



Hero's journey in Percy Jackson and The Olympians: The Lightning Thief (2005)

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the hero's journey theory by Campbell and how it was used in the story of Percy Jackson. The study aimed to see the development of characters found in the story by using the close-reading method and segmentation where sections of the story would be classified into their own segments matching the stages of the hero's journey. The hero's journey played a massive role in the story and influenced how the characters developed. The story stayed true to the fundamentals of the hero's journey theorem and had archetypes of the story that had significant roles. The study can be improved further by analysing the intent of the characters.

Keywords: Hero; Hero's journey

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INTRODUCTION

The amazing tales of many heroic deeds had inspired many writers in history to write their own version of heroism based on either their experiences or their imaginations. Some of them remained as folklore, others had become a popular culture in many communities, locally or globally. However, there was a similarity between these narratives, the journey of a simple character into the saviour of their respective communities. This similarity had become sort of a concept of an archetype to be used in modern stories or movies. The tales of heroism and valour were frequently viewed as the role model of human nobility in achieving the greater end (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). This concept inspired Joseph Campbell to coin the term "hero's journey" to best describe this archetype in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

A hero's journey had been a common recurring theme amongst fantasy fiction literature works for children and adolescent teenagers where the protagonists went from zero to hero. Such a genre had its own respective heroes. An example of fantasy work that employed this theme was *Percy Jackson and The Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2005), the first book of *Percy Jackson and The Olympians* serial novel written by Rick Riordan where the protagonists dealt with figures from the Greek mythologies in the

modern world. This narrative theme regards to hero's journey and the Percy Jackson story written by Rick Riordan was chosen as this study's focus due to the awards it has won such as Hampshire Book Award and ALA's Best Book for Young Adult 2006 and how similar it is to other stories such as *Harry Potter* (1997) by J.K. Rowling and *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowskis. The aforementioned authors had written stories with similar patterns to Joseph Campbell's theory of hero's Journey, deliberately or not. Rick Riordan's choice of the worldly setting of inserting mythological Greek figures in the modern world becomes another reason why the *Percy Jackson* narrative had been chosen.

The book *Percy Jackson* explored the journey of the main character, Percy Jackson, coming from an average American household to become the saviour of the world. Percy Jackson discovered that the world he lived in was far bigger than what he could imagine during his quest to attest his innocence to Zeus, the king of gods, as he was accused of the act of theft that he never did. Helped by his friend, Percy managed to not only prove his innocence but also returned what had been stolen and in turn, saved the world.

This study used Joseph Campbell's (1949) theory of hero's Journey as the basis for the analysis. Joseph Campbell defined Hero's journey as "The journey of a character from common origin into a

region of supernatural wonder where the character is encountered with various obstacles then emerge victoriously. After the character's triumph, the character then returns from his adventure with the power to "bestow boons on the character's fellow man". The character's adventure is categorized into three acts: departure (the character is separated from the common and known world), initiation (the character gains insight into a whole new level of skill and responsibility), and return (the character returns to their previous ordinary life with the power and treasure they had gained during their adventure, which they may use for the benefit of their fellow man). The reason as to why this theorem was chosen was to explore how hero's journey had been utilised in *Percy Jackson* and how it developed the characters.

To further elaborate the theoretical framework and the basis for this study, let's move on to the literature to discuss related studies and the proponents of the theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An article entitled *The Archetype of the Hero's Journey in Odyssey* (2013) written by Mohammad Taheri and Ronak Jalaly proposed that the poem *The Odyssey* written by Homer was a classic example of an epic of Hero's Journey. Taheri dan Jalaly claimed that the main character of the poem helped defined what an epic hero is. They further elaborated that a hero must express certain virtues to be considered as such with strength, integrity, and tenacity as the prerequisites. The character in the poem possessed those characteristics and was able to overcome struggles, loss, heartache, growth, and victories as detailed in Homer's *The Odyssey*.

