The Quest Motif in Literature

Supplemental handout for English 215, Fantasy Fiction, Fall 2010, with Nancy Howard
MYTH OF QUEST: AN ARCHETYPE

GLOSSARY

Archetype — a prototype, a pattern, a common theme, a template in fiction; a flexible pattern of expectations reflective of the human experience; a theme that reflects life, a recurring story or plotline

Fantasy — literature based on the unknown and/or the unproven; dream-like; often too abstract to visualize—myth and legend

Irony — literature based upon an inversion of romance; a mode of contrasts, paradoxes and subtleties; a story line based on romantic expectations which are, at some point, denied or negated; depicting the tension, ambiguity, inhuman or non-human nature of life where human concepts of fairness are irrelevant, dependent on random, unpredictable occurrences.

Magical Realism — literature based on the intersection of the real and the unreal; focusing on the normal to highlight the supernatural; a melding or collision of realism and magic to pose questions rather than provide answers.

Quest — literature based on a journey, a road of trials in which a hero hears a call and leaves his home—alone or in the company of others—to search out a treasure. Along the way he undergoes trials, receives aid, fights enemies and may even die, and, if he succeeds in attaining the treasure sought, may change who and what he is.

Romance — literature that expresses human wish-fulfillment and dreams; a nostalgic yearning for a simple moral world and the romantic ideals of quest, female beauty, wealth, power and wisdom; a world with a place for and meaning in a higher order; an orderly, unified world in the hands of an imminent being; a spiritually progressive, purposeful quest.

Symbol — equivalent to a sign—anything which signifies something else. Applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event that in turn signifies something or has a range of reference beyond itself. An emblem is an object whose significance is determined by its own qualities and by its role in the narrative context. Universal symbols have broad significance to the human experience. Private symbols carry significance within the framework of a specific narrative. Symbolism transforms a phenomenon into an idea, an idea into an image that, no matter the language of expression, is clearly recognizable as an aspect of the human experience.

Tragedy — literature based on serious and important actions which turn out disastrously for the hero or protagonist; catastrophe; a fall from grace or wealth; a narrative that evokes pity, suffering, defeat, respect and awe. Tragedy, by design, is emotionally draining for the reader. A major flaw in the hero predicts that tragedy will come.

The Characters (in the Quest Motif)

THE HERO -- ROMANTIC, IRONIC, TRAGIC

In stories of "the quest," heroes are on the brink of a great change. Some heroes are desperately unhappy and experience their lives as a stultifying world, one that, in its very orderliness and familiarity, comes to seem sterile and confining: a kind of wasteland. In either case, the environment or something in it keeps the hero from changing, from growing—in short, from living. All heroes must recognize their worlds for what they are; must realize the need for change; must have the courage to try.

It is possible for heroes to blunder into the quest, to make some sort of mistake and find themselves quite suddenly embarked on a difficult journey. Generally, though, something or someone calls the hero to this adventure. The summon can come from any source: a friend, a relative, a stranger, an alluring object, or an impulse within the heroes themselves. If the protagonist possesses the necessary courage and resolve, she or he is off on the quest, however fearful or arduous it may seem.

Narrative romance is the oldest, simplest, most predictable and inevitably hopeful story pattern. Yet the reader questions throughout. There seems to be doubt though there is none at the end. Romance expresses the human need to fulfill wishes and to
dream. Romance causes the reader to yearn for a simple moral world and the romantic ideals of the "quest"—beauty, wealth, power, wisdom. Romance offers the reader a world with a place for and meaning in a "higher order" where the world is orderly and unified in the hands of an imminent being. Romance presents a spiritually progressive, purposeful quest.

**The Romantic Hero**

The romantic hero is the basis from which all other "hero types" evolve. The romantic hero is usually male, though some scattering of female heroes does occur. Quite often the hero comes to the world through some sort of "divine" or "magical" birth though this difference from his fellows is often not evident until "the call" is heard and "the journey" undertaken. His human action reflects man's most hopeful conception of life. He is in service to an ideal through which he can find enduring meaning outside the constraints of the plausible world. The hero within a society that is coherent and transcendent. His quest is progressive and culminates in success.

