

Applying Campbell's theory of the hero's journey to Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children

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Introduction

This essay explores the use of the typical conventions of a heroic quest story in the young adult fantasy novel *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs, according to Joseph Campbell's theory of *The Hero's Journey*, or also known as *Monomyth* discussed in his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. In order to determine the extent to which the young adult fantasy novel "*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*" conforms to the most typical conventions of a heroic quest story, my intention is to examine to what extent the most important stages of Joseph Campbell's template comply with the story, and how the classical motifs unite to shape the typical stages of Campbell's *The Heroic Journey* theory in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Additionally, this paper will probe how the major phases, the Call to Adventure, Crossing the Threshold, Tests, Allies and Enemies, the Approach, the Reward and the Return, are evidenced in the story and will investigate what the choice of stages intend, hence how the most meaningful phases are continuously and coherently interpreted in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*. According to the classical structural conventions by Joseph Campbell, it also touches on the archetypal and universal experiences of a hero and examines how explicitly the fictional story matches the classic monomyth. This topic is worth investigating as Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* Theory has not been evidenced nor demonstrated, in a considerable amount of modern young adult fantasy novels. Furthermore, it is particularly interesting to analyse whether the storyline and structural pattern of this popular novel correspond to this well-known theory.

Background to Joseph Campbell and his Theorem

The mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell spent a significant amount of his life reading world literature such as ancient mythology and philosophical works. In his own works on mythology examined the universal functions of myths in different cultures (Segal). What he observed during his readings, are similarities and reappearances of patterns. In most stories he perused, a character is requested to accomplish a task and then returns home to reveal the benefit. Intrigued by ancient mythology, Campbell studied the myth and claims in his theory that most myths reveal an almost identical structure in their pattern format. Hence, he identified the different stages as "The Hero's Journey". He explains all components of this pattern in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, highlighting and explicating the spread of this pattern in many stories worldwide. In the year of 1949, Joseph Campbell first published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is a book of comparative mythology. In his work Campbell discusses his theory of the journey of the archetypal hero in the world of mythologies ("The Hero with a Thousand Faces"). Campbell concluded the following: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (Campbell 23). Applicable to the hero in the young adult novel, he ventures from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder. As stated in his book, Campbell believed that myths have four functions. A mystical function, a sociological function, a cosmological function and a psychological function. Related to the background of his theory, Campbell based a section of his *The Hero's Journey* theory on the

psychological function. This is because a theorist that Campbell considered for his theories was Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who was engaged in psychological aspects of myths. Jung stated that story patterns are also encoded in the brain of human beings, which is why similar patterns are found in mythologies all over the world (Segal). Therefore, Campbell based his theories on ancient mythology as well as on Carl Jung's theories. Referred to his theory of The Hero's Journey and basing it on Jung's psychological ideas, he identified his own theory as an archetype that is related to the psychological function of myths by which the hero incorporates the conscious with the unconscious (Hobbs). Thus, Campbell's labelled monomyth pattern theory signifies that all heroic quest stories and most myths follow this pattern. By applying the Hero's Journey Theory of the American mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell to the fantasy novel, the extent to which the story conforms to the most typical stages of the monomyth can be significantly proven.

Applying Campbell's Theorem – The Call to Adventure and Crossing the Threshold

In Ransom Riggs' young adult fantasy novel, the 16 year old narrator Jacob Portman lives an ordinary life, unaware his extraordinary abilities. Jacob grew up with his grandfather's wondrous tales and stories about people with mesmerizing skills living in a orphanage in a time loop, young world war 2 orphans with supernatural abilities. Each individual child ostensibly has a specific supernatural capability or peculiarity, such as unlimited invisibility. As the narrator becomes older, his faith in the stories grows into doubt. On one day he experiences an unfortunate disturbance, as he finds his

grandfather dying in the woods who was severely bitten by abnormal creatures that the narrator even saw with his bare eyes. The young follows his grandfather's last words and tries to investigate whether the stories correspond to reality and discovers the peculiar children and his own peculiarity. The narrator discovers the peculiar ability that his grandfather had as well. He finds himself in an almost lifeless island and steps into the broken old orphanage where his own grandfather used to live, the place that he will find the truth about himself and everything else. The story draws to an end in which the young narrator fights the eventual enemy, and frees the peculiars from their unconditional fear. The novel involves the young orphans confronting a variety of ethical and moral issues, such as changing the past, the life-changing scarification for others at the risk to oneself, and the costs of survival.