The study by Taheri and Jalaly helped to understand the stages of Hero's journey and the archetypes that came with it. The poem *The Odyssey* itself was an archetype as it had recurring patterns of an epic journey. Most of, if not all, the characters in the poem followed certain archetypes. The main character, Odysseus, posed as the valiant and clever hero with Athena as the mentor, and Poseidon as the antagonist.

Campbell classified characters' archetype into 8 major roles, the hero, the herald, the mentor, the threshold guardian, allies, shadow, trickster, and shapeshifter. Campbell defined the hero as someone who would succeed where others would often fail and that heroes often serve their communities well (Segal, 1987). The main role of a mentor was to teach and give guidance to the main character and his party. The mentor also often provided items and knowledge required for their journey. The herald was often defined as the character that issued challenges and declared the coming of major changes to the story. While they were able to join the story at any time,

they often appeared in the beginning of the story to announce the hero's call to adventure. Threshold guardian served as an obstacle in the story that the hero must overcome. They were the beings that protected the special world. The allies in story often acted like sidekicks. Without them, the hero had significantly higher chances to fail in their journey. The shadow of the story often represented the hero's darkest desire or the qualities that the hero rejected. The role of the trickster was to cause a rift in the hero's adventure with laughter as they lured the characters and readers into realizing an absurdity in the story. The shapeshifter often found themselves misleading the hero by hiding his intention and loyalties during the course of the story. A shapeshifter may also share another archetype, most commonly shadow, trickster, and threshold guardians.

The stages or acts of hero's journey of Vogler's model had been analyzed and discussed by Pasya et al., (2020) entitled the *Journey of the Villain: A Character Analysis of the Once-Ler from Dr. Seuss' The Lorax*. The study discussed the character development of the Once-Ler. Whether Once-Ler became a hero or not would depend on how they perform in the story.

While Campbell was the first to coin the term hero's journey, his theory was often criticized by scholars due to how broad the focus was (Crespi, 1990). To narrow down the broad scope it had, Christopher Vogler had his own rendition of the Campbell's theory in his book, *The Writer's Journey* (2007). Vogler further established contemporary values to the theorem by adding practicality and eliminating elements that were redundant in Campbell's rendition.

As mentioned previously, Campbell's theory of a hero's journey was categorized into three main acts: departure, initiation, and return. The three main acts were then further elaborated into sub-categories. In total, there are seventeen acts of the hero's journey. However, Vogler's (2007) model had simplified it into twelve sub-acts.

1. Departure

In this act, the hero was first introduced into the mystic world beyond his ordinary one. It also marked the separation in which the hero must depart from the common realm into the supernatural one. In this act, five sub-categories were specified. The first one would be the ordinary world where the hero was introduced by presenting personal backgrounds dilemma and some kind of polarity in the hero's life which causes tension. The second act was call to adventure in which the hero was meant to realize that there are worlds beyond his common life. It is continued by the refusal of the call where the hero faced events or had factors that prevented him to start his journey. Meeting with the mentor was the third

sub-category in which the hero was guided by mystical beings to choose the correct path. After that, the hero started his journey to prove his ability and knowledge in crossing the first threshold sub-category.

2. Initiation

In this act, Vogler divided this category into four sub-categories in which he discussed how the hero would conquer and overcome many trials and thorny ways to become a true hero. Starting from the tests, allies, and enemies where the hero was forced to accept requests and prove his heroism to help others in need. It is continued by approaching to the inmost cave, where the hero rest before continuing his journey. The next act, the ordeal, was the point in which the hero must confront the most difficult challenge, be it in the form of his strongest enemy or his deepest fear. The final act, the reward, celebrated the hero's valour and achievement. It was a point where the hero prepared himself before moving on to the journey's resolution.

