

Defining the Notion of a Hero

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Overview

At some point in our lives we encounter a hero in some aspect. Whether we are watching a movie or reading a book, the notion of a hero surrounds us. The question is, “What is a hero?” Depending on who you ask that question you will receive an array of responses. Some may view a hero as a comic book figure and others may view a hero as someone who has accomplished a goal and set a positive example. No matter what definition we use to describe a hero, this is a notion we are all familiar with and can relate to.

When I first decided to explore the hero topic, I never imagined the wealth of information I would discover. After reading informational text from Joseph Campbell and Maureen Murdock I found that a hero is actually mythical and there are different stages that the character must travel through on their journey in order to be classified as a hero. When first thinking about what a hero is, my initial response would have been the “good guy” in the film or “the person that everyone looked up to admired.” Never would I have thought that there is so much behind what actually defines a character as a hero.

Overall, the unit will work to define the characteristics that qualify a character as a hero. The students will explore the notion of a hero by either reading text or viewing a film. Students will explore what makes a particular character a hero. Students will also develop a deeper understanding of why a character is a hero by following him or her through their journey. They will develop an understanding for the journey that a hero takes as they explore the hero at different stages of the journey. Breaking the journey down into Campbell’s twelve different stages will help the students discover who the character actually is.

Rationale

The definition of a hero is ever-changing. We tend to refer to a hero as the one who saved the day, got his dream girl and everyone lived happily ever after. This always seemed to be the typical ending of our childhood books and early movies that we have experienced. In every film or book there was always the perfect hero and the bad villain. Times have changed from the pre-modern era and so has the way we look at heroes. The term “hero” has become more complex. Things are not always easy for the hero, there is not always, “a happily ever after.” In today’s film, the hero faces a series of trials and tribulations in order to become a hero. The “chosen one” must follow a path. This path will take the hero through a series of changes, in the end, making him a hero.

This unit will look at Joseph Campbell’s definition of a hero and his three part act. Campbell takes this notion on step further and breaks down his three act formula into seventeen stages of a hero’s journey. Campbell’s model of the hero’s journey is from his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). Campbell uses the term “monomyth” which is a reference to a term originally created by James Joyce in Finnegan’s Wake (1939). It refers to the basic elements of a myth that show qualities of legends and heroes. The “monomyth” that Campbell discusses is universal and timeless. Therefore, the hero that Campbell explains does not only apply to one particular myth, but it discusses universal qualities of all heroes. Campbell explains it as follows:

“The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation, initiation, and return.”

The formula of the monomyth is then summarized as follows: (The Three Part Act)

“A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

According to Campbell, the hero’s journey is an internal psychological drama. Campbell says, “Each of us has a hero, a mercenary, a princess within. Each of these pulls and pushes as we journey through the story that is our life. We need all of these energies to pursue life’s adventure.” As the hero journeys the “road of obstacles” and we pursue the obstacles of our everyday lives, the heroic task is to integrate these energies and win the prize – overcome the obstacles we are faced with. This is what gives us our individuality, our sense of place, our sense of

purpose. The Hero's Journey copies the stages of the Rites of Passage. First the "chosen one" faces separation from his own familiar world. Once he/she is separated, he undergoes transformation. At this point all of the known begins to change. Old ways of thinking and acting are altered or destroyed. This happening takes the hero into a new level of awareness, skill and freedom. After successfully meeting the challenges of the initiation, the "chosen one" takes the journey's final step, coming back to their known world. When he/she does, they will find that they have changed dramatically. They will see that they are more confident and alert. They will be more aware of things occurring around them. They will discover that the known community now has a different impression of them. They will be treated differently by the people who once knew them. Their new status opens their world to many privileges and better treatment that they have never experienced before their call to adventure.

Campbell and Murdock both discuss the three part act: departure, initiation, and return. Campbell breaks this down even further and incorporates seventeen different stages that the hero goes through as they move through their journey or quest. This is an explanation from every step of the Hero's Journey.

(Act I) - Departure

The Call to Adventure

The call to adventure is the point in a person's life when they are first given notice that everything is going to change, whether they know it or not. A call to adventure when the ordinary world is no longer endurable and the hero is ripe for change.

Refusal of the Call

Often when the call is given, the future hero refuses to heed it. This may be from a sense of duty or obligation, fear, insecurity, a sense of inadequacy, or any of a range of reasons that work to hold the person in his or her current circumstances. Refusal of the call when the hero is scared, even terrified at first, and avoids the challenge that he/she is faced with.

