The Idea of the Hero

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LORD Byron, in his epic poem, “Don Juan” begins with the words:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one:

Byron was not alone in his desire for a hero. The need for heroes exists in every society and goes back as far as written records. A study of the idea of the hero can provide an excellent point of liaison between the cultural heritage and the real world of the secondary student. This is one of the recurring aspects of human existence which is manifested today in no different a pattern than in the time of Oedipus.

A good place to begin this study is with the students’ own definitions of the word “hero.” They can then compare them with those in the dictionary. Some of the definitions listed in Webster’s Third New International Dictionary are the following:

a mythological or legendary figure endowed with great strength, courage, or ability, favored by the gods, and often believed to be of divine or partly divine descent; a man of courage and nobility famed for his military achievements: a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities and considered a model or ideal: the principal male character in a drama, novel, story, or narrative poem: the central figure in an event, action, or period.

It is evident from these definitions that we have come to call the standard bearer of the “best” the hero. It is he who incorporates into the context of his existence the ethos of an age and thereby becomes its symbolic embodiment.

The best standard work on the hero is available in paperback. In Joseph Campbell’s The Hero With a Thousand Faces (Pantheon, 1961), the author deals with the hero in all of his historical manifestations. He defines the hero as:

...the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one’s visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society
is reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore ... is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed (pp. 19-20).

The hero springs from his society, transcends that society and has a vision of the future, and ultimately returns to bring that message to his people. Campbell identifies the typical path of the hero as “separation, initiation, and return” and identifies this pattern as the hero “monomyth.” Thus, we have the embodiment of the “best” following a typical and traditional route to the fulfillment of his destiny.

In the simplest version of the monomyth, the hero leaves his ordinary world, encounters a supernatural force which he vanquishes, and then returns to present this boon to his fellow man. This is the pattern we see in “Jack-in-the-Beanstalk” and similar fairy tales. It is also the pattern of “Saint George and the Dragon.”

On a more difficult literary level we see the pattern in the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf. The hero leaves his comfortable kingdom to battle the supernatural monster, Grendel. He vanquishes Grendel and is joyously reunited with his people. In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Sir Gawain leaves the court of King Arthur to battle the Green Knight and he then returns to the court having made the world a better place for knights.

This version of the monomyth requires exceptional courage of the hero but does not require him to sacrifice himself for his fellow man. The Old Testament story of “David and Goliath” and the Greek myth of Theseus in common with the story of Beowulf, permit the hero to live out his life honorably in the midst of the people to whom he has given the boon.

A more complex version of the monomyth does not permit the easy re-entry into society. The hero must pay with his own personal suffering for the blessing he confers on society. His mission, which is his link to his fellow-men, also separates him from them and he cannot reap the simple rewards of a Beowulf. The boon plucked by him for the world does not return it to an old balance. On the contrary, his boon must unbalance the powers of the world. And, when he does this, “the powers that he has unbalanced may react so sharply that he will be blasted from within and without” (Campbell, p. 30).

A protagonist in Greek legend who epitomizes this variation is Prometheus, who defied Zeus, king of the gods, and gave fire to mankind. This version of the hero moves him into the majestic dimension of tragedy for he knows in advance the price he may pay for his service to humanity and, with this full knowledge, consciously makes his choice.

The way in which Prometheus obtained fire for men was through trickery, or, as Campbell puts it, through “quick device.” The hero who moves too quickly to his goal or attempts to get it by violence or luck so unbalances the fabric of society that he can never go home again. The changes that this hero brings about place him beyond the pale or protection of society. Therefore, Prometheus was doomed to suffer eternal torments. His own pain was the price for the boon and he had no one to lift him from his misery. “Alas for me,” he says in the play by Aeschylus, “such inventions I devised for mankind, but for myself, I have no cunning to escape disaster.”¹

This is the version of the monomyth which we find in the stories of Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, and Che Guevara. Lord of the Flies recounts it in relation to Simon. The boy separates himself physically (he has previously become

separated spiritually) from his society to confront the supernatural force which turns out to be a dead pilot dangling from his parachute. Simon attempts to bring this boon of knowledge based on scientific investigation to his fellows but, in the process, risks destroying the existing establishment which is based on fear and ignorance. The establishment recognizes the danger and Simon pays for the boon with his life.

Two interesting contemporary illustrations of the monomyth in which death or torment are inextricably entwined in the boon are the film, Cool Hand Luke, and the novel by Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Signet, 1962).

There are interesting similarities in these two works. In common with all heroes, the protagonists, Luke and McMurphy, have an exceptional gift which sets them apart from their fellows, the gift of living life joyously. Both are thrown into worlds which have the same symbolical deficiency, the repression of life by the forces of death and evil. Before the appearance of the heroes death, despair, and the frustration of impotence have controlled each society.

The supernatural Grendel is epitomized in Cool Hand Luke by the Man with No Eyes. Instead of eyes we see the mirrored sunglasses he wears and his awful power is patterned by the first shot of the chain gang which is seen through the reflection in his glasses.

Luke's persecution begins after he has the temerity to address this man directly. "Luke," his friend warns him "ain't no one allowed to speak to No Eyes."

This supernatural figure is malevolent, and because he is all-powerful he can see everything through his mirrored glasses and possesses absolute power of life and death over ordinary men.

