

Mythmaking in Star Wars IV

Monomyth Structure, Part I

Matthew Grau

Stages of the Monomyth

In our last article, we completed our exploration of a key element of mythmaking – the use of archetypes. Here we will begin to explore the stages of the monomyth, so that you can use this structure to build your own epic and enduring stories.

At the heart of the monomyth is the structure of the story. Each Hero, regardless of who he is and the setting in which he lives, follows a similar path. This structure has existed in mythology for generations and it speaks to us. It resonates with the human condition and what it takes to truly overcome and persevere. When we experience a story that utilizes the structure of the monomyth, it occurs to us as meaningful and epic. We identify with the Heroes and join them on what is most like the adventure of a lifetime.

The monomyth certainly resonates in *Star Wars*. How else could a 1970's medium-budget space opera have become such a household name (aside from the ground-breaking effects)? George Lucas studied the monomyth and used it to form his story. By adding the elements of the monomyth to his space opera, the story of *Star Wars* took on an eternal characters, speaking to the audience on a deep level. Even people who had no love for "sci-fi" were able to watch *Star Wars*, enjoy it, and be touched by it.

In this article, we will explore the stages of the monomyth as they apply to the first half of a story, encompassing the first act and first-half of the second act. The important thing to keep in mind is to not take the titles of the stages too literally – instead, study the spirit of what they represent. When you are creating your Star Wars roleplaying story, knowing how to broadly implement these stages will allow you to use the monomyth over and over again, with it never appearing the same way twice.

Act I

The purpose of Act I is to set the stage for the real action of the story. During Act I, you should answer the where (setting), the who (main Characters), and the what (plot) of your story, as well as have introduced the beginnings of any subplots. You should also have introduced the antagonists' main goal, or at least evidence of it. At the end of the Act, something moves the Hero into the real meat of the story.

1. The Call to Adventure

Every story starts in the ordinary world of the Hero. He is living his life, doing the everyday sorts of things he does everyday. It is important to take a moment to experience the world of the Hero as it occurs to him in his routine. This makes the special world of the story, into which he will soon be venturing, that much more impactful.

However, something intrudes on the Hero's ordinary world. Whatever it is, it is something that he cannot ignore, something that intrudes into his life, and speaks to him. This is the Call to Adventure, a thing or event that draws the Hero onto the path of the story.

For example, Luke Skywalker is a simple farm boy, born and raised on Tatooine. His everyday life involves little excitement, aside from racing and shooting wildlife. However, one day his uncle Ben Lars picks up new droids for the farm. As part of his ordinary world, Luke is sent to clean them and get them ready for use. The cleaning process sets off a holographic transmission inside the little droid R2-D2 – a princess calling for help, imploring a man with a name similar to a hermit Luke knows. Luke is compelled by the damsel in distress and now wants to find "Ben" Kenobi. This pushes him onto the path of the greater adventure that is *A New Hope*.

Ben Kenobi was once a young padawan known as Obi-Wan Kenobi. His ordinary world as a boy was a more exciting place than Luke's, traveling the galaxy as the apprentice of Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn. One day, he is asked to go with his master to enter into negotiations with the Trade Federation, who has implemented a trade blockade on the planet of Naboo. This is all routine for young Obi-Wan. However, shortly after he and his master arrive, the Trade Federation attempts to assassinate them. This one moment starts a chain reaction in which Obi-Wan is called into the greater adventure that is *The Phantom Menace*.

Thousands of years before either Skywalker or Kenobi were born, the amnesiac Revan believes himself to be a part of the Galactic Republic. Fighting against the Sith is part of his everyday world. However, the Sith attack the Endar Spire, forcing Revan to flee the ship with Carth Onasi. This one event changes everything for Revan, who

starts on the path of *Knights of the Old Republic* while marooned on the planet Taris.

In each of these cases, you can see that something enters the Hero's normal life which he cannot deny. In *Star Wars*, that thing is most often a matter of life and death.

2. Refusal of the Call

Heroes don't just leap onto the path of adventure without some trepidation. After all, they are meant to be characters with which we can empathize, and any sane person would give pause when facing what the Heroes most definitely will face. In the monomyth, this moment is called the Refusal of the Call.

Oftentimes, the Hero simply feels that what is ahead is out of his league. He feels that he is not up to the challenge, that such things are better left to more qualified people. It could also be that he is afraid of the consequences, which are often death or worse. However, the refusal doesn't have to be an outright retreat from the call. It can sometimes simply be the Hero's acknowledgement that what is ahead is dangerous, as well as possibly scary or beyond him. It just has to be a moment where the magnitude of what the Hero is about to embark on weighs on him.

The thing about the Refusal of the Call is that when the Hero looks back on his ordinary world, what he has already experienced makes it feel banal. The excitement about what has already happened makes his old life seem somehow insubstantial – something that often drives him forward on the path of the story.

When Ben asks Luke to come with him to Alderaan, the boy balks. He uses the excuse that he has to stay and help his uncle, when really the world Ben is proposing is much too big for the simple farm boy.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon are not interested in getting into the politics of the blockade or the war the Trade Federation is threatening. They just want to survive Naboo, rescue the captive Queen Amidala, and get back to Coruscant. The pair refuses to get drawn in any more than that.

Revan only wants to rescue the captive Jedi Bastila Shan and get off of Taris. His only desire is to survive and get back to the Republic.

3. Supernatural Aid

Before the Hero sets out on the path of the story, he is usually counseled by a mentor. This character shows up at exactly the right time to give the Hero an object or special advice that is designed to prepare him for the road ahead. Whatever it is that the mentor gives him, it is crucial for the Hero's ultimate success – though at the time it may not make much sense.