Supernatural Aid

Once the hero has committed to the quest, consciously or unconsciously, his or her guide and magical helper appears, or becomes known. Meeting a mentor who acknowledges, supports and pushes the hero onward.

The Crossing of the First Threshold

This is the point where the person actually crosses into the field of adventure,

leaving the known limits of his or her world and venturing into an unknown and dangerous realm where the rules and limits are not known. Crossing the first threshold when the hero begins to feel weird, and gets very scared.

The Belly of the Whale

The belly of the whale represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. It is sometimes described as the person's lowest point, but it is actually the point when the person is between or transitioning between worlds and selves. The separation has been made, or is being made, or being fully recognized between the old world and old self and the potential for a new world/self. The experiences that will shape the new world and self will begin shortly, or may be beginning with this experience which is often symbolized by something dark, unknown and frightening. By entering this stage, the person shows their willingness to undergo a metamorphosis, to die to him or herself.

(Act II) - Initiation

The Road of Trials

The road of trials is a series of tests, tasks, or ordeals that the person must undergo to begin the transformation. Often the person fails one or more of these tests, which often occur in threes.

The Meeting with the Goddess

The meeting with the goddess represents the point in the adventure when the person experiences a love that has the power and significance of the all-powerful, all encompassing, unconditional love that a fortunate infant may experience with his or her mother. It is also known as the "hieros gamos", or sacred marriage, the union of opposites, and may take place entirely within the person. In other words, the person begins to see him or herself in a non-dualistic way. This is a very important step in the process and is often represented by the person finding the other person that he or she loves most completely. Although Campbell symbolizes this step as a meeting with a goddess, unconditional love and /or self unification does not have to be represented by a woman.

Woman as the Temptress

At one level, this step is about those temptations that may lead the hero to abandon or stray from his or her quest, which as with the Meeting with the Goddess does not necessarily have to be represented by a woman. For Campbell, however, this step is about the revulsion that the usually male hero may feel about his own fleshy/earthy nature, and the subsequent attachment or projection of that revulsion to women. Woman is a metaphor for the physical or material

temptations of life, since the hero-knight was often tempted by lust from his spiritual journey.

Atonement with the Father

In this step the person must confront and be initiated by whatever holds the ultimate power in his or her life. In many myths and stories this is the father, or a father figure who has life and death power. This is the center point of the journey. All the previous steps have been moving in to this place, all that follow will move out from it. Although this step is most frequently symbolized by an encounter with a male entity, it does not have to be a male; just someone or thing with incredible power. For the transformation to take place, the person as he or she has been must be "killed" so that the new self can come into being. Sometime this killing is literal, and the earthly journey for that character is either over or moves into a different realm.

Apotheosis

To apotheosize is to deify. When someone dies a physical death, or dies to the self to live in spirit, he or she moves beyond the pairs of opposites to a state of divine knowledge, love, compassion and bliss. This is a god-like state; the person is in heaven and beyond all strife. A more mundane way of looking at this step is that it is a period of rest, peace and fulfillment before the hero begins the return.

The Ultimate Boon

The ultimate boon is the achievement of the goal of the quest. It is what the person went on the journey to get. All the previous steps serve to prepare and purify the person for this step, since in many myths the boon is something transcendent like the elixir of life itself, or a plant that supplies immortality, or the Holy Grail.

(Act III) - Return

Refusal of the Return

Why, when all has been achieved, the ambrosia has been drunk, and we have conversed with the gods, why come back to normal life with all its cares and woes?

The Magic Flight

Sometimes the hero must escape with the boon, if it is something that the gods have been jealously guarding. It can be just as adventurous and dangerous returning from the journey as it was to go on it.

Rescue from Without

Just as the hero may need guides and assistants to set out on the quest, often times he or she must have powerful guides and rescuers to bring them back to everyday life, especially if the person has been wounded or weakened by the experience. Or perhaps the person doesn't realize that it is time to return, that they can return, or that others need their boon.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold

The trick in returning is to retain the wisdom gained on the quest, to integrate that wisdom into a human life, and then maybe figure out how to share the wisdom with the rest of the world. This is usually extremely difficult.

Master of the Two Worlds

In myth, this step is usually represented by a transcendental hero like Jesus or Buddha. For a human hero, it may mean achieving a balance between the material and spiritual. The person has become comfortable and competent in both the inner and outer worlds.