The coverage of The Hero's Journey has been displayed in a very typical manner in the novel. It can be proven that Riggs uses the classical arrangement of a heroic quest story by adjusting it to the typical distinct phases of a hero's odyssey, according to Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey theory. The story of the novel begins with the narrator being in his home until his parents ask him to visit his grandfather, Abraham Portman. Arriving at his residence, his grandfather behaves quite oddly, hysterically instructing Jacob to hide as they're both in trouble. The narrator's grandfather semiconsciously fades in and out of lucidity telling Jacob to move, speaking his last words before he died. This gives a clear indication about what occasion happened that caused the narrator being sent on a

mission. "Go to the island, Yacob. Here it's not safe. Find the bird. On the other side of the old man's grave. Emerson- the letter" (Riggs 37-38). In consonance with The Hero's Journey paradigm, according to Joseph Campbell's theory in his book, this situation embodies the Call To Adventure, the secondary phase of the typical conventions of a heroic quest story theory. This is one of the key stages in Campbell's monomyth template, as it launches the hero's journey and lets the narrator carefully approach their imminent adventure. This specific phase in the young adult novel has the purpose to reveal the hero's greatest fears, through the approachment of leaving their personal limits in order to pursue the forthcoming adventure. The narrator fears and questions the unknown and denies to confront the truth. Demonstrated is this in "Why did you send me here? What was it you needed me to see?" (Riggs 107). The young hero is not aware of his supposed abilities thus far, and may not accept that the call is supposed to be for him.

As the young hero approaches to his adventure, he is absolutely not aware of all the unfamiliarities ahead of him, which is an universal segment in typical heroic quest stories, according to Joseph Campbell. Identical to other various heroic tales, the hero must complete the quest, regardless of his personal willingness. If the hero would completely deny the call to Adventure, the consequences from the supernatural world would eventually unwarily affect him in his ordinary world. Although not yet cognisant, the narrator already fears failure and his lack of skills required to meet the mentor and eventually cross the threshold. Comprising, these factors

conform to the young adult fantasy novel, referring it to Campbell's perspective.

It comes to the point where the narrator in the book celebrates his 16th birthday, on which he receives a literal piece that belonged to his grandfather. A letter directed to his grandfather slipped out, written by Alma LeFay Peregrine, the owner and caretaker of the peculiar children's extraordinary orphanage. It is the representation of how the hero experiences one first sign, that will lead him to the world of the supernatural and cross the threshold from the ordinary to the extraordinary environment. The narrator's name is written at the front of the book, in his grandfather's handwriting. "The selected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. To Jacob Magellan Portman, and the worlds he yet has to discover -" (Riggs 60). The hero in the novel questions himself whether the letter he found was something that he was meant to find. The hero finally crosses the threshold as he discovers and enters the abandoned building, without a clear vision about who or what awaits him. By crossing the threshold the hero experiences an inner impression of danger but nonetheless sees a potential opportunity that may completely change his life.

The hero cannot just enter the supernatural world but rather has to be tested for competency before accessing the new environment. "I spent the months following my grandfather's death cycling through a purgatory of waiting rooms and anonymous offices, analyzed and interviewed." (Riggs 39). It is displayed how the narrator learns to approve the uncertainties ahead of him and the monomythic pattern evolves, as the hero gradually understands the

situation and considers the responsibility caused by the call. " For the first time, my grandfather's last words began to make strange kind of sense. He wanted me to go to the island and find the woman, his old headmistress".

(Riggs 62) Conclusively, according to Joseph Campbell's overall idea of the monomyth evinced in his theory, by crossing the threshold the hero goes through a world of unfamiliar forces, with many forthcoming tests, potential support from others and critical confrontations with the enemy.