3. Return

In the final act, it was described how the hero took action and reacted after completing his journey. This act also discussed various obstacles and factors to prove his own worth and his decision toward both worlds. This act was further elaborated into three sub-categories. The first was the road back where the hero, who had achieved his goal, must commit to return to the ordinary world after gaining strength and knowledge, despite his initial reluctance. The hero then must prove himself once again that he was able to maintain all that he learned onto the ordinary world to share the boon with his fellow men. The final act, return with the elixir, was the final point of the hero's journey where the hero had been brought back and fully accepted to the ordinary world and share the elixir of his journey.

Although the sub-acts mentioned before presented chronological order, this order itself was not stiff nor is it rigid. Campbell exclaimed that the hero's journey was very flexible when it comes to the order of the stages or how many times they occur in hero's journey (Campbell, 1949 p. 246).

METHOD

This study was qualitative in nature as it aims to analyse how the theory of hero's journey being utilised through their interpretation. Qualitative research is a descriptive research in which the data are presented in the form of words or pictures to describe a particular context (Cresswell, 2007). This methodology uses no numerical data but instead uses data such as text, pictures, or video to understand ideas and produce descriptive data. This methodology featured texts as the main focus of the study as it provides textual data that presented behaviour and expression in society. This

methodology examined the collected data and then interpreted it based on the text by providing experience from within and outside the text. This means that the researchers have no wrong or correct interpretation as they state the fact based on their observations.

In this study, the data were collected through close reading of chapters of the book written by Rick Riordan in 2005 entitled *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* which contained 22 chapters and 377 pages. Close reading is a strategy or method used to perform a literary analysis which focuses on specific parts of a text in order to be able to ascertain certain qualities of the text (Brummet, 2018). This method was chosen to be utilised as the purpose of this study was to analyse how the hero's journey theorem was utilised in the book which the researcher deemed to be an appropriate method.

In analysing the data, the analysis is divided into two steps. The first step is to divide chapters of the book into segments where it is referred to as a "single" event. Then, the segmented events were matched accordingly to a stage or phase that correctly represented a phase of the hero's journey theory. However, the acts or stages that did not occur in the character's story is left out.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The recurring narrative pattern of hero's journey fell into the category of an archetype. And every character in the story has their own role which allowed them to be a part of an archetype as well. In this story, the characters' archetype will be classified into 8 categories that best describe the major characters; this include the main character and his immediate surroundings.

The main character, *Percy Jackson*, played a central role in the story. The story followed Percy from the start of his journey to the end. As he played a major role, Percy followed Campbell's definition of a hero, someone who would succeed where others would fail, to be able to do something that others cannot. In his scenario, Percy was accused as the thief of Gods' treasure, and the gods demanded that only him to return the stolen items. Percy must return the stolen items in 10 days to prevent the war of gods that would ravage his world.

Zeus has demanded that Poseidon return the bolt by summer solstice. That's June twenty-first, 10 days from now. Poseidon wants an apology for being called a thief by the same date. I hoped that diplomacy might prevail, that Hera or Demeter would make the two brothers see sense. But your arrival has inflamed Zeus' temper. Now neither gods will back down. Unless someone intervenes, unless the master bolt is found and returned to Zeus before summer solstice, there will war. (Riordan, 2005, p. 143).

In *Percy Jackson*, we were introduced to a character that played the role of Percy's favorite teacher, Mr. Brunner. It was later revealed that Mr. Brunner was not just a crippled teacher who taught history lessons, he was a centaur that went by the name Chiron. During the course of the half-blood camp, Chiron taught Percy of his own prophecy, and he later gave Percy a sword that would become a major weapon for Percy during the course of the story (Riordan, 2005, p. 15).

The herald of *Percy Jackson* made a brief appearance in the early parts of the story where she played the role of a teacher alongside Mr. Brunner, Mrs. Dodds. Her appearance marked the early interaction between Percy and the special world. She was the one who made Percy realize that there were worlds beyond his ((Riordan, 2005, p. 14).