Freedom to Live

Mastery leads to freedom from the fear of death, which in turn is the freedom to live. This is sometimes referred to as living in the moment, neither anticipating the future nor regretting the past.

It seemed difficult to break down and explain each of Campbell's twelve stages into smaller components. The best explanation that I have found through researching the topic is by looking at each of the twelve stages through a specific hero's journey. I have found that the best explanation of these twelve stages comes when looking at the stages through Spiderman's journey. The research takes a detailed look at Spiderman in each of these twelve stages, which makes the complicated journey more clear and understandable.

Explanation of Stages One - Five

The main character in Spiderman is Peter Parker. In the movie, Peter is an orphan who is being raised by his Aunt May and Uncle Ben. In the movie, Peter is not your typical high school student. He is viewed as a "nerd" and a "weakling." He doesn't appear to have many friends and the other kids at school are not always very nice to him. On the flip side, his dream girl, Mary Jane is quite the opposite. It is almost as if they are from two opposite sides of the world. Peter is a geek and Mary Jane is beautiful and popular. A change of events takes place in Peter's lonely world when he attends a school field trip at Columbia University Lab. While on the trip, Peter is bitten by a genetically engineered mutant spider. After being bitten, Peter gains super-human powers. In reference to Campbell's stages,

the spider bite gave Peter *supernatural aid* which is in the form of super powers. This new found strength changed Peter's luck. All of a sudden, Mary Jane starts to notice and talk to Peter. Peter is no longer the "weakling"; he is the strong one who is in control. Initially, Peter is not aware that his strength/powers are not the only thing that has changed. His whole life has changed. At first, Peter takes advantage of his new strength and powers.

Campbell's stage, *call to adventure*, begins when Peter has the chance to stop a thief from taking money at the boxing arena. Peter chooses not to stop the thief. At the time, Peter did not realize that the choice he made would dramatically change his life. By not stopping the thief, Peter moves into Campbell's next stage, *refusal of the call*. The thief that Peter chose not to stop from escaping ends up killing his Uncle Ben when he flees the scene. Peter feels guilty for his uncle's death because he didn't do anything to stop it. He is ashamed that he could not even save his Uncle Ben by using his new powers. Peter's dying uncle's last words were, "With great power comes great responsibility." This tragedy replayed in Peter's mind over and over again. When Peter thinks of his uncle's last words, he is accepting his call to adventure. Peter enters into Campbell's next stage, *crossing the first threshold*, when he decides to dress himself in the Spiderman costume and set out to get revenge on his uncle's killer. Now that Peter is fully involved in his calling, he moves into Campbell's next stage, *the belly of the whale*, meaning Peter is now completely emerged in his call to adventure/journey.

Explanation of Stages Six – Eleven

Peter moves into Campbell's sixth stage, *meeting with a goddess*, when he has a conversation with his Aunt May. Many may assume that the meeting with a goddess stage, would be an opportunity to meet with Mary Jane, his dream girl, but it goes deeper than that. When Peter meets with his Aunt May, she has inspiring words for him. She says, "You were meant for great things." These words send Peter instantaneously into Campbell's next stage, *road of trials*. Aunt May's inspiring words send Peter into his new journey of fighting crime and destroying the villains of the streets of New York. While moving through this journey of fighting crime, Peter emerges into Campbell's next stage, *encounter with a temptress*. The temptress in this film is Peter's dream girl, Mary Jane. Mary Jane is considered the temptress because like a temptation, she has the capability of luring Peter away from his journey. Mary Jane is beautiful and in Peter's mind, his utopia. His ultimate goal in life would be to have a life with her. He can't remember a time in his life that he didn't love her, and can't imagine a future without her in it. At this point, Peter is not aware that the life he dreams of with Mary Jane is not in the cards for him. The day the spider bit him, is the day that all changed. Peter must come to realize that his life is not meant to battle

against evil, a life that is dedicated to helping others, not himself. Peter is destined for an independent life, a life without Mary Jane.

Mary Jane serves a two-fold role in Peter's journey. First, she is the temptress, capable of luring Peter away from his Call of Duty. Mary Jane also serves as an inspiration to Peter. Peter continues to strive to do things to impress the love of his life. Although Peter will never be able to have an actual life alone with Mary Jane, she drives him to continue on this journey which he has embarked on.

