

Reading practice: Star Wars and the hero myth

Critics of the 2015 film *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* have called the film unoriginal and predictable because the story so closely mirrors the very first *Star Wars* film in 1977. But, in fact, both films follow a structure that predates all Hollywood films, that of the 'hero myth'. That's because director George Lucas based *Star Wars* on the ideas in Joseph Campbell's 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Later editions of Campbell's book even featured *Star Wars*' hero Luke Skywalker on the front cover. In his book, Campbell analyzes myths from all over the world to describe the 'monomyth' – a pattern that you can see in myths from every culture. In short, a hero sets off from home on a journey, where he overcomes obstacles and defeats enemies to return with a prize. It's a tale that has been told for thousands of years, from the Ancient Greeks with *The Odyssey* to JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. George Lucas was one of the early film directors to directly base his story on the 17 stages of the hero's journey. Typically, the hero starts the story living an ordinary life, but something happens that calls them to an adventure that changes everything. At the beginning of *Star Wars*, Luke lives an ordinary life with his aunt and uncle, repairing robots. When he finds Princess Leia's message to Obi-Wan Kenobi inside the robot R2D2, it is 'the call to adventure' that starts the hero on his journey.

According to Campbell, the hero at first refuses the call to adventure, but a mentor appears who helps them and they decide to 'cross the threshold' and travel into the 'special world' where the adventure happens. The next stage consists of passing tests, fighting enemies and meeting friends as the hero prepares to face their biggest challenge. For Luke the mentor is, of course, Obi-Wan, the friends are Han Solo and the robots R2D2 and C3PO and the enemy is Darth Vader inside the special world of the Death Star. Next, the hero overcomes obstacles on the way to facing their greatest challenge. There often comes a moment when they face death or loss and that experience gives them the strength to finally defeat the enemy. Luke loses his mentor when he sees Darth Vader kill Obi-Wan, which helps him find the strength he needs later on. When heroes succeed, they return from the special world, changed by their experiences forever. Luke's change comes when he remembers Obi-Wan saying, 'Use the force', and he uses it to help him aim his laser into the heart of the Death Star. Luke takes his first steps to becoming a Jedi, and the hero myth restarts in *The Return of the Jedi*, except this time his mentor is Yoda.

Are the sentences true or false?

1. Joseph Campbell's original book cover has links to the Star Wars films.

TRUE FALSE

2. The Ancient Greeks also based their stories on Campbell's ideas.

TRUE FALSE

3. Other film directors after George Lucas have carefully followed the hero myth structure.

TRUE FALSE

4. Obi-Wan Kenobi sends Luke a message and starts his adventure.

TRUE FALSE

5. The hero is always willing to accept the call to adventure.

TRUE FALSE

6. The hero often finds strength from some kind of loss.

TRUE FALSE