Applying Campbell's Theorem – Allies & Enemies and The Approach

In the novel, the young hero instantaneously understands who his alliances are, and identifies who he has to cooperate with in order to face the challenge. This is an essential step for the heroic quest story pattern according to Campbell to continue in the storyline, as it shows the hero who his enemies are and what exactly they are capable of. In the novel, the appearance and strengths of the enemies that are against the hero are revealed, who are the main antagonist and threshold guardians that don't let the hero approach the salvation too quickly in first place. " Wights have no peculiar abilities. But because they can pass for human, they live in servitude to their hollow brethren, acting as scouts and spies and procurers of flesh." (Riggs 260). The hero now has an idea of purpose and consciously prepares himself in order to defend. According to Joseph Campbell's idea evinced in his theory, to survive the hero must overcome and perhaps kill the opponent. However, allies are the reason why the approach might be eased, as the hero constantly receives ideas and inspiration in order to successfully defeat the foe. Additionally, he receives support through his

journey, which is a source of motivation in order to fulfil the task. The allies are the one that the hero can supposedly trust. In his theory, Joseph Campbell states that the hero is aided by the advice of supernatural helpers who he met before his entering the mythical world. With the aid of the allies, it can also be possible that the hero first discovers his superhuman powers. On the other hand, there can be a potential chance that the ally that supported the hero on his journey, will want to receive something in return, and therefore turns his back on the hero at the end of the storyline.

In Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, the allies play a considerable role because in the beginning of the journey they guide the hero to the correct path that will lead him to the required destination. Following the story, the thorough alliances aid the hero in critical situations as they all have the same goal. "We only want to finish what we started. That's all we've ever wanted." (Riggs 325). Because they have a weaker position in terms of supernatural capacities, the hero cannot only rely on their allies but rather uses their ideas, motivation and aid in incoherent emergencies. When the hero's foe was described to him, it is remarkable that the hero has seen the abnormal creatures in his dreams before. According to Joseph Campbell's perspective it is described that the hero's journey includes many psychological influences on the hero personally, as the hero incorporates the conscious with the unconscious and primarily cannot differentiate reality and imagination, until the task and his extraordinary abilities have been fully clarified to him, either by the mentor or allies (Vogler). It is evidenced towards the end of the storyline, in which the hero concludes how much the

given task has clarified and eventually influenced him. "I used to dream about escaping my ordinary life, but my life was never ordinary. I had simply failed to notice how extraordinary it was." (Riggs 351).

According to Joseph Campbell's theory another major stage of the hero's journey is the approach, in which the hero and his allies prepare for and confront a major challenge and later face the central ordeal. A common challenge before the narrator approaches to this important confrontation, is the occurrence of an intricate dilemma whether the hero can actually fulfill the expectations. In the novel it is illustrated what mental dilemmas and burdens the narrating hero must face by approaching the journey. "You're weak. Grandpa Portman knew you couldn't handle it." (Riggs 271).

Associated with the classical structure, the hero and his allies now review and plan in order to launch the attack against the initial opponent. According to Campbell's Theory, there can be very courageous hero that make an immediate Approach and bypass their inner fear. Because the hero has survived the entry into the supernatural world, he may have already overcome his mental burdens that were withholding him to take an approach. In the novel, the approach to face the foe starts with the expeditionary team of allies being assembled. The group in the young adult novel has been formed with several peculiar children with a variety of supernatural abilities who created a specific plan when they will have to confront the foe. "An expeditionary team was assembled. We were going to carry out Enoch's plan." (Riggs 284). In many heroic quest stories, the hero's allies experience a bigger fear than the hero himself. Therefore, the hero has

the responsibility to either calm or motivate his allies so they do not cause any further obstacles while approaching the enemy. That the hero has to support his allies in order for them to support him is indicated. In order to approach successfully, the hero tries to support his alliances. "What if we see a wight?" "Run like the devil's after you" (Riggs 287). It is considerable that the peculiar children are very young, mostly under the age of 10, and have to assist the hero on his journey. When the foe reached the island's abandoned building, the hero in the novel undergoes one of the most difficult negotiations of his odyssey. He hasn't seen the enemy. However, because of the carefully arranged plans, the hero apprehends that there is a high chance that the foe can be defeated. What applies to a significant number of heroic quest stories is that the carefully planned, prior preparations are a tool for the hero to approach his attack and assure that no mistakes are made during the approach.

Applying Campbell's Theorem – The Reward and the Return

The foremost most typical convention according to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* monomyth template is the reward, in which the hero wins the treasure received by facing his biggest fear. After the hero has defeated the foe, he is primarily rewarded by his allies. This includes rejoicing and eventually handing a gift, that could aid the hero in need. In Riggs's novel, the peculiar subsequently apologise for any obstacles that they had done or may have caused. "I'm sorry I called you a traitor. I'm glad you're not dead." (Riggs 308). Despite these personal rewards and received apologies, the hero has also been rewarded by the relief of further torture from any enemy.

By the end of the heroic quest story the hero should have escaped the chase and defeated the foe that threatened everyone in the supernatural world. In the novel, the young hero successfully defeats the opponent and is rewarded. "I had, just for a moment, a clear shot." (Riggs 327) "The moment Golan disappeared from view, he was forgotten." (Riggs 328), Hence, this stage of the novel conforms to the theory of Joseph Campbell. The return of the hero to the ordinary world will not require supernatural activity, but he may need the new skills he made. According to Campbell's Theory in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the person takes off on an adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning (Campbell). The hero is expected to return to his ordinary home living in peace after enjoying glory as he has a family waiting for him in the ordinary world. After appreciating the reward, the hero views his potential abilities and the alternate world as something he will never be able to get back to. "I realized leaving wouldn't be like I had imagined, like casting off a weight." (Riggs 352). Followed by the reward, the hero is nearing the final return, back to his ordinary world. The hero can feel sorrow when bidding goodbye to his allies that accompanied him throughout his entire journey, however he does know that he must return to his ordinary world as his mission has been completed. Additionally, the hero does not know whether he will be able to return to the supernatural one day. "When will you be back?" "I don't know." (Riggs 321) When returning to his ordinary world, the narrator has to clarify to his father what he has undergone and needs to explain himself in order to not get misunderstood by his fellows in the ordinary life. "Your friends are

imaginary, son! Go away.” (Riggs 344). Regarding Campbell’s theorem, the hero doesn’t fully describe his venture and describes every detail, as the human beings from his ordinary world wouldn’t be capable to understand and follow his story. The hero in the young adult novel did not experience a resurrection, as he didn’t get severely harmed or killed by the foe. However, the narrator returns with pictures of the island which he aims to later use as evidence for his courageous venture. This corresponds to the final phase of the hero’s journey according to Joseph Campbell’s perspective in his theory. In his theory, Campbell also states that the return is the point where the writer resolves subplots and answers most questions raised in the story (Campbell). Following this overpass, he undergoes a transfer from the supernatural world to the ordinary world.

Conclusion

While investigating the research question: To what extent does the young adult fantasy novel “ Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children” conform to the most typical conventions of a heroic quest story?, it can be evidenced that the novel complies with Joseph Campbell’s Theory of The Hero’s Journey in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, as distinctly corresponds to the major stages the Call to Adventure, Crossing the Threshold, Tests, Allies and Enemies, the Approach, the Reward and the Return. The young narrator undergoes the archetypal mythological experiences discussed in Campbell’s Theory and therefore matches the classical monomyth template, according to the theory and perspective of the mythologist. As claimed in his theories in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, the theory and theme of the monomyth

occurs in stories at all times, is always varied but yet the structure remains the same (Campbell). In addition, Campbell also states that character development is a key feature in heroic quest stories. The typical hero not only experiences the generic stages of Campbell's The Hero's Journey, but also evolves his personality to a more courageous individual with fewer personal boundaries as the heroic quest concludes. During this investigation, a variety of demonstrations were found in the young adult novel that evince the development of the heroic character. Hence, the classical motifs of the monomyth is reflected in the young adult novel by Ransom Riggs as its storyline progresses to a shape that thoroughly corresponds to the typical stages of Campbell's The Hero's Journey theory in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.