Mary Jane becomes a central part of Peter's journey once she is captured by the Green Goblin. Peter as Spiderman has no choice but to Battle the Green Goblin in order to save his love, Mary Jane. The Green Goblin is actually Peter's best friend, Harry Osborne's father. At this point of the film, Peter moves into Campbell's next stage, *apotheosis*. Campbell describes apotheosis as the symbolic death and spiritual rebirth. In the specific case of Peter, he is fully emerged in this stage when he battles the Green Goblin. During the battle, Peter/Spiderman is hurt badly and nearly dies. This battle scene puts him in the apotheosis stage of his journey.

Much like the role of Mary Jane, the role of the Green Goblin is two-fold. The Green Goblin is played by Harry Osborne's father; however the Goblin also serves as a symbol of the dark, father-figure of Peter. Peter must overcome the dark image of his father and *atone with his positive father figure*, which is done through his Uncle Ben. In order to achieve this goal, Peter must destroy his negative image, which is portrayed through the Green Goblin. Peter accomplishes this goal during the fight with the Green Goblin. During the fight, the Green Goblin says to Peter, "I have been like a father to you," Spider Man/Peter's response is, "I have a father. His name is Ben Parker." After this exchange of critical words, the Green Goblin is defeated by Spider Man and dies during this scene of the film.

At the end of Spider Man Peter experiences a breakthrough. According to Campbell's stages, this would be known as the *ultimate boon*. At this point in the film, Peter has finally realized the entire spectrum of his calling. He has now realized that although Mary Jane has finally professed her love for him that he can never be with her. Peter's boon is that he has accepted all of his new super powers and all that they entail. Peter now realizes that his cause is to help the world and all the people in it.

Objectives

This unit seeks to have students gain a better knowledge of the characters that are discussed in class. The main objective for this unit is to show students the process that a character must go through to be considered a hero. The students will explore these characters by reading different texts and viewing film. The students will understand how and why specific characters are classified as heroes. The students will develop an understanding of the mythical history of a hero, including Campbell's twelve stages. Students will identify and describe the hero in the text or film. Additionally, students will explain, orally and in writing what characteristics the character possesses that classify them as a hero. Students will follow the hero through his/her journey and describe the changes the hero goes through and the obstacles/challenges that they face as they move through the twelve stages.

Students will be able to follow a character through Campbell's stages and create their own hero's journey through narrative writing. They will trace their heroes through the twelve stages as outlined by Campbell.

Students will write persuasively in an effort to convince their audience whether or not a character, from film or text, can be considered as a hero based on Campbell's process.

Strategies

This unit will begin by having group discussions about some well-known heroes. This will be done through examining photographs, reading short biographies, and researching heroes on the internet. The students will gain a better understanding of what made all of these characters heroes through research. For our purposes in class, we will share different points of view within the class and discuss the characteristics that qualify the character as a hero.

The students will examine the characteristics and the factors that surrounded each of these characters. They will examine what the character did to become a hero. The students will discuss in groups and be able to write about what problems the heroes had to solve, or what obstacles they had to overcome. The students will begin to collect and organize all of this data by working with a partner. Information will be organized by using a graphic organizer.

After a character is identified as a hero by the students, they will have to support their position. They will have to show support to validate their character as a hero. This will be done through persuasive writing. With their partner, they will

work to discuss the characteristics that their character possesses. They will identify the obstacle that was overcome and they will follow their hero throughout their journey. They will explain through their narrative writing how their hero moved through the twelve different stages. They will also discuss how the character/hero changed or developed throughout their journey.

The students will give mini presentations that will explain the character that they chose to identify as a hero. The presentations will reflect the work they did with their partner, specifically discussing the characteristics of their hero, what they accomplished or overcame and how they changed or progressed throughout their journey. In addition to explaining their hero, this presentation will be an opportunity for the students to work on their public speaking skills. The presentation will also help them to be able to show adequate support for the position that they are taking regarding a specific character. This skill will also help them when writing their persuasive essays.

The unit will give the students an opportunity to look deeper into the characters that we read about in class. They will take their understanding a step further by really examining the character. They will put themselves in the character's shoes and move with them throughout their journey. By digging deeper into these characters, my students will have the opportunity to explore characterization in a way that they have never done in the past. They will develop a better understanding for what classifies a character as a hero, and they will develop a greater appreciation for the journey that a hero must take.

Classroom Activities

This unit is designed to take place over a three week span. The unit will be taught as a theme unit, which will allow for flexibility with the amount of time used to teach the unit. The hero theme can be used in several different aspects and could be taught over a much longer span if desired. About one week of instruction time will be spent exploring and investigating each hero featured within the unit.