Big Nurse, in the Kesey novel, also rules through supernatural powers which include the ability to read thoughts. She has never been bested by ordinary mortals whether they were patients or fellow workers. Her exceptional power gives her the ability to change her shape like witches in traditional fairy tales:

She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times...her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl, and she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load... But just as she starts crooking those sectioned arms around the black boys...all the patients start coming out of the dorms... and she has to change back before she's caught in the shape of her hideous real self.

What is the boon which Luke and McMurphy bring to their new societies which is so threatening to the establishments of each that they must die? On the surface the changes they have occasioned are not even evident. The chain gang continues and so does the mental hospital. But, the boon is the same in both stories. They have shown their fellow prisoners that even in the most extreme circumstances man can retain the last and possibly the greatest of human freedoms. That is, the freedom to choose his own attitude in any set of circumstances. Once the men have understood the possibility of inner freedom, the foundations of fear and desperation on which the power of the establishment has been based are irrevocably shaken.

Luke first confers the boon on his fellow prisoners when he accepts willingly the most difficult job given to the chain gang and makes it into a game. When the men learn that they must tar a road, a familiar despair settles on them. They have had no hero to show them that when a man is not free it does not matter whether he cuts grass or tars a road. It is still the establishment which has set the rules and it is their manipula-
tion which forces men to see a value in the lesser of two evils. But, with Luke leading them, the men finish the job two hours ahead of time. They are exhilarated and filled with laughter instead of the exhaustion and hopelessness typical of their reaction.

"Luke, you crazy, wild, beautiful thing," his friend shouts exultantly. After that, Luke’s fate is determined. He has defeated the supernatural monster with laughter and must be punished for ripping apart the old fabric of his society. The slow crucifixion of his body to destroy his mind begins. But nothing can destroy his joy in life. Even with his ankles in chains he laughs at the tenacity of a snapping turtle which just won’t let go. And finally they are forced to kill him, but they cannot kill his boon. His friend tells the other men that even in death he was smiling that special “Luke smile,” and in the final chain gang scene his friend is smiling that legendary smile and it is evident that Luke’s message has reached his fellowmen.

In One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, McMurphy’s first major challenge to the thinking of the mental institution comes after a group-therapy session. He silently observes as each patient parades his past mistakes before the others, spurred on by Big Nurse. Then he asks:

“And you really think this crap that went on in the meeting today is bringing about some kinda cure, doing some kinda good?”

The brainwashed men have never articulated any questions about the group-therapy process. They do not even dare to think critically about Big Nurse. McMurphy continues:

...that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em, old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes—people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the lines, to follow their rules, to live like they want you do. And the best way to do this, to get you to knuckle under, is to weaken you by gettin' you where it hurts the worst. You ever been kneed in the nuts in a brawl, buddy. Stops you cold, don't it? There's nothing worse. It makes you sick, it saps every bit of strength you got. If you're up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, then watch for his knee, he's gonna go for your vitals. And that's what that old buzzard is doing, going for your vitals.

By the time McMurphy is finished he has given the boon to his fellow patients. Kesey describes the coming of understanding to Harding, one of the patients, in the following way:

Harding looks around, sees everybody's watching him, and he does his best to laugh. A sound comes out of his mouth like a nail being crowbarred out of a plank of green pine; Eee-eee-eee. He can't stop it. He wrings his hands like a fly and clinches his eyes at the awful sound of that squeaking. But he can't stop it. It gets higher and higher until finally, with a suck of breath, he lets his face fall into his waiting hands. "Oh the bitch, the bitch, the bitch," he whispers through his teeth.

McMurphy lights another cigarette and offers it to him; Harding takes it without a word. McMurphy is still watching Harding's face in front of him there, with a kind of puzzled wonder, looking at it like it's the first human face he ever laid eyes on. He watches while Harding’s twitching and jerking slows down and the face comes up from the hands. “You are right,” Harding says, “about all of it.” He looks up at the other patients who are watching him. “No one's ever dared to come out and say it before, but there's not a man among us that doesn't think it, that doesn't feel just as you do about her and the whole business—feel it somewhere down deep in his scared little soul.”

And after this, the fate of the typical hero as described in the monomyth be-
gins to unfold inexorably. McMurphy is lobotomized but he has contributed to the freedom of humanity.

She tried to get her ward back into shape, but it was difficult with McMurphy's presence still tromping up and down the halls and laughing out loud in the meetings and singing in the latrines. She couldn't rule with her old power any more, not by writing things on pieces of paper. She was losing her patients one after the other.

The value of this study of the monomyth in the English and Humanities classroom is its ability to serve as a unifying concept for many seemingly disparate elements in the contemporary world. For example, it can help in the evaluation of the achievements of men such as Che Guevara, John Brown, Martin Luther King, Mark Rudd, Timothy Leary, Lennie Bruce. The monomyth is applicable to a variety of literary works, films, and plays. This different way of studying these works has unquestionable relevance for both the past and the present.

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To P.M.

—On Reading a Commentary by P.M. on Hopkins' "Spring"—

Much have I heard Lafcadio Hearn speak
on "Manfred," "Grecian Urn,"
on the beauty
of the morning scene from the Bridge
or on the singing Skylark pouring his heart.

Long have I stood beneath a persimmon tree,
admiring the round, red, honey-packed fruits,
thinking of my forty years that will not come again.

But never did I feel such keen joy,
till I looked, following your direction,
into the thrush's nest in the hedgerow,
and saw heavens there in the blue, tiny eggs;
till I heard the bird sing from the peartree top,
rinsing and wringing my unaccustomed ears.

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