



*Beyond the Myth of the Hero: The Rise and Self-Reduction of the Ego,
from C. G. Jung to J. Campbell*

Filippo Losito*

Abstract:

This paper explores the hero myth as a symbolic expression of the individuation process, based on the theories of C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell. By analyzing the concept of the "Monomyth" or "Hero's Journey," it highlights how the hero's journey represents a universal narrative found across various cultures. The hero's path, marked by a series of trials and transformations, symbolizes the libido's tension toward consciousness and the integration of unconscious aspects. Contributions from Christopher Vogler are discussed, noting his recognition of a common structure in hero myths. The paper delves into the role of the Self in the individuation process, emphasizing how narratives can serve as tools for psychological transformation. Through literary and cinematic examples, the study illustrates how the hero's journey mirrors the process of inner growth and self-realization, offering a comprehensive understanding of the hero myth as a metaphor for personal development and the quest for meaning. This paper first explores Jung's and Campbell's theoretical foundations, then examines how the monomyth operates as a tool for individuation, followed by an application of these ideas through a modern case study in literature and cinema, culminating in a reflection on the evolving role of the hero in contemporary narratives.

Key Word: Individuation process, monomyth, hero's Journey, C.G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, archetypal narratives

* ARPA (Institute for Research in Analytical Psychology), Italy
Corresponding author: Filippo Losito, filippolosito.fl@gmail.com

1. Introduction

C. G. Jung considers the hero myth one of the most universally symbolic expressions suited to elucidating the process of individuation. This theme resides at the heart of “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, a work by mythologist and anthropologist Joseph Campbell (2015), who investigated the figure of the hero in numerous cultures worldwide. He supported the thesis that the myths and legends of different peoples follow a similar pattern, called “Monomyth” or “Hero's Journey,” a path marked by a series of stages the hero must traverse to reach his goal.

The monomyth represents a universal narrative template identifiable across a vast range of stories, myths and cultural traditions. In the hero's myth, the hero leaves his familiar environment to embark on an exciting and terrifying experience, in an unknown and magical world, where he face and overcome a series of challenges. These lead them into the darkest recesses of his psyche, offering him the opportunity to shape a more complete personality and bring benefits to the community.

Initially the hero can rely on his individual consciousness only, but as the adventure progresses, the presence of a guide or a higher spirit becomes evident: the symbol of a higher consciousness capable of grasping hidden meanings.

As explained by Bernardo Nante (2012) in his “*Guida alla lettura del Libro Rosso*” the hero needs to set out on a journey, and the story itself describes the arduous heroic path of separation from the unconscious. In “Transformations and Symbols of the Libido” (1912), Jung identifies the hero as a ‘wanderer,’ a figure driven by insatiable desire and symbolic of the emerging Ego separating from the undifferentiated unconscious (Nante, 2012).

Jung bases his work on the writings of Otto Rank, who interpreted the hero's myth from a psychoanalytic perspective (Rank, 1909), and the studies of Leo Frobenius, an anthropologist who saw in the hero the protagonist of a solar myth (Frobenius, 1904).

Frobenius collected examples that showed a common structure: the hero is swallowed by a sea monster in the west and taken eastward, where he lights a fire in the belly of the beast and consumes a piece of its heart. Then, once on the coast, he begins to tear the animal apart from the inside, freeing the others who had been swallowed. The solar character of the hero, corresponding to the libido's tension towards consciousness, is

indicated by the descent into the mother's womb and the incubation taking place there, to then reach the East, the light.

The hero must kill the hero – the Ego must kill the Ego – by surrendering to darkness and the absurd, not as an antihero, but by rising to a new dimension of the Self, a synthesis of hero and antihero, on a path where one must continue without help.

The goal of the heroic endeavor is not predetermined, as the hero must face unexpected situations and take them on just as unexpectedly. The challenge is continuous, and imagination expresses itself freely, without restrictions. According to Jung, the transcendent function is an individual destiny.

In Campbell's interpretation (2015), the stages of the hero's journey do not just constitute a logical distribution of adventures, stages, and narrative mechanics based on cause-and-effect dynamics; and the true goal – the last stage of the journey – would not involve the protagonist's acquisition of a concrete and external object of desire but would have to do with the fulfillment of one's destiny, or part of it.

