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There and Back Again: The Structure of *The Lord of the Rings* as Monomyth

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The present article is aimed at investigating basic structural principles of the literary fantasy genre in connection with the archetypal structures, in particular the quest or the hero's journey, thus establishing the connections between the genre and the concept of the traditional hero myth. The paper gives an insight into the concept of hero myth or monomyth as defined by Joseph Campbell and traces its elements in the famous saga *The Lord of the Rings* by the so-called father of modern fantasy John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

Joseph Campbell, a prolific American scientist of comparative mythology was one of the first to draw parallels between certain structures in myths, fairytales and other types of the story. The basic formula of these structures has been outlined in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* where he proposed the so-called theory of the monomyth (Campbell 1973: 337), a synthesis of recurrent motifs in heroic quests of varying mythological traditions. Campbell insists that most traditional stories contain the same underlying pattern of the hero's quest or journey that he outlines as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of 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" (ib. 30). This process, as Campbell suggests, can also be viewed as a magnified rite of passage, a journey of enlightenment, during which the individual breaks through the boundaries of self to discover his unique contribution to the world. This opinion has also been echoed

by the famous Rumanian researcher Mircea Eliade who divides this paradigm into the familiar three-fold structure of departure, initiation and return and connects it to a broad variety of symbolic actions and objects.

The archetypal structure of the mythological hero's adventure is the path also most fantasy writers seem to take, starting from the initiators such as J. R. R. Tolkien. It can even be stated that the whole genre of literary fantasy relies heavily on these archetypal foundations. As put by the fantasy writer and theoretician Ursula le Guin: "Fantasy is not antirational, but para-rational; not realistic but surrealistic. In Freud's terminology, it employs primary not secondary process thinking. It employs archetypes which, as Jung warned us, are dangerous things. (..) A fantasy is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is." (Le Guin 1979: 84) As Le Guin reminds, fantasy writers are not the only ones to note the power of magical stories. Jungian psychologists regard the fairy tale quest as reader's symbolic inward journey into one's soul evoked by the reading experience.

In this paper we will investigate in particular *The Lord of the Rings*, the book traditionally considered to mark the birth of the modern fantasy genre. Although Tolkien was not the first to compose a piece of fiction featuring an imaginary world full of fantastic beings and heroic adventures, but he was definitely one of the first to turn the literary form concerned with the strange and the magical into a vehicle for exploring a person's spiritual world and restoring many forgotten mythical concepts to life. In the following paragraphs we will discuss the structure of the monomyth as corresponding to the plot of the novel.

The monomyth or the cycle of the hero's initiation consists of certain formulaic parts. The initial premise reveals "a stage when order has been disturbed and the equilibrium of earlier times must be re-established (...) a challenge must typically be overcome, or some dire threat looms over the land. The structure dictates that elements of chaos must be dissolved or unified in order to regain a state of balance." (Abrahamsen: 2003) Against this background the figure of the hero is presented. The hero's childhood and/or youth is spent in a closed community, in the relatively blessed state of ignorance

regarding his/her chosen status as well as the wide world outside his/her village. This state is suddenly interrupted by a messenger form the outside who reveals a secret, foretells a destiny and invites the hero to leave the comfortable existence and pursue an adventurous quest in the perilous realms. The figure of the messenger, according to the observations of Campbell, usually is mystic, even frightening, for it represents the instinctive, yet unknown levels of the individual's existence (Campbell 1973: 53). The invitation is usually followed by one or several refusals and, finally, agreement, yet it cannot be denied that some heroes seem to be dragged on this path against their will.

The hero then sets on a quest in order to gain or regain something important for the society, most commonly a talismanic object. During the quest the individual must be completely set apart from the familiar world. On this path he is accompanied by helpers – first and foremost an old companion with extensive knowledge and supernatural powers, often represented by a wizard, smith, shepherd or hermit who fulfills the function of the mythical soul's companion on its way to afterworld (ib. 72). The hero is given a talismanic object and crosses one or several thresholds that are guarded by various powers. After crossing the threshold there is no looking back.