The most notable threshold Guardians in *Percy Jackson* were Charon the boatman of styx and Cerberus the guardian of Hades lair. Charon played the role of the person that connected the two worlds and acted as bridge between them. While Cerberus played the role of an obstacle to the characters as Cerberus tried to prevent the entry of the characters into the underworld.

The book written by Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, had explained similar patterns and structure in the writings of heroes in most fables, stories, and legend. In this section of this study, chapters of the book will be divided and merged into segments in which it was referred to as a "single" event that matches accordingly to the acts of hero's journey in order to analyse how the hero's journey theorem had been implemented in the book *Percy Jackson and The Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2005).

Chapter one of the book *Percy Jackson; Accidentally Vaporize* was considered as one segment to match the very initial act of the hero's journey theorem, namely the "the ordinary world." Having been raised by his mother and stepfather, Percy Jackson found out that he was a halfling to a god and human at the age of twelve. In the same year, it was revealed to him that his biological father was the God of the sea, Poseidon.

Percy had never fit in with the society for all his life. He was a troubled youngster who had been expelled from every school he had attended. At his most recent school, Yancy Academy, Grover Underwood was his only friend. Percy had been accustomed to being left or kicked out wherever he went, even though it was not his fault. Trouble seemed to love being around him. For instance, during his school trip to the New York Museum:

I was trying to listen to what Mr. Brunner had to say, because it was kind of interesting, but

everybody around me was talking, and every time I told them to shup up, the other teacher chaperone, Mrs. Dodds, would give me the evil eye. (Riordan, 2005, p. 5)

In chapter two, *Three Old Ladies Knit*, the next sub-act of the theorem began, namely, the call to adventure. After making sure Nancy was unharmed, Mrs. Dodds then demanded Percy to meet her at the gallery nearby. Percy then claimed in his monologue that he often experienced black out similar to what just happened. Once again, Mrs. Dodds disappeared to the entrance of the gallery, leaving Percy perplexed.

The segment then moved on to the first phase of the Departure act, the call to adventure. After joining Mrs. Dodds in the gallery, Percy tried to take the usual false accusations of Mrs. Dodds only to be met with her sudden change of tone and ways of speaking.

The segment then further spiralled when Mrs. Dodds physical appearances changed into a creature of avian characteristics. Then, Mr. Brunner who was in a wheelchair burst into the gallery and gave Percy a pen that changed into a sword when wielded. While Percy was still confused by the events, Mrs. Dodds then suddenly exploded into yellow powder and vanished, both physically and mentally, from everyone's mind. Her sudden disappearance left Percy weary and unbelieving of the people around him. Then, one day, Percy overheard Grover and Mr. Brunner's conversation in regards to the incident. After contemplating for quite some time, Percy decided to confront them to know his circumstances. Grover brought Percy to the camp of mystics called Half-blood Hill where others who had inherited magical traits lived. There, he found out that Grover had been trying to protect Percy from creatures similar to Mrs. Dodds, that the King of Gods, Zeus, had falsely accused him of stealing Zeus' lightning and that he must return it before the end of summer solstice.

In chapter five up to chapter eight of the book, began the next act of the hero's journey, The meeting with the mentor. Percy reunites with Mr. Brunner, whose true identity was Chiron the centaur, and met Annabeth, one of the daughters of Athena. In the camp, Chiron told Percy of what sorts of capabilities he had, as both human and son of a god, and guided him throughout his daily life in the camp. Through Chiron, Percy learnt of his quest and the bad ties between his father, Poseidon, and Zeus. Chiron often mediates disputes between Percy and the other children of gods, most frequently, Annabeth. The two began their dispute often as Annabeth craved to go on an adventure whilst Percy preferred to stay in the comfort of the camp. However, Chiron eventually guided Percy to try to fulfil his quest. Percy accepted Chiron's request to venture outside the camp

although not to fulfil his quest but his friends'. Then, Percy and friends had ventured into different places trying to fulfil each of their quest and learnt the story and backgrounds of one another. As they travelled, Percy's power continued to grow to the point that he learnt he could bend water to his will and be fine even if submerged underwater.