The hero's journey would consist of a metaphorical and symbolic path aimed at unlocking the meaning of existence, as stated by Marie-Louise Von Franz (2017) “what the human being is looking for is not the desired object but the water of life: the real objective is to be alive in a meaningful way”. (Von Franz, 2017, p.98)

Storytelling allows us to make sense of our lives by placing them in a narrative light. In the thought of James Hillman (1983), the narration itself, as a passage of events through psychological processing, would be part of the elaboration process of the psyche: “I believe that had we more experiencing there would be need for fewer events and the quick passage of time would find a stop”. (Hillman, 1983, p. 33)

By telling stories, we identify connections, causes, a before and an after; we are struck by the brilliance of synchronicities; a pattern previously hidden in the tangle of fabric forms, and from this emerges a guiding thread, the red thread that Ariadne gave to Theseus, so he would not get lost in the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur.

The investigation of these heroic tales began in 1871 with the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), who could notice common patterns in the narratives of various heroes. Otto Rank, with a psychoanalytic approach based on Freud's theories, Lord Raglan (2003), with his theories on the unification of myths and rituals in 1936, and

finally Campbell (2015), influenced by Jung's ideas on myth, have explored and disclosed the study of the narrative models of heroes.

In particular Joseph Campbell, in his “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” (1949), detailed the narrative model, describing the hero's journey as an adventure leading to victory and transformative return.

Campbell (1949), along with other authors including Erich Neumann and Edward Edinger, applied the concept of the monomyth to historical-religious figures such as Gautama Buddha, Moses and Christ. Others, like Rank and Raglan, interpreted heroic tales through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis and ritual.

Despite some critics consider the concept too broad to be usefully applicable to comparative mythology, the monomyth is seen as a fundamental narrative archetype that encompasses different forms of the hero's journey.

2. The Structure of the Monomyth in the Hero's Journey

The term “monomyth” appears in James Joyce's work, “Finnegans Wake” (1939), to which Campbell dedicated “A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake” (Campbell & Robinson, 1944), the essay which accredited his theories in the realm of literary criticism.

If the concept of the monomyth is used in a broader sense to indicate a universal mythological archetype and as a meta myth, namely as a philosophical interpretation of the unity of humanity's spiritual history, the expression “hero's journey” – even before the book of the same name by Cristopher Vogler (2010) – entered the common parlance thanks to several popular works, particularly “The Power of Myth”, a series of interviews between Campbell and Bill Moyers, produced by the BBC, which helped to spread the theory to a wider audience.

Campbell's work, starting in the 1990s, became the reference for numerous studies related to storytelling, particularly in audiovisual production, alongside studies on the narrative functions of characters – above all: - Morphology of the Folktale by the Russian linguist and anthropologist Vladimir Propp – analytical systems based on the mythical and symbolic value of events in stories – from the three-act structure attributable to Aristotle, to The Hero's Journey by Cristopher Vogler – useful to build meaningful stories and produce sense through dramaturgy.

While Propp's work introduced an interest in dividing narratives into structuring elements – already in the fairy tale we find recurring motifs, repeated sequences, crucial stages – what varies in each interpretation is the meaning attributed to events: the same passage can have a religious, a sociopolitical level of reading, and can vary depending on the theoretical model of reference, the framework within which a narrative is reported.

“The Writer's Journey” (2007) by Cristopher Vogler applies the theme of the monomyth to the main cinematographic audiovisual works and recognize a circular structure – thus endless – made of twelve stages, which should recur in almost all Western audiovisual products:

1. The Ordinary World: The hero is introduced. The reader is given a bit of personal history, setting, and cultural context. Something in the hero's life makes them feel they are being pulled in different directions and causing stress.
2. The Call to Adventure: Something shakes up the situation, and the hero feels called to make a change, which usually involves leaving home.
3. Refusal of the Call: The hero fears the unknown and considers turning away from the adventure. Or another character tries to dissuade the hero from proceeding.
4. The Hero finds a Mentor: The hero comes across someone (often a stranger, elder, or spirit) who gives them training, equipment, or advice that will help on the journey.
5. Crossing the Threshold: The hero commits to leaving the World where they started and enters a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values.
6. Tests, Allies and Enemies: The hero is tested and sorts out allegiances in the Unfamiliar or Special World.
7. Approach: The hero and their new-found allies prepare for the major challenge in the Special World.
8. The Ordeal: The hero arrives in a central space in the Unfamiliar World and faces death or their greatest fear. The hero emerges from this moment of reckoning changed in some way.
9. The Reward: The hero takes possession of the treasure they have won in the ordeal. There may be celebration, but there is also danger of losing the treasure again.