The initial part of *Lord of the Ring* presents the typical state of disbalance – the parallel world Middle-Earth is under the constantly growing power of darkness, only in some lonely parts is the illusion of safety preserved. For defeating the shadow an unlikely hero is chosen – a hobbit. Here it must be reminded that initially the archetypal hero more frequently than not appears to have nothing heroic about him, he is "the other": orphan, foundling or an adoptee, seemingly weak and insignificant, to a certain extent representing the holy fool who fearlessly goes where angels dare not tread. This type of the hero in Tolkien's work is embodied in the double character: the "other", orphaned child Frodo and the blessed simpleton Sam. It is hardly a coincidence that the adventures begin as Frodo comes of age (according to Shire standards), although the real quest begins years later. This fact marks the beginning of the initiation rite as a transfer to a new level of consciousness. Frodo thinks his calling a mistake, although deep down is aware of his task as being appointed

solely to him. The hero must formally commit to the task, as Frodo does, agreeing to be the Ring-bearer. Similarly the call is answered by two parallel heroes of the story – the king figure Aragorn and the priest figure Gandalf, although their plotlines have been subjected to Frodo's quest.

Every time when a new stage of the quest begins, the travellers find themselves faced with the described threshold situation and its guardians. According to Campbell, these guardians (Old Man Willow, for example) signal that the temporary horizons have been reached and a new way into darkness and danger opens. (ib. 77) The guardians are also benevolent – such as the archetypal parent figures, seasonal forest spirits Tom Bombadil and Goldberry who offer the childlike hero a safe but non-resident refuge. The hero must not stay under the parents' wing, though, because the true aim of his quest is growing up. The parent figures also remind of the "divine couple" – Adam and Eve archetypes that denote the unfallen state from which the hero must progress forward, into the fall and redemption. This couple is "earthly" and is followed by another, "heavenly" cosmic parent couple – Galadriel and Celeborn later on, who give the hero another refuge, also temporary.

During the second stage of the monomyth the hero must wander on and on, regularly passing through regions that denote subconsciousness, even death – forests and underground. Hero continues to face thresholds and their guardians that are becoming less and less friendly – the Fellowship of the Ring passes through the mines of Moria, gets attacked by wolves and demons. The most important among guardian figures is the female character (goddess or anima) – in Tolkien's case, elf queen Galadriel who tempts each traveller and thus is the most dangerous guardian in accordance of the ambivalence that the mythical thought attributes to woman. The helper figures gradually disappear, so that the hero can undergo the further tribulations without divine support – so Gandalf must die and leave hero to struggle on. This implies an important aspect in the process of initiation – the only way to attain one's true power is to remain without outer help.

The hero then must undergo a series of various tests such as abduction and tracking, fight with the brother or a friend, even the

hero's own father (Мелетинский 1994: 7–8), fight with the dragon – physical monster or one's own inner fears and doubts, and, finally, ritual death or dismemberment. (Campbell 1973: 245) This final desperate situation that often takes place in underground cave or other closed space has been termed by Campbell the "belly of the whale" (an allusion to the Bible story about Jonah) (ib. 90–91). The descent into this space is the process of going down into the depths of one's own soul, return into mother's womb as self-destruction. As put by researcher G. F. Elwood, "the whole adventure, from the viewpoint of the ordinary folks at home, is a death: passing the boundaries, the thresholds, of the known, is equivalent to being swallowed up by a darkness or by a monster. The image of (...) night, cave, the sea or a monster (...) are expressions of a return to the womb – but not for security. The experience necessitates self-annihilation, with all its terrors, for the purpose of rebirth. All three of our heroes have terrifying underground experiences (Gandalf in Moria, Frodo in Shelob's Lair, Aragorn in the Paths of Dead), two of them in confrontation with monsters. When the deepest horror has been faced, there is no longer anything to fear. Sometimes the hero will even defy death." (Elwood 1970: 95–96) The tests are always dual in nature, proving both hero's physical courage and spiritual maturity. While undergoing trials, the hero gains supernatural experience, even epiphany that allows him to view the world in a different light as well as master and synthesize the opposites of the world in his inner being – in C. G. Jung's terminology, to reach his Self. Tolkien's heroes Frodo and Sam must go down in the "belly of the whale" similarly to many mythological heroes. Frodo experiences passing through death and rebirth several times – he wanders away in the shadow world after being stabbed by the Black Rider's dagger, following his own Shadow image – Gollum – through Dead Marshes into the lair of the monster – giant spider Shelb, the anti-goddess figure. Frodo's crises are more physical, while Sam suffers mostly emotionally, saving his master from captivity and torture.

