these. The change of the ending of the final movie of the *Hunger Games* series, *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015), to a more typical Hollywood ending combines both parts of the hero's and heroine's journey in order to tell a story which is captivating. It is not enough that female characters like Katniss in *Hunger Games* are trying to survive, or to arm female characters with a sword and contend that they are strong role models. There is more to the journey, and the heroine's journey provides another way to find balance between men and women and reconnect with the goddess of mythology.

Conclusion

The heroine's journey centres on inner struggle, and what it takes to make a dream into a reality despite opposition from family, friends and society. Ignoring the heroine's journey creates a hole in fiction; stories are not being told, and representations of life are being overlooked. Incorporating the heroine's journey in a character's development, alongside the hero's journey, offers more possibilities for the writer to draw on when constructing a story. The two journeys can be explored concurrently, deepening the creativity levels for writers and producers, and enriching the art available to the public. As creative practitioners we may thus begin to represent groups within society whose voices are yet to be heard more prominently in fiction.

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