10. The road back: The hero must complete the adventure and leave the Special World to bring their treasure back home. Often a chase scene signals the urgency and danger of the mission.
11. The Resurrection: The hero is severely tested once more as they near home in the climax. The hero is changed by a last sacrifice, another moment of death and rebirth—often psychological— which prepares them to be a leader upon their return.
12. Return with the Elixir: The hero returns home, bearing the treasure. The treasure has the power to transform the world, as the hero has been transformed. The hero is hailed as a leader by their kinsmen or community and so begins a new (and better) life and world.

The merit that Vogler (2010) attributes to Campbell is that of having recognized the principles of the hero's journey, assembled them, articulated them and organized according to a universal model.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces is his statement of the most persistent theme in oral tradition and recorded literature: the myth of the hero [...]. He found that all storytelling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the Hero's Journey: the “monomyth”. [...]

Campbell's thinking runs parallel to that of the Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung, who wrote about the archetypes: constantly repeating characters or energies which occur in the dreams of all people and the myths of all cultures. Jung suggested that these archetypes reflect different aspects of the human mind — that our personalities divide themselves into these characters to play out the drama of our lives. He noticed a strong correspondence between his patients' dream figures and the common archetypes of mythology. He suggested that both were coming from a deeper source, in the collective unconscious of the human race. (Vogler, 2010, p. 54-55)

Starting from the premise that every narrative work stages the possible arc of transformation of one or more characters (through a dynamic system of events that, rotating around a curve of fortune, offers characters the chance to transform or, to use a

term close to analytical psychology “individuate”) it is possible to try to trace in the narrative structures, as described by Joseph Campbell, the symbolic value of the passages that substantiate the narratives – from myth, to fairy tale, from novel, to contemporary audiovisual narrative – and correlate their meaning with the process of individuation described by C. G. Jung.

Narratives in this sense are understood as optimized transformation pathways (narration is life deprived of chaos and scenes that do not produce meaning and sense). They offer access to new thresholds of consciousness and provide us with tools useful for our individuation, understood as a creative and spontaneous process “potentially present in every man, although most men are unaware of it”. (Jacobi, 1973, p. 107)

According to Jung (1953), individuation is the process through which individual beings form and differentiate:

[...]in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as a differentiated being from the general, collective psychology. Individuation, therefore, is a process of differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality. (Jung, 1953, p. 561)

Individuation is a process of differentiation, oriented by the unconscious center of the Self, which, in Jung's thought, represents psychological completeness, the whole end of man, the realization of his totality and his individuality as being distinct from the generality and collective psychology.

The Ego is, by definition, subordinate to the self and is related to it like a part to the whole. Inside the field of consciousness it has, as we say, free will [...]. It finds its limits outside the field of consciousness in the subjective inner world, where it comes into conflict with the facts of the self. (Jung, 2014a, p. 23)

By “Ego” is meant “the complex factor to which all conscious contents are related. It forms, as it were, the centre of the field of consciousness” and is “the subject of all personal acts of consciousness” (Jung, 2014a, p. 18). The Self, on the other hand, includes the totality of the elements of the psyche, those accessible and those unreachable; it comprises “consciousness first of all, then the personal unconscious, and finally an

indefinitely large segment of the collective unconscious whose archetypes are common to all mankind” (Jung, 1959).

The process of individuation, in differentiation, has the function of unify the individual and the collective, the personal and the social. There can be no individual without society and no singularity without culture, as every human being is made of its environment. Also, as argued by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1964), humans have the psychological necessity to belong to a collective identity.

A fundamental function of the identified hero is to return the obtained elixir to the community, to confirm his transformation through the transformation of the community in terms of extended knowledge, well-being, and renewed consciousness.

The ultimate goal of the individuation process is not, therefore, a blind egoic affirmation but, to quote Marie-Louise Von Franz, the progressive “submission to the Self”. In the encounter-clash with the forces of the Self, the ego moves towards a progressive *diminutio* to reconfigure itself – possibly – into a new fullness.

Heroes of narrative escape the classical ideal and, especially in the contemporary narrative plenitude, cannot literally coincide with rich rulers or unflappable warriors, and their stories cannot develop around a schematic series of trials that would necessarily lead to victory, treasure, the beloved or the lover.

Literature has staged for centuries the fragmentation of the ego, and contemporary narrative feeds on anti-heroes – we just have to think of the split characters of the series, from Tony Soprano to Don Draper, from Walter White to Frank Underwood – and offers a complex exploration of flaws and shadows.