The final trial – decisive conflict with the antagonist sets the quest on the knife-edge. The hero must face and conquer his own Shadow, his darkest enemy, lest it conquers him, though both are in fact one

being (Campbell 1973: 108). The hero must omit all that he still keeps – pride and prejudice, fear, health and even life; so Frodo throws away all his belongings and weapons, in the last moment he leaves even his trusted companion Sam. Each of the heroes in this final stage meets the archenemy that Joseph Campbell considers to be the image of the father, dark animus, authority to be destroyed – Balrog for Gandalf, Denethor for Aragorn, Sauron for Frodo. Frodo is the only one to give up, but his former deeds save him from an evil end – in his stead a shadow double (Gollum) is sacrificed, and the world balance is preserved. Campbell defines the antagonist as a shadow that must dissolve when the light is seen, illusion that disappears in contact with reality, when the hero reaches epiphany. (Ib. 294)

The final stage of the monomyth involves the hero's triumph having reached the double solution – saving the world is equaled to reaching the new level in his own consciousness. However, the cycle can only be fulfilled by return into the point of departure, so each of the three heroes returns where he belongs. The hero must understand that the quest has taken him not to other worlds, but to other aspects of the same familiar reality, heroic Gondor is the same lowbrow Shire. Campbell states that the basic sense of the hero's journey is hidden in revealing the forgotten aspects of everyday life (ib. 217). So the hero returns home bringing new spiritual knowledge, but is disappointingly often met with incomprehension, even contempt, for the society might not be ready for changes. In this case the hero can die or return to the otherworld once more. If the attitude is positive, the hero is glorified. As stated by G. F. Elwood, "The hero's victory, his rebirth is an occasion of splendor – glory for himself, new life for the rest of the world (...) or the boon of new life may be only slowly accepted by a suspicious populace, who cannot see how death can be a source of life, who are too preoccupied with the present and finite to be really interested in the impossible tale of the adventurer. (...) In The Lord of the Rings we see both." (Elwood 1970: 97) Frodo's return to Shire does not bring triumph, but new battles and restorations. At the same time the offspring of the world tree is being planted simultaneously in Gondor and Shire, marriages are celebrated in both countries, so we know that the cosmic order has

been renewed, land healed, justice regained, opposites joined – Aragorn marries elf princess Arwen, uniting human and Elf, mortal and immortal beings. On the other hand, Frodo cannot stay in Middle-Earth and enjoy the plenitude, he is bound to leave for good. Campbell states that, as monomyth reaches its culmination, the cycle must pass on to other stage, because remaining in the state of perfection can cause today's hero become tomorrow's tyrant, who refuses the change – so hero must give up what has been obtained (Campbell 1973: 353) . Thus it becomes clear why Frodo cannot return to the blessed ignorance, cannot heal his wounds otherwise than by going overseas to the land of immortality, i.e., by dying and completing the cycle.

This very brief overview allows us to come to several conclusions. First, it is undeniable that *The Lord of the Rings* is structured according to the basic principles of the monomyth as defined by Campbell, although it is hard to state whether deliberately so. Second, as it has been agreed upon that Tolkien's work served as a model for majority of the later fantasy works, they obviously have inherited also the archetypal structure. So, as the worldview characteristic to fantasy inevitably contains structure of myth, it is possible to conclude, finally, that modern fantasy functions as one of the possible equivalents of myth in today's literary culture, since it serves the same purpose as myths served in classical times: to explore the structures of the soul.

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