The romantic hero's destiny has supernatural origin. His action grows from the eternal power that reflects man's most hopeful conception of life. In the full story of the quest, the hero dies--either physically or metaphorically--and takes on features of a god finally unified with the mysterious. He has total human freedom, infinite possibilities for significant action, limitless power. He realizes his dreams and desires and transcends his suffering resulting in a destiny that transforms him to something more than he was.

**The Ironic Hero**

Irony depends on romance. The reader recognizes the pattern inherent to romance and irony preys on these. The ironic hero begins as the romantic hero. Then, since irony is a negation, a twisting of romance, something or someone thwarts the hero through a mode of contrasts, paradoxes, inversion and subtleties. One set of assumptions is established. Then ironic twists undercut these to produce an ironic outcome and therefore an ironic hero. Irony depicts the tension, ambiguity, inhuman or non-human nature of life where human concepts of "fairness" and "orderliness" are irrelevant. The negation or twisting is random and unpredictable, not caused by the character of the hero, but perhaps in spite of him.

Often the romantic hero becomes the ironic hero through his incompleteness. In the beginning, when the hero operates as romantic, he seems as perfect, as having the capability to overcome his flaws, as bigger than life. However, as irony twists and turns the narrative, we can see his downfall coming.

**The Tragic Hero**

The true tragic hero is neither all good nor all bad. He is a mixture. A hero with a balance of good and bad will invoke pity or terror. The tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is better than the rest of us, of higher moral character or of higher position. This hero suffers a fall from grace or wealth or position because of a mistake. He makes this mistake, or even a series of mistakes, because of his tragic flaw—some trait that he feels is positive but in fact causes his poor choice. The tragic hero invokes pity because, since he is not evil, his fate is worse than he deserves. He also invokes fear because we can recognize similarities in ourselves and therefore see our own possibilities for disaster. And the tragic hero invokes admiration in defeat. We feel awed for his endurance rather than depressed in his defeat. We can predict his downfall because we can see his flaw.

**THE OTHER**

The Other, also known as the double or the alter ego, frequently appears in stories of the quest and is a common character in literature of all kinds. Like a shadow, which is a dark, distorted, but ultimately a recognizable image of the person who casts it, the Other may at first glance bear little resemblance to the hero. In fact, the two characters often look and behave in diametrically opposite ways. A close examination, however, reveals that their relationship is intimate—indeed, inseparable. Sometimes, this relationship is quite literal: the Other may be the hero's sibling or best friend. However, this is not always the case: The Other may be a complete stranger, even if oddly familiar. Seeing the Other for the first time, the hero may feel that they have met somewhere before, though the hero cannot remember where or when. As they get to know each other better, surprising similarities may become
The stranger who is uncannily familiar, the enemy who looks so much like the hero that they might be twins, the "black sheep of the family," the close friend to whom the central character is tied despite their totally contrasting personalities—each of these possible identities testifies to the Other's special nature, to the powerful bond between the protagonist and the inescapable figures who follow them. Though the protagonist may try to break or deny this bond, to disavow any connection to the Other, or even to run away, the reader gradually becomes aware that, in some sense, the two characters cannot exist without each other.

Symbolically, the Other represents precisely that dark, unlived, and generally unacknowledged part of the central character's personality, kept hidden away from the eyes of the world and often from the protagonists' own awareness. For this reason, Robert Louis Stevenson gives the name "Mr. Hyde" to the character who embodies the violent and lustful impulses, the bestial underside, of the seemingly spotless hero, Dr. Jekyll. Often, the hero rejects or despises doubles because, like Mr. Hyde, they are actively evil or immoral: personifications of primitive energies and desires, the untamed urges society trains us to repress. Often, the Other's actions are outright criminal or maniacal. The Other can be evil personified.