The monomyth model identified by Campbell and its condensation proposed by Vogler in *The Hero's Journey* – along with the main systems used by authors and screenwriters for decades – do not constitute a shortcut for writers (or a practical self-help manual), but a map to trace the crucial passages of individuating paths, which through stories are offered to us. In these passages, it is possible to detect unconscious archetypal drives, which like a geyser, in the narrative progression, emerge into the consciousness of the characters. Thus, Campbell's journey can be reinterpreted as a Journey of the Ego. An Ego called to resist, to expand, to disintegrate, to transform, to reduce under the impulses of life, following the often inscrutable logic imposed by the call of the Self.

In our culture, ours, especially oriented around the mythology of the Ego, the hero's journey, taken in its surface dynamics, could be interpreted as the paradigm of the individualist who wins over enemies in a purely competitive and performative perspective. Jung, in this respect, clarifies:

But individuation is far from meaning individualism in the narrow, egocentric sense, for all that individuation does is to make a man the individual that he really is. By individuation he does not become 'selfish'; he fulfils his individual nature, which is something very different and must not be confused with egoism or individualism. [...] The wholeness he has achieved is in contact, through consciousness and the unconscious, with the whole world. The accent is not on his supposed individuality as opposed to his collective obligations but on the fulfilment of his own nature as it is related to the whole. (Jacobi, 1973, p. 106-107)

The specific skills that the hero-warrior develops – with mythological references to Hercules, Achilles, or the more recent Rambo – are primarily physical skills. Strength is symbolic of the capacities and vigor of the Ego, of the directed libido, of the consciousness able to gather energies and direct them towards a purpose. This dynamic describes the strength of the Ego but does not necessarily set in motion individuating dynamics.

The characters portrayed in cinema by Stallone or Schwarzenegger are archetypal representatives, sometimes highly effective, of the libido able to exercise control and impose its goal on the environment, but they are not a testament to the strength of the Ego in an absolute way. Especially in our contemporaneity, where the display of self has reached paroxysmal levels, these characters testify very often the fragility of an Ego supported by narcissistic dynamics and an inconsistent Self even on a collective scale. The presence in stories of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, kings and queens, princes and princesses is not a declaration of target audience; stories do not speak 'only' to those who wield weapons, hold scepters, wear crowns, but have the symbolic function of awakening in the reader and the viewer the – extraordinary, divine, heroic, regal – qualities, the heroic principle of the Ego conveyed in the individuating process. In Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra', "the hero should not be cast away. It is poison when you identify but it is not if you don't" (Jung, 2014b, p. 1054).

As Vogler himself notes, there is a vast corpus of stories that resonate with the model of the hero's journey but question the value of victory and explore themes that go beyond the concept of domination:

The warrior is only one of the faces of the hero, who can also be pacifist, mother, pilgrim, fool, wanderer, hermit, inventor, nurse, savior, artist, lunatic, lover, clown, king, victim, slave, worker, rebel, adventurer, tragic failure, coward, saint, monster, etc. (Vogler, 2010, p. 28-29)

The hero is, by etymology, someone who demonstrates extraordinary strength. This strength is above all a strength of the psyche in its multiple possibilities, surpassing the concept of personal affirmation through a dual movement of ascent and self-reduction. The hero is always a Self.

The first part of a narrative represents and shapes the Self; the second part carries out the more global project of the Self, sometimes even forsaking developed skills, conquered resources, and initial ideals.

The Self starts from a condition of vulnerability, which, besides representing the empathic key for identification with the characters' fates, constitutes the vulnus – the wound and loophole – through which the Self is struck, instilling the latent need for revolution that animates the characters.

A Self that can be as naive as Forrest Gump, as mad as Willy Wonka, as genius as Will Hunting, as ironic as Fleabag, as proud as Walter White, as determined as Mrs. Maisel, as unfortunate as Maggie Fitzgerald, as vengeful as Edmond Dantès, as ambitious as Andrea Sachs, as magical as Harry Potter, as avenging as Beatrix Kiddo, as wounded as Joker, as damned as Raskolnikov, as alone as Theodore Twombly, and the list could go on almost infinitely.

For instance, Walter White from “Breaking Bad” illustrates a fragmented individuation process. Initially embodying the archetype of the “everyman”, his transformation reflects an anti-hero's journey that diverges from traditional mythic ideals. His descent into darkness, trials through moral transgressions, and final acts align with both the “Ordeal” and “Resurrection” stages of Vogler's structure, yet ultimately reveal a fractured, incomplete coniunctio oppositorum, an individuation that succumbs to the inflated ego rather than a balanced Self.

Every individuation path, read in novels, seen in a movie or a TV series does not concern only the characters of the stories, but is an event that affects the inner world of the reader and the viewer, activating a similar process: here lies the power of narrative.

