Directions*: Read, annotate, and react to the argument below…*

*Star Wars*: A Myth for Our Time


by Andrew Gordon

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*Star Wars*, George Lucas' lavish space opera, is a fantasy for our times, this generation's *Wizard of Oz*. Nevertheless, whereas Lucas' film was almost universally praised for its costuming, sets, technical perfection, and wondrous special effects, its plot was largely dismissed by reviewers as corny or hokey, strictly kids' stuff. "The film's story is bad pulp, and so are the characters of hero Luke and heroine Leia," says Richard Corliss.1 "I kept looking for an 'edge,' to peer around the corny, solemn comic-book strophes," writes Stanley Kauffmann.2 And Molly Haskell sums up the critics' objections: "*Star Wars* is childish, even for a cartoon."3

Well, if *Star Wars* is childish, then so are *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Like Tolkien's *Middle Earth* series, *Star Wars* is a modern fairy tale, a pastiche which reworks a multitude of old stories, and yet creates a complete and self-sufficient world of its own,4 one populated with intentionally flat, archetypal characters: reluctant young hero, warrior-wizard, brave and beautiful princess, and monstrous black villain. I would argue that the movie's fundamental appeal to both young and old lies precisely in its deliberately old-fashioned plot, which has its roots deep in American popular fantasy, and, deeper yet, in the epic structure of what Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* calls "the monomyth."

In an era when Americans had lost heroes in whom to believe, Lucas created a myth for our times, fashioned out of bits and pieces of twentieth-century American popular mythology--old movies, science fiction, television, and comic books--but held together at its most basic level by the standard pattern of the adventures of a mythic hero. *Star Wars* is a masterpiece of synthesis, a triumph of American ingenuity and resourcefulness, demonstrating, how the old may be made new again: Lucas raided the junkyards of our popular culture and rigged a working myth out of scrap. Like the hotrods in his previous film, *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* is an amalgam of pieces of mass culture customized and supercharged and run flat out. He lifted parts openly and lovingly from various popular culture genres, but the engine that runs it is the "monomyth."

If, as Lucas says, he has studied myth and deliberately attempted to construct one in his film, it would be useful to determine how successfully the work meets mythic criteria. I want to examine *Star Wars*: A Myth for Our Time in the light of Joseph Campbell's thesis in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* that the hero of epic myth is a dream-figure who stands in for the entire culture. According to Campbell, the hero must descend into the infantile unconscious, the realm of sleep. There the hero gives battle to "the nursery demons of his local culture," and "brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of the society as a whole" (pp.17,38). Symbolically, he become a man by rescuing his mother and slaying his father. Despite the Oedipal nature of the conflict, he is finally accepted by the parent figures, and thus discovers his true identity and attains his true powers, which he realizes were within him all the time. Campbell divides this "monomyth" into three main stages--Departure, Initiation, and Return--each of which consists of various steps, so I will trace the action of *Star Wars* to see how closely it corresponds to this traditional pattern of mythic adventure.

Typically, the hero is the orphaned son or royalty. Unaware of his true identity, he is consigned to a life of drudgery and exile. He is first called to adventure by a herald, signifying that "the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (p.51). The threshold represents a rebirth into adulthood; the hero or heroine must overcome the parents, who stand as "threshold guardians."

The next step in this wish-fulfillment dream is the encounter with a protective figure, "some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require....The call, in fact, was the first announcement of the approach of this initiatory priest" (pp. 72-73). The wizard here is old Ben Kenobi, once a rebel General (Obi-wan) and a friend to Luke's father, now a hermit in the desert wastes of the planet; the Princess' message had been a call for his help.

Of course, nothing in mythic plots adheres to the conventions of realism; it is all guided to fulfill the hero's "destiny." And what is destiny but a supernatural "Force" which arranges for things to happen? It is another word for the belief in the magical omnipotence of thought. For example, why does a chain of circumstances detour the little robot to Luke's farm? This is not chance--it was evidently predestined for Luke's sake. And why is Ben living as a hermit near Luke's farm? Obviously, so that he could be there when Luke needed him. For that matter, the death of Luke's aunt and uncle is arranged conveniently.

As Otto Rank notes in The *Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, "the myth throughout reveals an endeavor to get rid of the parents," particularly the father; yet the hero, like Hamlet, sees himself not as the persecutor but as "the avenger of the murdered father." In fact, Luke has a careless habit of losing father-figures: first the Knight, then his uncle, and then Ben fall to the demonic Darth Vader (whose name suggests "dark" or "death invader," or even "death father").