In many instances, the Other represents a more personal form of the unacceptable. As Billy Joel's song "The Stranger" reminds us, "we all have a face/ that we hide away forever." The Heroes frequently shun, fear, or despise the doubles because the doubles are embodiments not of behavior condemned by society but rather of fantasies and drives that seem hateful or unsavory to particular individuals. These urges may be incompatible with the kind of human beings they imagine themselves to be, with their idealized self-images. The adoring father, for example, who slaves at a soul-crushing job for years, sacrificing his own happiness to give his children a better life, may repress a part of himself that longs to be free of his family, of the restraints and responsibilities they impose on him. The loving daughter who spends her young adulthood taking care of her invalid father may experience rage and hatred that she cannot possibly acknowledge. In stories about the Other, ordinary people often come face to face with figures who possess the very characteristics the protagonists have refused to recognize in themselves or from which they have cut themselves off.

When individuals are unable or unwilling to admit that the character traits embodied by the Other are actually a rejected or despised part of themselves, they suffer. On the other hand, coming to know and accept the double is always beneficial. But even when the Other is repulsive or base, the hero must come to terms with this figure. Meeting the Other is a crucial event in the hero's journey toward the ultimate goal. Indeed, it is often the first significant stage of the quest after the departure, since the hero cannot proceed along the dangerous path unless she or he has the self-awareness that acceptance of the Other brings. Such acceptance, however, is difficult to achieve; by definition, the Other represents precisely those things people have the most trouble facing up to in themselves. Only true heroes can look unflinchingly at their Others—who embody everything they find most frightening or repellent in themselves—and admit that what they see is their own mirror image.

Not every story depicts a successful encounter between a protagonist and a double. Frequently, the main characters steadfastly refuse to recognize their own features in the Other's face, insist to themselves that this distasteful figure has nothing to offer them, deny that the mysterious bond between them exists. Such individuals remain psychologically stunted, trapped by their fear of what they might discover about themselves, within the narrow confines of a rigid self-definition. Such people are also likely to become their own worst enemies. Because they are unable to accept the dark sides of their personalities, these protagonists fall victim to the Other, become possessed by it. We see this happen in our own lives when our inability to admit to an unpleasant emotion—anger, for example—causes it, not to disappear, but to sink to a level of our minds where it remains hidden, even from our own awareness, but where it grown stronger and stronger until it unexpectedly bursts forth in an inappropriate of destructive way. When rejected, the Other can easily turn from a potential helper, a figure who holds out the promise of increased self-knowledge and a fuller life, into an adversary.
Because the journey is so difficult, the questors of myth and folklore frequently find themselves at a loss. Faced with an insurmountable obstacle, an insoluble mystery, or an enemy with powers that surpass their own, even the mightiest heroes may need help to reach their goals.

Sometimes, this help comes from very unlikely sources. Fairy-tale and folklore characters are often saved from terrible predicaments by seemingly insignificant creatures that turn out to have exceptional, sometimes indeed magical, abilities. Beasts, birds, or even insects can offer the heroes guidance, counsel, and unexpected assistance. For example, when the protagonist of the Grimm Brothers' story "The Queen Bee" must find a thousand pearls scattered beneath a forest floor or turn into a stone at sunset, an army of friendly ants rush to his aid, rescue him, and recover every one of the buried gems. Another Grimm Brothers hero, the young prince of "The Three Feathers," is commanded by his father to locate the most beautiful carpet, ring, and woman in the world. He is completely nonplused until he encounters an enchanted toad that tells him where these treasures are. Two main types of recurrent characters that help and guide heroes are, generically, The Good Mother and The Wise Old Man.