The charm that literary works or films exert on us produces an encounter with archetypes that, as Jean François Vézina (2010) states, constitutes a synchronistic event capable of inspiring, shaking consciousness, providing fragments of answers to life's big questions, which are the result of wisdom gained by humans in the great history of the species.

3. The Journey of the Self and the coniunctio oppositorum

The myth of the hero is precisely the epic of the Self – the Journey of the Self – and many narratives highlight the role, the events, the failures, the successes, the victories of the Self.

Starting from the Jungian hypothesis, developed especially by Marie-Louise Von Franz (2010), according to which archetypal narratives encompass the myth of the Self but somehow transcend it, it is possible to see how the path of individuation embraces the long and important work of the Self and extends it through the work of the unconscious. The theme of individuation, as mentioned, is often inflated by the myth of the hero, but it surpasses it.

The typical ending of the myth of individuation is not – only – the affirmation of the hero, but the coniunctio – the reconciliation of opposites in the psyche. Even in the model proposed by Campbell (2015), the Sacred Marriage – Hieros Gamos – is a symbolic concept representing the union of opposites and the integration into the psyche of contrasting polarities.

The marriage is not necessarily a physical marriage, it is rather a metaphor for the harmonization of masculine and feminine aspects in an individual's unconscious or the reunion of the hero with his Anima or the heroine with her Animus. After achieving this synthesis, the hero returns to his ordinary world transformed, carrying with him the gift of integration, in the form of knowledge, skills, or an understanding that benefits its community.

This dynamic core – which effectively resonates Jung's thought with the evidence proposed by Campbell (2015) – is also insistently found in fairy tales, whose classical model always requires an interpretive effort in metaphorical and symbolic terms: the hero

marries the princess, they live happily ever after realizing a new completeness full of sons and daughters, and they restore fertility to the community, ensuring a collective regeneration.

The structures of fairy tales revolve around recurring axes and narrative acts.

The setup: the initial condition of equilibrium is disrupted: the king is sick, or he has died, or something has happened and one must leave.

The development: the Self departs, overcomes trials, conquers the treasure, the princess or vice versa, and returns home. The development details the hero's monomyth and his assertion.

The conclusion, however, speaks of a coniunctio, of an integration and development at the collective level, often a very rapid epilogue: "they had many children and lived happily ever after". The ending is not so much about the triumph of the hero: the prince does not continue to conquer other women, but rather expands the boundaries of the kingdom.

Once the story closes and the coniunctio is somehow completed, the fate of the characters loses interest.

We know the stories until "they lived happily ever after" because, paraphrasing Tolstoy: the happiness (of others) is boring, it's the unhappiness of the characters that interests us. Resolved situations are narratively still. No one is interested in the story of Snow White wife of the prince, of Little Red Riding Hood, who, as a good girl, does not take the path through the woods but the main road, greets the priest, and brings her grandmother the apple pie with organic flour and whole sugar. Nor of discovering how Pinocchio became an obedient and diligent boy at school. We are interested in his weakness in following Lampwick to Pleasure Island, falling for the scam of the Cat and the Fox, his esteem for Stromboli. We are drawn by the constant tension he lives – like a pendulum – between the aspiration to be a sensible boy – with a heart full of compassion, pulsing with human feelings towards others, above all towards poor father Geppetto – and the attraction towards immediate gratification, that disintegrative spirit that leads him on the road of vice and easy success. In fairy tale terms: the right path (or straight way) and the wrong path (the forest of dangers).

When Pinocchio becomes a boy, another story begins, with another mythical theme, telling what happens to a boy who at first had almost no self-awareness and then, having

become aware, is called to embark on a new journey, of which we may not necessarily care (often the sequels of stories turn out to be disappointing precisely because the character has already exhausted the exploration of their mythical theme).

Contemporaneity exemplifies well this mechanism in serial narratives. In the never-ending stories of fiction, conflicts are not healed: events systematically complicate and the *coniunctio* is always postponed. It's the incompleteness, the renewal of dilemmas that keep viewers hooked for tens of hours.

After all, all narratives, even those completed, can narrate, more or less diffusely, more or less focused, only segments of the individuation process, a more or less partial integration; in the same way, humans, like the characters of the stories, are only allowed to approach fullness, achieving as much completeness as we are allowed.

Who guarantees that the king and queen really lived happily ever after?

We know few about the marital life of Snow White and Cinderella with their respective spouses or how Alice and Dorothy will conduct their mature lives after their respective journeys in Wonderland and the land of Oz.