To start the hero unit students will participate in discussions focusing on heroes of their choice. Students will discuss the heroes in small groups. After the discussions have occurred, students will write narrative essays describing their heroes. The narratives will be shared with the entire class as an author's circle activity.

In addition to the Spider Man example that I outlined, Joseph Campbell's theory can be used in many other stories and films. Students will have an opportunity to read literature and view different films. They will look at both genres, film and

text, from their own perspective and they will make decisions about whether or not the characters that are featured can be viewed as heroes based on Campbell's theory.

When viewing Spiderman, students will follow the main character, Peter Parker through each of Campbell's stages that I have outlined in the rationale. This will serve as the model for the unit. The students will follow Peter Parker through his journey as a whole group with guidance. Students will write persuasively about Peter Parker's status as a hero. They will use evidence from the film to support their position. This same activity can be completed with many other texts and films.

When working with students in special education, repetition is needed and is effective when used in guided practice activities. My plan is for the students to identify heroes throughout different films and texts throughout the course of this unit. As students become more familiar with Campbell's process, the ultimate goal will be for students to independently identify and explain why or why not they view a particular character as a hero.

At the end of week two, students will complete data collection activities that will take place as students work in groups or independently to follow the characters throughout their journeys. Students will record evidence about the character at each point/stage of the journey.

Upon completing the necessary data collection process, students will write in narrative form and in persuasive form about the characters featured in the film or in the text. Narrative pieces will focus on characterization and will explain specific changes that the characters go through throughout their journey. Persuasive pieces will be used to justify or support their position of whether or not a character can be classified as a hero based on Campbell's theory.

The unit will also focus on speaking and presentation skills. Students will deliver mini presentations based on the characters from the film and the text. Once they become more familiar with the process, students will choose a character of their choice. After completion of the data collection stage, students will have an opportunity to deliver a presentation about the character they chose. The presentation will include evidence of why the character is a hero, focusing on Campbell's stages, and the presentation will address why the students chose this particular character for their presentation.

In addition to heroes that accomplish great things, I would like the students to explore everyday heroes who simply make ends meet in their everyday lives. By making this real life connection, I believe that the students will be able to easily

relate to this type of hero and to make a real world connection. This activity will give students an opportunity to reflect on a person who has made an impact in their everyday lives. Students will write in narrative form explaining who this person is and what they have done to qualify them as a hero in their opinion. The narratives will be submitted and shared with the class via a presentation. This activity will expand upon the students' knowledge that a hero is based upon all we have studied using Campbell's theory. However, I believe that this activity is more personal than the others and it will allow the students to really take ownership of the essay that they will be writing.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources (Teacher)

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with A Thousand Faces. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949. This is the main book that influenced my curriculum unit. In this book, Campbell examines the hero and finds specific patterns in many tales. Campbell breaks the process down into twelve stages, which have become the framework for this unit.

Campbell, Joseph. The Power of Myth. New York: Doubleday, 1988. In this book, Campbell shows how humans will inevitably create and live out the themes of mythology.

Indick, William. Movies and the Mind: Theories of the Great Psychoanalysts Applied to Film. McFarland Publishers, Inc., 2004. This book provides the techniques and strategies that are necessary to create film that displays symbolism in film that relates to dreams.

Indick, William. Psychology for Screenwriters: Building Conflict in Your Script. Michael Wiese Productions, 2004. By looking at several films, this book describes theories of personality.

Izod, John. Myth, Mind and the Screen: Understanding the Heroes of Our Time. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. The book Myth, Mind and the Screen is an attempt to apply Jung's theories to the analysis of films.

Jung, Carl G. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology. (In Collected Works, Volume 9), 1960. This collection looks at all of Jung's most important concepts and theories. It focuses on Jung's most important ideas.

Raglan, Fitzroy Richard Somerset Fourth Baron. The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama. Dover Publications, 2003. This book looks at remains the common application of Freudian theory to hero myths. The book parallels ideas discussed by Otto Rank.

Rank, Otto. The Myth of the Birth of the Hero. New York: Random House, 1914. This book examines mythological research and mythological theories. It breaks down the theory into two parts; idea of people and the idea of community.