The Good Mother

At times, the Good Mother is literally the mother of the protagonists, or at least a relative. On the other hand, she may be childless, even virginal: her role reflects not biology but the quality of assistance, which always has a distinctly maternal character. In ancient mythologies, the Good Mother appears in the form of the earth goddess, who supplies humanity with all of nature's bounties. In the story of Cinderella, she is the title character's fairy godmother, who comforts the mistreated young girl, magically clothes her in a magnificent gown, and oversees her passage into adulthood. The Good Mother is also a very common in the popular arts: for example, we find her in The Wizard of Oz in the guise of Glinda, Witch of the North, whose kiss acts as a protective talisman, keeping Dorothy from harm on the long and dangerous road to the Emerald City. Frodo, the central character of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, also receives a talisman from a Good Mother, the elf-queen Galadriel, who presents the quest hero with a vial full of magical light to brighten his way in the darkness as he journeys to the shadowland of Mordor. The gifts the Good Mother bestows, in short are the kind traditionally identified as motherly: protection, succor, compassion, sustenance, and in some cases, spiritual nourishment. The Good Mother typically gives the hero maternal care and material support—in the form of food, clothing, or a magical amulet to shield the questor from danger.

The Wise Old Man

The masculine counterpart, the mythological figure known as the Wise Old Man, tends to offer a different type of assistance. Generally portrayed as a magician, wizard, seer, or sage, he is the possessor of special, often arcane, knowledge, which he passes on to those rare individuals who have shown themselves to be worthy of it. Frequently, the Wise Old Man functions as a surrogate father of quest heroes, taking them under his wing as children, training them in the skills they will need to succeed in their enterprises, and initiating them into the uses and responsibilities of power. A good example can be found in T. H. White's popular retelling of the Camelot legend, The Once and Future King, the first part of which "The Sword in the Stone," focuses on the figure of the wizard Merlin and his role as tutor to the boy who will grow up to be King Arthur. When his pupils are ready to begin the quest, the Wise Old Man may accompany them on the journey, to warn them of any dangers that lie ahead and point out the path that will lead them to their goals. At other times, he appears only when the hero has arrived at a dead end and is in desperate need of guidance. For example, at the climax of the move Star Wars, Luke Skywalker finds himself unable to hit the enemy target by means of his computerized gunsight. He is suddenly visited by the spirit of his dead mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who reminds the boy of the secret he needs to accomplish his task. In essence, what the Wise Old Man offers his charges—what he symbolizes in psychological terms—is not only mature knowledge and saving insight but also self-realization. Following his counsel delivers heroes from narrowness and immobility and set on the road that leads ultimately to the release of all their latent powers and capabilities. The Wise Old Man helps them develop into the heroes they have always had the potential to become.

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Blacaman the Good, Vendor of Miracles," the title character discovers his supernatural powers
while being subjected to a kind of initiatory ordeal by his mentor and namesake. But it seems clear that the boy's transformation into a true miracle-worker takes place in spite of—almost in defiance of—the harsh treatment he receives from the old charlatan, on whom the narrator takes a terrible revenge. Some protagonists treat their elders badly. Others respond to their mentors with the kind of gratitude, devotion, even awe, that a child feels for a beloved parent of grandparent. This is true of Han Fook in Herman Hesse's "The Poet," whose guru, "The Master of the Perfect Word," is the spirit of art personified and of the boy in William Faulkner's "The Old People," whose Indian teacher, Sam Fathers, conducts him through a kind of primitive blood ritual; which results in the young hero's transformation into a hunter and a man.

Whatever their individual concerns, helpers ultimately teach the same fundamental lesson. By introducing the young protagonists into a larger world than they have previously know and, even more important, by giving them access to the untapped, and unsuspected, powers that reside within them, these older and wiser characters show their charges how to lead a fuller life: not simply how to be a man or a woman, a poet or a hunter, but how to be a human being.

The Road of Trials

The Call

Anyone—any animated thing—can undertake a quest. Those who do must have certain qualities: insight, courage, endurance. These qualities must be inherent in questors. Not all have what it takes, or enough of what it takes, to complete the quest. But anyone who accepts The Call must have these qualities. These heroes need insight to see the limitations of their lives, especially when the rest of their world regards those lives as enviable. They need courage and endurance to fight against the fate others succumb to, against social convention and the expectations of family and friends, or even against the stable but unsatisfying conditions of their lives—especially since their own fears and habits urge them to stay home, to stay safe, to be happy with what they have and what they are.