The achievement of fullness is a utopian project and follows subjective paths; totality as such would not be experiential, because it would include not only the known and the unknown but also the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. If the Self obtains a part of consciousness, in part it will be conscious, in part will remain unconscious; it would therefore not be possible to have a full consciousness of the Self.

According to Campbell, narration is a means to organize the often confused signals coming from the unconscious. Without a structure (and narration provides a solid structure for subliminal life experiences), we would sink into impressions, fears, choices, and instinctive reactions. Narratives put us in contact with the great questions of existence, illuminate the paths, without the pretense of offering universal answers, but possible traces of meaning.

4. From the Ego to the Self to the new Self

Narratives possess tensional structures that keep together our experience of being human and save us from madness by collecting, organizing, and managing the impulses of the unconscious.

Campbell (2015) describes the unconscious as a deep and hidden realm beneath the surface of our everyday awareness—like an “Aladdin’s cave” filled not only with treasures but also with powerful and often threatening psychological forces. These inner elements—strange images, impulses, and emotions—can emerge unexpectedly through dreams or daily experiences. Though they may disturb our sense of stability, they are also captivating, as they hold the keys to self-exploration and the transformative journey toward discovering the true Self (Campbell, 2015, p. 19)

Vogler has simplified and capitalized on some concepts developed by Jung and later by Campbell in a hollywood handbook aimed at helping screenwriters create commercially viable, yet meaningful narratives. Vogler's *Hero's Journey* shows the applicability of Jungian ideas in the production of narrative works (particularly audiovisual ones) and together serves as an ideal metaphor – often abused in terms of personal growth – to describe the psychological transformation in a person's life.

The *Hero's Journey* is an interesting phenomenon in the world of writing guides and psychoanalytic criticism. It blatantly defies the prevalence of Freudian thinking in the cinematic arena, both in its style and content, and asserts the usefulness and supremacy of the Jungian approach to screen narratives. (Bassil-Morozow & Hockley, 2017, p. 47)

The twelve stages of the journey recall the ritual and symbolic lines outlined by Campbell (seventeen), analyzing the dynamic development of different archetypes in some popular Hollywood cinematic works. This dynamic impulse is one of the specific engines of Jungian thought, as Helena Bassil-Morozow and Luke Hockley (2017) state, echoing Campbell (2015), according to whom Freudian principles would be more suited to reading the first part of an individual's life and Jung's ideas more effective in addressing what happens after midlife. Unlike Freud's focus on the past, Jungian psychology emphasizes a forward-looking approach centered on evaluating one's current life and consciously shaping the future. While past experiences matter, they do not define the individual's potential. Personal growth is seen as an ongoing journey toward psychological wholeness, even if this state is never fully attainable. Through individuation—a process of integrating various aspects of the psyche—one can achieve a sense of inner balance and better navigate life's challenges. Everyone goes through this journey, encountering similar symbolic milestones tied to the collective unconscious. These archetypal patterns reflect common human struggles: managing relationships with

authority figures, confronting negative traits like envy or aggression, dealing with instincts and sexuality, seeking meaning, love, and purpose, and striving to leave a legacy before death (Bassil-Morozow & Hockley, 2017, p.35)

Once the differentiation of the Self has been achieved more or less successfully and the individual is somehow anchored to the external world, Jung believed that a new task arose for the second half of life, a return, and a conscious rediscovery of the Self: individuation. The Ego reaches an impasse of one sort or another; and has to turn for help to what she termed

“a sort of hidden regulating or directing tendency [...], an organizing center” in the personality: “Jung called this center the 'Self' and described it as the totality of the whole psyche, in order to distinguish it from the 'ego', which constitutes only a small part of the psyche”. (Von Franz, 1964, p.161-162)

Under the guidance of the Self, a succession of archetypal images emerges, bringing fragmented aspects of the Self closer to its totality. The first to appear, and closest to the Ego, would be the Shadow, followed by the archetypes of the Animus and Anima, which come into play as mediators between the Ego and the Self, the last point on the path of self-realization.

In Jung's words, “the Self embraces Ego-Consciousness, Shadow, Anima, and Collective Unconscious in indeterminable extension. As a totality, the Self is a coincidentia oppositorum; it is therefore bright and dark and yet neither” (Jung, 1963, p. 108).

The Self, our consciousness, even if it is predominantly unconscious, is an islet emerging on the oceanic surface of the Self – would, however, be far-sighted, intentional, differently capable of consciousness, and endowed with its own narrative project.

In stories, this project manifests in the ending, the passage where the plot converges and the meaning is gathered – the ultimate purpose of the story – the act in which the fate of the characters is revealed.