The next act of the hero's journey, refusal of the call, had been somewhat a part of the previous chapters as well. Prior to meeting Chiron, Percy was ignorant of the supernatural despite his encounter with Mrs. Dodds. Only after meeting Chiron did Percy learnt of his quest and chose to refuse it as the sole reason for his life, his mother, had disappeared after being attacked by a minotaur. Chiron managed to partly convince Percy to travel along with his friends in order to appease Zeus and gain the knowledge of the world. At one point, Percy tried to test his underwater prowess by submerging himself deep underwater. However, as his power gained strength in accordance to the water, Percy was contacted by a spirit who informed him that both his mother's soul and the stolen lightning rest in the hand of Hades, another god. After hearing such information, Percy was fully convinced that he will fulfil his quest to return the stolen lightning of Zeus and retrieve his mother's soul.

In chapter sixteen, *We Take a Zebra*, Percy, Grover, and Annabeth had stumbled upon the final sub-act of the initial main act of departure, namely, crossing the first threshold. Percy and his friends had planned to travel to Los Angeles by freeloading onto a truck only to find out that the truck was carrying abused animals. Percy and his friends decided to set them free and find another way of travel in Las Vegas. During their stay in Las Vegas, they stopped in front of a hotel and casino, Lotus. Enticed by the doorkeeper friendly gestures, the three went in there to rest. However, what they had seen amazed them and left them in awe. Staffs of the hotel mentioned that all payments and amenities were fully covered so the three only needed to stay in their own luxurious suites. Tempted, the three of them decided to enjoy themselves to the fullest whilst staying there by immersing themselves in the various games available in the casino section. Despite the temptations there, Percy managed to catch a glimpse of what was wrong in there. He had found a person who didn't match with the current day's information in regards to ways of talking, entertainment, and fashion. Curious with it, Percy asked the person and found out that he was from 1997 and he had only been in the hotel for two weeks. Other people whom Percy questioned shared similar answer with the first person. Aware of the trap, Percy quickly alerted his two companions to immediately leave the premises before they went in for too long. After they left the building, they quickly tried to find information of the current dates. While

they felt that they had only been staying there for hours, they actually had spent 5 days in the hotel. Left with only one day to finish his quest, Percy, Grover, and Annabeth departed to save his mother.

In chapter seventeen up to chapter nineteen of the book, the next act of tests, allies, and enemies continued. In this segment, Percy, Grover, and Annabeth had rushed themselves to find whoever stole the lightning and brought what was stolen back. In chapter seventeen, Percy and his friends met a swindler named Crusty who had attempted to trap all three half-bloods by suddenly binding and stretching them onto a bed. However, Percy had managed to outswindle the swindler and saved them all, gaining the exact address to Hades' doorstep. In chapter eighteen, Percy and his companion faced the guardians of Hades' territory, Charon and Cerberus, and triumphed against the two of them with their wit. In chapter nineteen, Percy and his companions finally confronted Hades, the god who stole Zeus' lightning and held Percy's mother's soul captive, only to find out that Hades' helmet which could cause the undead to invade the ordinary world had been stolen by the same God who had stolen the lightning and that the other God intended to frame Percy for the theft of the lightning by placing the lightning in Percy's backpack. Baffled that he was manipulated by another god, namely Ares, Percy quickly left Hades' territory to not only return the lightning but also confront Ares who had tricked them.