In order for these heroes to undertake a quest, it is essential that they consciously or unconsciously perceive the danger of remaining where they are. These heroes need insight. To leave the security and familiarity of the known world for the unknown as the quest demands may seem more dangerous than staying put. But it is not. The quest motif in myth and literature symbolizes the absolute necessity of radical, defiant, creative change in the individual's life—in the life of any culture. Animated things must alter and grow, physically, emotionally, psychically and spiritually. To stop or hold this growth is to invite stagnation. The hero learns to accept the difficult truth that all is in flux, that all must change, that life is an unending cycle of deaths and rebirths, a discarding of the things that were meaningful yesterday for those that assume new significance as the future unfolds. The hero's willingness to undertake the quest is the sign that he understands and accepts these exacting conditions of human life. The hero must know that to be static is to be dead.

The hero's quest begins with a call to adventure. A "herald" appears and issues this call. The herald is often someone or something external, though there are many instances when the call arises from within the hero in the form of a powerful impulse or sudden craving. More often though, the call comes from a source outside the hero. At other times, the call comes from a non-human creature. Myths and fairy tales are full of such heralds: giants, dwarfs, or enchanted beasts bewaring challenges or messages that set the story in motion. Animals occasionally play the part of heralds in modern literature, too.

Often, the herald is an extraordinary event or an intriguing object that makes a sudden, dramatic appearance, disrupting the day-to-day existence of the hero. Whether that call comes from outside the hero or within, however, it always signifies that the present situation has become stale, sterile, and unrewarding and that the hero is ripe for a change, that he is ready, if not necessarily willing or able, to leave his old familiar life behind and move on to something new.

There are times in our lives when our very survival—spiritual, psychological, even physical—depends on our ability to grow, to answer the inner challenge that urges us to change our lives. At such times, to stay where we are, out of fear or habit or
conventional morality, is to condemn ourselves to a kind of living death.

**THE JOURNEY**

From *The Odyssey* to the legends of *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* to such modern-day fairy tales as the fantasy books of J. R. R. Tolkien, the central action of all quest stories is the peril-filled journey the heroes must undertake to reach their goals. The preliminary parts of the quest, the call and the meeting with the Other, present their own problems and require courage and determination, but the hardships heroes must face do not fully begin until they have left their familiar surrounding and crossed into a mysterious world. In this new world, they must survive a series of ordeals, traveling a hard and dangerous path sometimes called "the road of trials" to win the prize they seek.

The precise nature of this alien realm varies widely from one quest story to the next. In non-realistic literature such as myths, fairy tales and folk stories, the heroes invariably journey into fantastic regions that exist nowhere in the actual world.

In spite of their differences, each of these incredible locales is essentially the same: a visionary landscape, a dream world, equivalent to the dark, sometimes enchanting, often threatening places all of us enter nightly in our sleep. Even works that take place in "real," identifiable settings often possess a distinctly dreamlike quality. Sometimes, a sudden, horrible accident turns the hero’s everyday world into a living nightmare.

What makes this stage of the quest a descent into nightmare or a voyage into hell is not only the strange, inhospitable land itself but also the kind of experience he encounters there. In this "kingdom of the dark," the protagonists undergo to a variety of ordeals that test their capacity for heroic behavior. In more fantastic forms of quest literature, this part of the narrative is generally the most entertaining. It portrays the heroes in a succession of exciting situations: climbing the slopes of an impossibly steep mountains; fighting their way through deadly jungles or enchanted forests; going battle with dragons, giants, and other super natural foes; crossing a bottomless chasm on a bridge as narrow as the edge of a knife; and a limitless variety of similar obstacles and hazards. In "realistic" works of fiction, the ordeals are usually more mundane though no less demanding, since the protagonists themselves are ordinary individuals rather than heroes of mythic stature or superhuman ability.

The Journey has a purpose: it is a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society, and the nature of human existence. The rigors of the journey, the trials and even tortures the heroes must undergo, are a sign that these truths are very difficult to face, not simply because they are often painful in themselves, but also because accepting them requires that the individuals rid themselves of their familiar, if outmoded, assumptions, values and self-images. In short, they must "die" to their former way of life before they can be "born" into a new one. In this sense, then most quest narratives are stories of initiation.