5. The Shape of Stories

The concept of fate in storytelling is well exemplified by the “Shape of Stories” illustrated by Kurt Vonnegut (1988). If fate is “something that stands”, which somehow has already been predetermined, the Shape of Story contains a route to the fate.

The main theory around which narratives are built is constituted by the three-act structure, a tensional framework theorized by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Aristotle's shape of story leads the character from an initial situation of precarious order to a resolution, that affirms the final value of the story, passing through a transitory peak of fortune (middle point) and an apparent death (death point).

In a romantic comedy, for example, the Shape of the Story rises when the two lovers meet, falls at the lowest point where love seems impossible, and then rises again in the case of a happy ending. In a story where the protagonist is in a condition of misery (a widespread pattern in revenge stories), the story generally leads to a reversal of the curve. In serial stories, which potentially postpone the resolution of the conflict indefinitely, the character's fortune curve is destined to rise and fall in a continuous oscillation.

The shape of events is a menacing backbone for the psychological structure of the Self. The hero of the monomyth is for Campbell a character with exceptional gifts, from the start, the protagonist – who may be honored by their society or just as frequently unrecognized or despised – and the world in which they find themselves suffer from a symbolic lack and are interesting precisely for the instability they are in. In fairy tales, the lack may consist of the absence of a treasure, in an apocalyptic vision, in a world that risks falling into ruin.

Thus, the hero's journey is shown as a Journey of the Self aimed at recovering the missing symbol and a valorial regeneration more than the attainment of an external prize.

In any case, the conflict that animates the character and guides the narration compels us to wonder about their fate. Every event in a story must have a motivation (the “motive,” from the Latin *motus*, is the drive to take action) and it is through a sequence of motivations and actions that a character's fate is fulfilled.

Fate can then be read as the enactment of the plan of the Self, which visible plot reveals only in retrospect; the Self has potentials of consciousness, but it is a diluted consciousness, not polarized, spread globally. To realize individuation, the potentials of consciousness should crystallize and condense into a pole. The Self contains the totality, but needs a nucleus of aggregated consciousness.

From this perspective, Jung's Answer to Job offers an interesting paradigm. In this interpretation of the biblical text, a duality in God is recognized, embracing both divine and diabolic aspects, highlighting a sovereignty that can also manifest as moral

indifference. In the confrontation between the submission of creatures and divine will, Job emerges as a figure of moral resistance. From his position of extreme loss, Job calls God to a higher ethic. The biblical narrative then evolves with the sending of Jesus, who, experiencing humanity, enlightens divinity on the injustice of suffering, operating a transformation in the divine nature, based on love and compassion.

The Ego, as the carrier of aggregated consciousness, is capable of a responsibility that the Self, in its diluted consciousness, does not possess: like the Sun for the indigenous people needs man to rise, the Self needs the Ego to manifest.

The common trait of the heroes of the monomyth is their distinction from others; for this reason, the characters of stories often attract extreme reactions from those around them. They can be stupid or intelligent, looser or successful, fascinating or unattractive: protagonists do not conform to the norms of the community.

According to Campbell (2015), the mythological hero, starting from the hut or castle where they live, would be attracted, pulled toward the threshold of adventure by the magnetic power of the Self:

There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm) or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion) (Campbell, 2015, p. 352).

The Shadow in the narrative and individuating path is not simply the fatal adversary but the exemplification of unknown forces necessary for the individual and collective transformation that the protagonist must face, tame, and integrate.

A significant example is shown by the figure of Judas in Nikos Kazantzakis', *The Last Temptation of Christ*, who is not presented as a betrayer but as a key figure in the destiny of Christ. The phrase «Eloì, Eloì, lemà sabactàni» – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – uttered by Jesus on the cross, reflects the inner conflict, the struggle against the sense of abandonment while facing suffering and his own tragedy. Christ, feeling alone and humanly abandoned by the Father, fantasizes about coming down from the cross, returning to Mary Magdalene, eating, resting, having children, and living a common life. It is the figure of Judas – in his betrayal, the true enzyme of Christ's

individuating process: he would never have taken on the burden of betrayal, he would never have delivered himself to the denigration of the future.

Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir). The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes (Campbell, 2015, p. 352-353)

The Self needs other forces; it uses other archetypes to set in motion the dynamics useful to enact and bring to light its own unconscious project.

Narratives arrange these forces within an order, and narrative structures are the keys through which it is possible to decode the meaning of the plan that manifests in its progression. A negative event attributed to the Shadow, for example, often gives rise to an individuation path that will lead to fullness, to greater development, and to an integration of the Self.

