Joseph Campbell

Perhaps the best-known comparative mythologist of this age, Joseph Campbell was born March 26, 1904, in New York, to a middle class, Roman Catholic family. As a child he saw, and was enchanted with, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show; subsequently he developed, while still a youth, a keen interest in Native American cultures and mythologies. As he grew up and as his education continued, this early fascination with culture and myth expanded to include the myths of many cultures worldwide – it could well be said of him that he “followed his bliss,” something he would ultimately exhort his readers and students to do.

His education – he studied at Dartmouth, Columbia, and the Universities of Paris and Munich – was extensive, including linguistic, anthropological and literary studies. He was well-traveled, and had an open and inquisitive mind.

In the course of his studies, he came to feel that there was a strong commonality linking the various myths and legends of disparate lands and cultures. Campbell believed that myth was universal, because it sprang from the common imagination of the collective unconscious.

He went so far as to enumerate the particular themes and features that different myths shared, theorizing, in the case of these heroic myths, the standard storyline which he called the monomyth. In his seminal book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he mapped the universal Hero’s Journey in detail, using as examples myths from many cultures and traditions.

However, since Campbell uses some specialized technical terms that require going back to his examples in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to find out what he’s talking about, I’ve taken the liberty of amending his outline. After all, every story-teller bends the myth to fit his own purposes.

“A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.”

Joseph Campbell

George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars, claims that Campbell’s monomyth was the inspiration for his groundbreaking films. Lucas also believes that Star Wars is such a popular saga because it taps into a timeless story-structure which has existed for thousands of years.

The Hero’s Journey is a great technique for analyzing all kinds of stories—whether they be myths, legends, films, novels, short stories, plays, or even comic books. Educating students about the Hero’s Journey encourages them to think about plot structure, character motivation, and theme. It also leads them to consider what qualities they associate with heroes. Are heroes born or are they made? Are there heroes in real-life or must they be larger-than-life? Who are the heroes in our society?