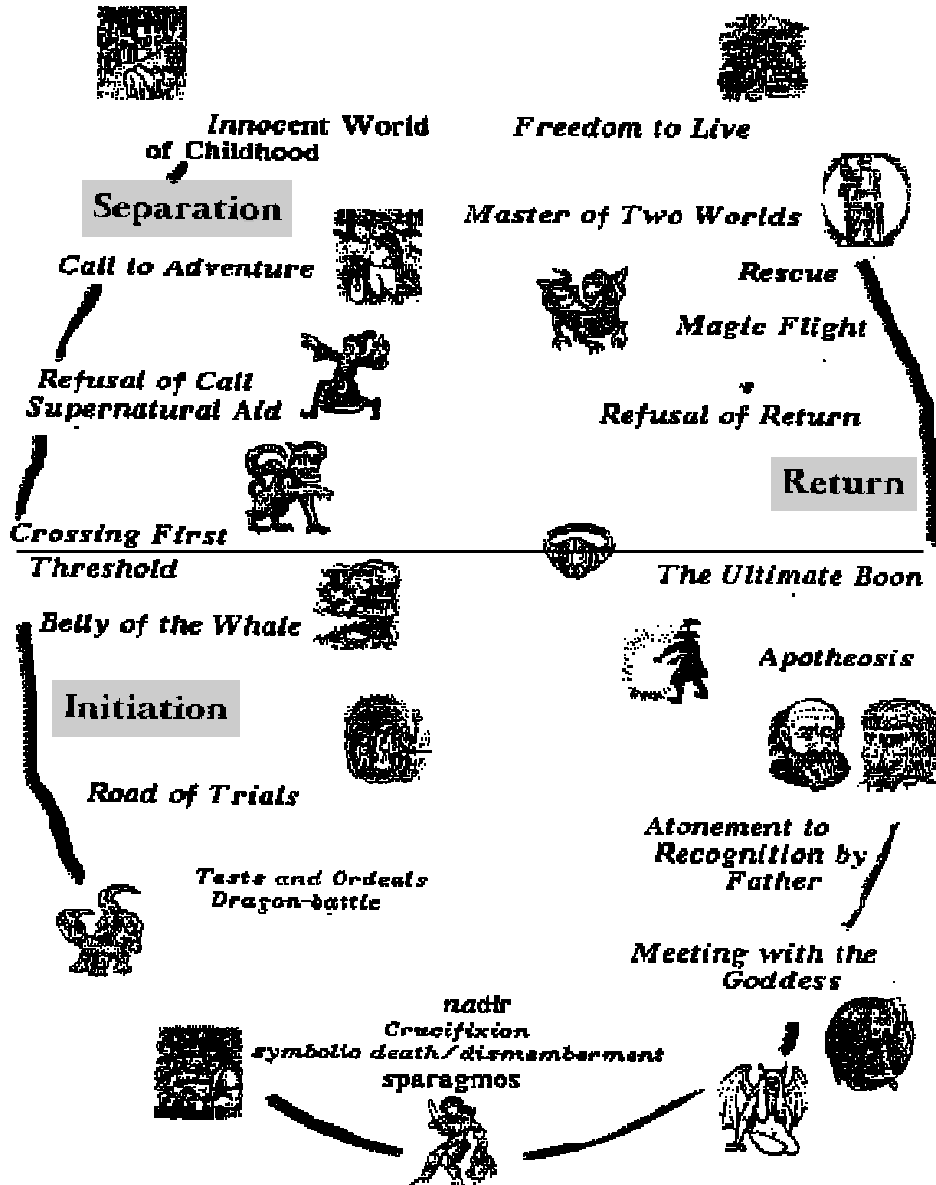
Annotated Bibliography/Resources (Student)

Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. New York: Robert Nemiroff, 1959. The play features the Younger Family. An American family whose members deal with poverty, racism, and painful conflict among themselves as they reach for a better life.

Hinton, S.E. The Outsiders. The book focuses on two gangs of kids from two different worlds; the “Greasers”, the poor kids and the “Socs”, the rich kids.

Lee, Harper. To Kill a Mockingbird. The book follows a three years span in the life of an eight year old girl, Scout Finch, her brother, Jem, and their father, Atticus. The conflict centers around the arrest and eventual trial of a young black man accused of raping a white woman.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY



Communication Standards

C2. Students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.

C3. Students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to solve problems and make decisions.

C4. Students write for a variety of purposes, including narrative, informative, and persuasive.

C6. Students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.

C7. Students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.

C8. Students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of studies that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.