In the folkloric tradition of fairy tales, the meaning manifests through a symbolic value that transcends the story. Jung argues that meaning manifests through reasons that go beyond causes, through correspondences of meaning beyond the logic of space and time, and manifest in the order of synchronicity, a non-causal order in which meaning determines the field of events.

In the original versions of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the Self – the final coniunctio – is accomplished through a subtle but substantial difference, as Claudio

Widmann (2016) observes: Snow White wakes up because the prince kisses her; Sleeping Beauty wakes up when the prince arrives. Not always “at the moment when” (cum) means “because of” (propter): “causes are one thing, coincidences another, and sometimes coincidences are not due to causes” (Widmann, 2016, p. 67, translated by the author).

6. Case study. Dragon Trainer

The story *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) by Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders unfolds on the island of Berk, inhabited by a robust clan of Vikings constantly in conflict with dragons. Hiccup, the young son of the village chief Stoick, due to his slender physique and reflective character, finds himself alienated from a warrior culture that demands all able men to be dragon killers. Using his ingenuity as an apprentice blacksmith, Hiccup builds mechanical devices and, in a bold act during a dragon attack, manages to down a Night Fury, the most formidable and rare dragon. Contrary to his people's expectations and traditions, Hiccup finds himself unable to kill the wounded dragon. This moment of empathy and compassion marks the beginning of his individuation journey: Hiccup frees the dragon, which has lost the ability to fly due to a mutilated tail, and begins to secretly visit it in the forest. By learning to tame it, addressing both the individual and collective Shadow, Hiccup integrates its power, discovers his unique way of being, and liberates his community from a perennial threat.

The only trace of freedom and the only hope is, of course, in the one who is not devoured by the monster, who can deal with it, who can ride the monster [...]. Now, the dragon is of course the symbol for the collective unconscious; the state is simply the outside appearance of the thousand-headed monster. (Jung, 2014, p. 1153-1154)

Psychologist Carol Pearson (2018) suggests that each archetype contains a specific worldview, life goals, and theories about what gives meaning to existence:

We all begin in infancy and early childhood as Innocents, trusting that we will be cared for and still in awe of the beauty of the world. Soon we fall from this state of grace, as Adam and Eve fell from the Garden of Eden. Being Orphans, we are forced to face disappointment and pain. From these experiences, we learn realism and how to tell the difference between guides and tempters.

Growing older, we often experience our lives as confining and limiting, even oppressive. As Wanderers, we take off to find ourselves and seek our fortunes. Then, as Warriors, we gain the courage to face our dragons and to develop the discipline and skill necessary to succeed in the world. As Altruists, we discover that our existence is more meaningful if we commit to something greater than ourselves by, for example, giving back to others and to life itself. As returned Innocents, we can find the treasure of true happiness, once again trusting in the process of being alive. Finally, as Magicians, we become capable of transforming our lives and our kingdoms. (Pearson, 2018, p. 29)

Literature and cinema, like dreams, aim to satisfy our psychological needs and act directly upon us. The monomyth, according to Vogler, incorporates general principles that resonate in both fictional stories and real-life stories.

People pay good money for a taste of death. Bungee-jumping, skydiving, and terrifying amusement park rides give people the jolt that awakens fuller appreciation of life. Adventure films and stories are always popular because they offer a less risky way to experience death and rebirth, through heroes we can identify with. (Vogler, 2010, p. 313)

It is possible to manipulate the audience's emotions by making the hero's journey tortuous and unpredictable—in the emotional rollercoaster of trials—and by activating, through the hypnotic mechanism of the suspension of disbelief, the process of identification with the protagonist. It literally means transferring the spectator's self in cognitive, emotional, and psychic terms into the narrative—so that viewers can experience genuine emotions from the safety of their homes or movie theaters.

Neuroscience and brain scans indeed show that when we fully immerse ourselves in a story, the brain regions associated with our sense of identity are inhibited. Studies (Frith, 2007) have shown that travelers involved in such transportation can return transformed from a similar journey.

In conclusion, the myth of the hero continues to serve as a vital metaphor for the psychological process of individuation. By integrating insights from Jung, Campbell, and Vogler, and tracing their relevance across both traditional and contemporary narratives, the article illustrates how the hero's journey reflects the inner transformation of the Self. This archetypal structure not only guides characters through symbolic trials but also offers readers and viewers a psychological map for their own personal development.

Through this exploration, the paper contributes to an enriched understanding of myth, narrative, and the evolving human psyche.

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