In chapter twenty of the book, the next act, the ordeal, began with Percy confronting Ares in regards to both the stolen lightning and Hades' helmet. While Ares admitted that he had stolen it, he did not do it personally as Gods couldn't steal another God's symbol of power and that he had someone else to do his bidding. Ares' purpose for stealing the items was to create wars and that by falsely accusing Percy, he could achieve a three-way war between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Since the lightning is still in Percy's possession, Ares claimed that he had no choice but to kill Percy so that the lightning did not return to Zeus. Percy and Ares later on made a deal that the two of them will fight, if Percy win he could return the lightning and be free from Ares' grasp, but if he lose, Ares will take the lightning and transform Percy into anything he wished. The two then engaged in combat but was interrupted later on by mortals. Distracted by the crowd, Ares took a hit from Percy's surprise attack. Admitting defeat, Ares disappeared in a bright light. Hades' underlings then came briefly unto Percy to retrieve the stolen helmet. Percy then quickly left to return the lightning to Zeus.

In chapter twenty-one of the book, *Settle My Tab*, the final part of the initiation act, the reward, began with Percy obtaining the lightning in his possession. Fearing that Zeus had run out of patience, Percy rushed towards Olympus, the place where gods

resides. He managed to deliver the lightning in time and disclosed what had happened during his entire journey to Poseidon including his confrontation with Ares, the hurdle of entering Hades' territory, and his worries in regards to his mother's wellbeing. Zeus assured Percy that his life will be spared and the war will be halted. Poseidon then joined in on the conversation between Zeus and Percy by claiming that Percy would have to make a decision regarding the special package that had been delivered when he returned home. At the same time, Percy learnt that his mother had been safely returned to his home after Hades received his helmet.

In the later parts of chapter twenty-one, the first phase of the return act had begun with Percy and his mother returning back home to their house in New York. They reminisce about what had happened between the two of them and how they had never properly communicated with one another regarding Percy's true identity as a half-blood and the son of Poseidon. During their discussion, the two brought up the topic of how they would live their lives. Percy then decided that he would return to the camp of half-bloods and says goodbye to his mother.

In chapter twenty-two, *The Prophecy Comes True*, the final act, the resurrection, began with Percy returning to the camp and was welcomed with warm gifts and celebrations. Percy returned to his cabin to rest and to contemplate how to move forward with his newly gained strength and wisdom. Percy was then greeted by another resident of the camp, Luke. During their conversation, Percy realized that Luke was the missing piece of his journey, the betrayal of a friend. Percy learnt the reasons as to why Luke had stolen the items and almost instigated a war for it. Luke had planned to revive an evil ancient god. After revealing it all, Luke ran away after causing chaos by summoning monsters. Percy then decided that the next time they met, they would meet as enemies.

CONCLUSION

Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief written by Rick Riordan showed archetypes characteristics of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey theory. Rick Riordan consciously or unconsciously used Joseph Campbell hero's journey theory in his Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief as proven by how the stages of the hero's journey theorem was applied in his book.

Separation was the first section of the hero's journey and it was about how the hero went from the common world into the unfamiliar Special World with the main character of Percy Jackson believing that he's just a normal teen dealing with normal problems that were until he met the herald of the story that caused him to be introduced to the Special World.

Initiation was the main part of the story. It is where the hero initiates his heroic nature by

overcoming various trials and problems. And through quests and battles, true heroic traits emerge.

The return is the last stage of the Hero's Journey cycle. It is when Percy has obtained his goal, which is to bring back his mother and to return the stolen items. Percy Jackson returned to the common world but as a changed person, someone who is wiser smarter, and stronger than before.

Just like heroes, we as ordinary human beings wished to have had extraordinary ordeals for us to overcome in our mundane life. The fantasy of overcoming those unimaginable feats were what allowed writers from a variety of ages to have collectively wrote similar structure that was known as hero's journey. However, hero's journey was not all about defeating gods and slaying dragons, finding magical treasures, and exploring uncharted territories.

It was common to fear something as a human. We may experience becoming a hero and in between the worlds that we experience, any choices we made required us to leave the common world, the world that was familiar even though it may be a little bit unpleasant. Fears or problems we encounter could be symbolized as the villain of our own story, and the overcoming our struggles were the true treasure in our journey.

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