At the center of the journey is "The Meeting with the Goddess" and "The Atonement with the Father," both symbolic stages in working out the Oedipal crisis. The rescue of the Princess represents the former stage, and the death of Ben represents the latter. Luke's guardian, having fulfilled his function, seems to will his own destruction and is cut down by Vader; nevertheless, he does not die so much as he disappears in order to be subsumed into the Force. He persists as a voice which guides Luke at critical moments, like the superego, which Freud posited as nothing more than the internalized voice of the parents. Once they are safely aboard Solo's ship, Luke mourns Ben, and is comforted by the Princess, who maternally puts a blanket over his shoulders and tells him he is not to blame; there is nothing he could have done about it. Ben had similarly exculpated him after Luke found his aunt and uncle dead.

We can see here again how Lucas attempts to make this essentially Oedipal fable guilt-free. If myth is dreamlike, then all the characters are merely extensions of the wishes of the central character. Vader as destructive devil acts out Luke's patricidal desires, yet Ben, his good side, still forgives him and blesses him, as we all wish our parents to do. Finally, the Oedipal desires toward the mother-figure are also kept in check by the inability of the Princess to decide between the two rivals, Luke and Solo.

Having symbolically met his mother and made his peace with his father, the hero, according to Campbell, has reached the stage of Apotheosis. He is now the possessor of the grace of the Gods, "the Ultimate Boon" which can restore his culture. This Boon is, of course, the Force. This ur-religion is a basic element of all myth; the hero becomes the possessor of this ubiquitous power, or "Force" when he achieves adulthood.

Thus the mystical elements of *Star Wars* begin to make sense; they are indispensable to the mythic structure. Moreover, this Force, as Campbell explains, is not simply a religious power; it is also the power of the libido, and "its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven" (p. 182). Luke, having won through his trials and proven himself to his guardian, can now enter manhood. The father dies for his sake, freeing Luke's libido; as Ben tells him, "The Force will be with you always."

The Departure and the Initiation completed, the hero now begins the third and final stage: the Return.

Having crossed the threshold from "the world of light" into "the world of darkness" and returned alive, Luke is now "master of the Two Worlds" (p. 229). He has the power to move at will between the two, and he proves this by returning at the risk of his life to the Death Star in order to destroy it. In combat, Luke now assumes his true identity, which is that of the ideal father: Jedi Knight, starship pilot, and cunning warrior. Guided by the Force, he naturally succeeds in his task.

According to Campbell, "the work of the hero is to slay the tenacious aspect of the father (dragon, tester, ogre king) and release from its ban the vital energies that will feed the universe" (p. 352). His job, in other words, is the destruction of the status quo in order to permit renewal and restoration, and this is the task which Luke, ordinary boy raised to the status of mythic hero, successfully performs.

It is precisely this sense of renewal which makes *Star Wars* so appealing. In the absence of any shared contemporary myths, Lucas has constructed out of the usable past, out of bits of American pop culture, a new mythology which can satisfy the emotional needs of both children and adults.30 The passion for *Star Wars* is akin to the fervor of a religious revival.

Each generation must either create its own myths and its own heroes or regenerate those of the past. *Star Wars* was released in a period when the heroes had been cast down through such national catastrophes as Vietnam and Watergate, when the lines between good and evil became cloudy, and when sexual identities were beginning to be redefined by the Women's Movement. Meanwhile, Americans found themselves living inside a kind of Death Star, a machine world drained of spiritual values, a world in which the individual felt impotent and alien. In the late 1970s, Americans desperately needed a renewal of faith in themselves as good guys on the world scene, as men and women, as human beings who count, and so returned temporarily to the simpler patterns of the past. Old superheroes like Superman were revived--and so were old-fashioned genre films like Rocky and *Star Wars*.

Such fantasies give voice to our deepest longings, and speak to our hopes about the future of our society and of ourselves. For example, in opposition to the dehumanizing uses of technology, *Star Wars* shows the triumph of good technology over evil machinery--an updated version of the triumph of white magic over black magic in *The Wizard of Oz*. Viewers recognize that *Star Wars* has no direct relation to external reality, but it does relate to our dreams of how we would like reality to be. As the reviewer Jack Kroll says about the film, "It's the last chance for kids to have fun before they grow up to be Oedipus. And we hollow-eyed Oedipuses can, if we try, go back and enjoy the fun of our pre-guilt stage."32

"Kids' stuff," after all, is the stuff that dreams are made of.

<http://web.clas.ufl.edu/users/agordon/starwars.htm>

Reaction to what I read: