

The Heroic Cycle in *Star Wars*

Most people don't consider a "boring" epic poem from ancient Greece in the same category as a modern science fiction adventure like *Star Wars*, but those stories actually have a lot in common. Joseph Campbell's heroic cycle is a series of steps that all epic heroes go through, and Luke Skywalker is no exception. Created by George Lucas in the late 1970s, *Star Wars* probably needs no introduction to modern audiences: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." *Star Wars* illustrates all the elements of the heroic cycle.

The first stage of the heroic cycle is the call to adventure. Something draws the hero out of his ordinary world. The murder of his aunt and uncle draws Luke Skywalker, the hero of *Star Wars* into his epic adventure. Luke has secretly been looking for a reason to leave his home planet, but when he returns to find the house burned and the bodies of his aunt and uncle charred by invading imperial forces, there is nothing tethering him to the place he has always called home. His adventure into that "galaxy far far away" begins, and as it indicates in Joseph Campbell's Heroic Cycle, the hero is pulled from his everyday environment.

After the call to adventure, heroes go through an initiation, where they learn who their friends and enemies are. Obi-Wan Kenobi becomes Luke Skywalker's supernatural helper, mentor, and advisor. Although he isn't a god, Obi-Wan does have a magical power called the Force, which he uses to protect Luke. When the Imperial forces are searching for rebels like Luke, Obi-Wan tells them, with a magical wave of his hand, "These aren't the droids you're looking for," and the befuddled soldiers leave them alone. Luke has other helpers and protectors as well. The droids C3PO and R2D2, for example, join him on his adventure, where he ultimately meets up with Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Chewbacca, and together they battle the forces of evil in the galaxy. During this initiation stage, heroes not only discover their friends but also their enemies. Luke Skywalker's enemy (and, spoiler alert, father) is Darth Vader, who wants to turn Luke to the Dark Side. It is during his travels that Luke begins to train with what will become his special talisman: a light saber, the weapon of the Jedi. In all these ways, Luke's adventure mimics the aspects of the initiation, as it is defined by Joseph Campbell.

Another stage of the heroic cycle is the transformation, where the hero discards his old self and takes on a new role. In the first *Star Wars* trilogy, Luke must transform himself into a Jedi, undergoing training with Yoda in order to join the knighthood of those who represent the good side of the Force against "the dark side." The old Jedi master reminds Luke, "You must let go of your fear". It is by becoming a Jedi that Luke is finally able to face Darth Vader, which he does at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* and again at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. Part of the point of the Heroic Cycle, according to Campbell, is that the hero become a better person in the process.

The final stage in the Heroic Cycle is the hero's return, which is where the hero returns home and often receives some reward. In Luke's case, he never actually does return to his home planet of Tatooine, but he is accepted into the league of warriors (including Princess Leia) who will battle the evil Empire (and Darth Vader) for years and movies to come. At the end of the first *Star Wars* film, there is even an awards ceremony where Luke, Han, and Chewbacca are given medals for their heroism as the movie ends. They have been rewarded, but their adventures are far from over because there are many movies yet to come. The epic continues!

Elements of the heroic cycle are apparent in both *The Odyssey* and *Star Wars*. Luke and Odysseus have a call to adventure, an initiation, and a transformation before they achieve their legendary status. So the next time you complain about one of those boring old poems in English, just remember that they often share the same story pattern with your favorite epic movies.

Works Cited

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