The quest narrative reproduces the pattern of the "rites of passage" performed in many societies, in which youths are initiated into the privileges and obligations of adulthood after being put through a series of extremely harsh ordeals, such as beating, lack of food and sleep, and even physical mutilation, all of which are meant both to enact and to effect the initiate's death to his childhood state. Similarly, the journeys portrayed in myth and literature may feature episodes in which the hero undergoes a symbolic death or "return to the womb" and rebirth.

The knowledge heroes gain through their experiences on the journey is always important, if not always pleasant or easy to accept. They may be forced, for instance to face a hard fact about their place in a particular culture or in the world at large. At other times, the protagonists gain insight into vital areas of their own natures, for psychological journey, a descent into the dark unexplored regions of the hero's heart and soul, where the dragons and demons that must be faced and overcome are either embodiments of his or her own personal weaknesses, limitations and fears.

In a larger sense, the "road of trials" always leads to an illumination of character. Though some protagonists may remain blind to the reality of their natures even at the end of their stories, their responses to the perils and pitfalls of the quest tell the reader a great deal about them. For this reason, the journey is the
ultimate revelation or test of a character's heroic potential--a test some of the protagonists in these stories fail.

**TREASURE**

The hero's quest, as a persistent narrative pattern underlying literature and mythology, reveals two striking and apparently contradictory features of the human imagination. On the one hand, is its fixedness, its apparently insatiable appetite for the same essential tale; on the other is its infinite flexibility, its power to invent endless variations on a single theme. Through history, the story of the quest has provided writers with a vehicle for their original insights and visions. Like the other elements of this pattern we have looked at so far, the ultimate goal of the journey takes innumerable forms. Every version of the quest in myth, fairy tale and fantasy revolves around a particular "boon," often a fabulous treasure: The Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail, the Water of Life, the Plant of Immortality, the Lost Ark of the Covenant, and countless others. In the kind of fiction labeled Magical Realism, the treasures are sometimes less spectacular, and often intangible. Sometimes, the goal of the quest is a literal treasure: precious object, hoards of jewels or hidden fortune. In other stories, the prize the hero seeks, though still a tangible object, is comparatively paltry or even worthless (at least in the eyes of the rest of the world). The treasure sought may even be a person, as in the fairy tales. Often the hero journeys to find or rescue a princess. But the treasure is not always a material object. Often it is something intangible: the acquisition of knowledge, power, spiritual enlightenment, or inner peace. In fact, even when the treasure is tangible, what it represents is some intangible quality. Gaining this quality is the "true" treasure, though the heroes may not immediately realize what they have gained.

In spite of all the different forms they take, however, the treasures that lie at the end of the quest always share certain characteristics. First, they are difficult to obtain; reaching them requires immense effort of the heroes. Therefore, the goal of the mythological quest is "the treasure hard to attain." And the value of the treasure (to the hero) is in direct proportion to the difficulty of his or her journey to attain it. Indeed, the main characters commonly fail in their attempts to reach their goals. But even when a particular goal has little or no apparent worth, its importance to the questor is incalculable. That the heroes are willing to risk humiliation, defeat and possible death in order to achieve whatever end they are striving for is a sign of its ultimate value. In short, whether the treasure is worth a pittance or "all the money from a whole kingdom," its real value derives from its significance to the hero, from what it represents to him or her.

What exactly does the treasure represent? In story after story, the heroes are willing to undergo every variety of hardship and peril for one fundamental reason: they believe that the things they are looking for will change their lives. For some, the treasure means improvement in their material and economic circumstances. For others characters, the treasure represents a change in their position in society. Still others attempt to alter society itself. And some characters try to transform, not the outer world, but their own inner one--to break free of the fears, weaknesses, and delusions that have trapped them in deeply unhappy lives.