Luke Skywalker unknowingly seeks his mentor, Ben Kenobi. Luke's only intention is to bring Ben his droids and find out what R2-D2's mysterious message is about. However, once the two are together, Ben enchants Luke with stories of the Jedi Knights, gives the boy his father's lightsaber, and gives him his first lessons in the Force. As we know, this pivotal point is exactly what Luke needs to survive what lays in store for him.

Obi-Wan's aid is less dramatic. His mentor, Qui-Gon Jinn travels with him and the padawan spends much time checking in with his master for guidance. It is, however, Qui-Gon's teachings that allow him to survive the rocky road of *The Phantom Menace*.

Once Revan escaped from Taris, he was brought to Dantooine. The Jedi enclave there took Revan in, teaching him in the ways of the Force (or reawakening the teachings). The lessons that Revan learned from the enclave are the only thing that could have prepared him for his ultimate confrontation with Darth Malak.

You'll notice that the Refusal of the Call and Supernatural Aid may not always occur one after the other. These two points can be used flexibly in your story – sometimes they are reversed.

4. The Crossing of the First Threshold

Eventually, the Hero is ready (or is forced) to go beyond his ordinary world into the special world of the story. This moment is often marked and protected by a threshold guardian, who must be overcome in order for the Hero to be committed to and worthy of the adventure ahead. Overcoming the threshold guardian doesn't always need to be violent, but often is in *Star Wars*.

Luke, having lost everything he's known, must still pass through the hornet's nest that is the seedier side of Mos Eisley and survive Stormtrooper attack to leave the planet. By proving that he can survive and handle himself in the face of imminent danger, Luke is worthy of joining Ben on his adventure.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon don't just get to leave Naboo with ease. They are forced to infiltrate the city and fight their way past the forces of the invading Trade Federation. By facing an army, rescuing the Queen Amidala, and surviving, Obi-Wan proves that he is ready for the coming of the Sith.

Revan must fight against ancient Rakatan war droids in the crypt on Dantooine. By destroying these deadly

droids, he proves that he is strong enough to learn the secret of the Star Maps – and ultimately the one to walk the path of destroying the Star Forge.

5. *Belly of the Whale*

Just as Jonah was transformed by surviving his ordeal with the whale, the Hero is transformed into something new by crossing the first threshold. The Hero enters the special world of the story changed.

Luke takes his first steps towards becoming a Jedi and a man of action.

Obi-Wan is transformed into a man worthy of being a Jedi Knight.

Revan becomes a Jedi Knight, growing from being a lost amnesiac (and former Sith Lord).

Act II (Part)

Things really start to happen in the first half of Act II. The Hero begins to uncover pieces of the puzzle (or come closer to the ultimate goal by steps) by overcoming hurdles one at a time. Every step along the way builds the drama of the story.

6. *The Road of Trials*

The Hero has now entered the special world of the story and things start to heat up. Nothing is going to be easy from here on out. He must now face a series of obstacles and challenges. While each has consequences, they also hold rewards – they amplify his consciousness and awareness of the greater world and cause him to grow in ability in order to more effectively face what lies ahead.

Luke Skywalker, after his escape from Tatooine, is trained by Obi-Wan in the ways of the Force and lightsaber combat. Hurdle one is learning new skills while mastering himself. As that is happening, they travel to Alderaan, as directed by Princess Leia. Hurdle two is getting there. He arrives to find the planet destroyed and is promptly captured by the Empire. Hurdle three is survival and escape. Then, he discovers that Princess Leia is being held captive on the Death Star. Hurdle four is pushing deep into the lion's den. Finally, he and his companions must stage a daring escape now that enemy knows they are there. Hurdle five, escape and survive again.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon must take their damaged ship to Tatooine, deal with unfriendly locals who will not accept their currency, help the young Anakin Skywalker win the pod races, repair their ship, and ultimately face the new threat of the Sith through Darth Maul.

Revan's journey is long and arduous. He must endure the trials of three planets before things really heat up, including the hostile sand people of Tatooine, the corporate greed and oppression of the Czerka Corporation on Kashyyyk, and the litigious détente of Republic and Sith on Manaan. Each planet functions as its own Road of Trials, each building to a conclusion that catapults Revan on the path to the next.

As you can see, the obstacles seem to ratchet up in intensity with every success. These challenges are designed to build towards the Midpoint – the middle of the movie, where everything changes.

Subplots

As the Hero journeys into the special world of the story, smaller personal plots begin to grow. These subplots highlight the human element of the story, taking focus away from the grand plot at hand to show that those involved are just people. These humanizing elements are important and allow us to identify more fully with the Heroes.

In *A New Hope*, Luke and Ben's personal relationship as apprentice and master grows. In *The Phantom Menace*, the rescue and training of young Anakin Skywalker become an important element. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the love affair between Leia and Han blossoms. In *Knights of the Old Republic*, Revan's memories begin to return as visions, driving him towards the revelation of his identity and the cover up that went with it.

7. *Midpoint*

Halfway through such a tale, something always happens to change things so that the second half is fundamentally different from the first. It is an exciting change, where we discover that the story wasn't exactly what we thought it was and that the drama is even more than we expected. It is to this point that the Road of Trials builds. Sometimes the Midpoint is a false relief and sometimes it brings further darkness to the story.

Luke Skywalker and his companions finally believe that they have escaped Darth Vader and the Death Star. It is false comfort, however, as the Empire planted a homing beacon on the Millennium Falcon and is not tracking them to a primary rebel base.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon discover that the Trade Federation blockade is hardly the real threat. The Sith have

returned to the galaxy.

Revan, while on his travels, discovers that the Sith have destroyed the Jedi enclave on Dantooine, the birthplace of the new Revan. Their light has been extinguished from the galaxy.

Discuss this article on the [Forums](#)

©1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.