In virtually every instance, then, the treasure stands for the promise of a fresh start. That promise is not always fulfilled. In many stories, the heroes never find the treasure. It is also possible for the treasure to result in changes that are very different from the ones the hero expects. Still, to the true hero, the quest for the treasure remains an irresistible challenge. The hero understands that the difficulties involved in attaining the desired object reflect the difficulties involved in making any significant changes in the world or in one's self. Most people would rather cling to the familiar than face the new, even when the familiar has grown painfully unfulfilling. The desire and the ability to make those changes distinguish the hero from the rest of humankind.

**TRANSFORMATION**

To accomplish the quest, to surrender the life you have always known for the treasure that promises a new beginning, is not merely to risk death, but, in a sense, to experience it. World mythology symbolizes this through stories in which the quest heroes disappear for a time from the face of the earth. They may be swallowed by a monster, buried alive, lost in a subterranean kingdom, or actually make the journey to the land of the dead.

However, the hero's descent into death, which represents the final casting off of an old and outmoded existence, is not the end of the
quest, but a prelude to its final stage. Once the hero secures the treasure, he must still return with it. The fictional characters who successfully complete the journey are never the same people they were when they first started out; the treasure they have sought and found is precisely the transformation of lives that have been too constricted or of selves they have outgrown. For this reason, the last phase of the adventure is not simply a return but a type of resurrection: the heroes die in order to be reborn. The changes that take place within them are profound, affecting their values, perceptions, the very way they experience life. Because of this, everything around them seems transfigured: the world itself wears a new face.

In some quest stories, of course, the world the hero passes into seems worse, at first, than the one she or he has left. This is particularly true of those initiation stories in which the protagonist makes the transition from youthful innocence to mature experience. It is common for people, both in and out of fiction, to resist this particular type of transformation. Regarding the past with a piercing nostalgia, they may struggle to hold onto it as long as they can. To let go of the child’s world of pleasant irresponsibility is rarely easy; nonetheless, it is necessary. It is just this necessity, along with other difficulty and unpleasant facts of life, that the hero must learn to accept or risk remaining a child forever.

Not every hero is able to make a transition. Formidable inner and outer forces work to hold the hero back. Some protagonists find they do not have the courage to accept the change they thought they wanted. Maybe the characters do not have a powerful enough inner desire to attain their treasure and its inherent change. Or the "new life" that awaits is not always all what was expected. And often the protagonists find themselves in situations so stifling they are unable to break away. So while some characters reconcile themselves to the changes that occur during their journey through life, others eagerly quest after transformation or welcome it gratefully if it comes to them by chance.

The hunger for rebirth, in fact, is basic to human beings and we exhibit it in many different ways. In religion, the yearning for rebirth is expressed in such beliefs as reincarnation, the transmigration of souls and the resurrection of the body after death, as well as in the conversion experience, the conviction that one has been "born again" through the grace of God. Other people long for the kind of rebirth that will affect their material rather than spiritual condition; examples are immigrants who come to American looking for a new life. Still others seek to relieve feelings of depletion or stagnation; for example, the city-dweller who hopes to be regenerated by a vacation in the wilderness or the frustrated individual who believes that a change in career, marital status, or geography will make his or her life more fulfilling. Finally, some people struggle toward what is perhaps the most difficult rebirth of all: psychological rebirth, the transformation of their own personalities. Depressed by the sense that they have not lived up to their potential or trapped in deeply entrenched patterns of destructive behavior, these people undertake the long and painful process of inner exploration. Their quest is for the self-knowledge that can liberate them from neurosis and put them in touch with their untapped inner resources that can revitalize them.

For all their differences, stories of the quest attest to the same fundamental feature of the human spirit: not only a perennial hunger for renewal but also an inextinguishable faith in its possibility. Many characters never accomplish their quests; some are defeated before they begin. Every quest is in proportion. The stronger the desire for the treasure, the more courageous the hero. The more valuable the treasure, the more difficult the journey to attain it. And when attained, the more truly valuable the treasure and the transformation, the more complete his rebirth. Any one requirement for balance along the way can cause the hero to fail. But for every protagonist who fails, another succeeds, and in so doing demonstrates the human potential for meaningful transformation, the ability of people to change their world and themselves for the better.