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The Superhero's Mythic Journey: Death and the Heroic Cycle in Superman

Abstract

Superman, the original superhero, is a culmination of the great mythic heroes of the past. The hero's journey, a recurring cycle of events in mythology, is described by Joseph Campbell. The three acts in *Superman: The Movie* portray a complex calling to the superhero's role, consisting of three distinct calls and journeys. Each of the three stages includes the death of someone close to him, different symbols of his own death and resurrection, and different experiences of atonement with a father figure. Analyzing these mythic cycles bestows the viewer with a heroic "elixir."

Introduction

Since 1938, Superman has been popular culture's paradigmatic hero, and the original superhero has lived in many forms of media, from comic books to television series to film versions that include the 2006 *Superman Returns*.¹ His story is a culmination of the great mythic heroes of the past.

A recurring cycle of events in the myths that have been told since the dawn of history is described by Joseph Campbell.² The "monomyth" consists of the hero's journey. Beginning with the call to adventure, the archetypal hero journeys out of his ordinary world into a special world, facing many trials (including his own death and resurrection), and finally returning home with an elixir (e.g., of new perceptions, powers, personal growth, or precious objects).

For a quarter century, the blockbuster 1978 film *Superman: The Movie*³ established the dominant images in popular consciousness of Superman's heroic journey, his arriving on Earth, growing up, and starting of his mission. In the film, Superman (a.k.a., Kal-El and Clark Kent) has a complex call to his role as superhero (when viewed through the lens of Campbell's work on mythology).⁴ The overall "call" consists of three distinct calls and journeys.⁵ Each journey is a stage of a longer overarching journey, with the later stages building on the earlier ones over a span of about 30 years. For Superman, each of the three stages has:

- The death of someone close to him.
- Different symbols of his own death and resurrection.
- Different experiences of atonement with a father figure. Atonement here is reconciliation in a relationship, a symbolic life rising from death. Where there has been separation and disconnection (death of a relationship), there is a rejoining, rekindling, and rebirth (resurrection of that relationship).

Elements of these stages are mapped in the chart below and elaborated in the sections that follow.

Call	Identity	Travels	Death	Resurrection	Atonement	Elixir
#1 Go and live with Earth's people	Kal-El	From Krypton to Earth	Parents and people of Krypton; Kal-El is "entombed" in the spacecraft for 3 years	Landing on Earth, he rises from the spacecraft	With Jonathan Kent (after separating from Jor-El)	New family
#2 Retreat from Earth's people	Clark Kent	From Smallville to Fortress of Solitude	Jonathan Kent; Clark is "entombed" in the Fortress for 12 years	Jor-El seen as a hologram; Superman flies out of the Fortress	With Jor-El (after separating from Jonathan)	New powers
#3 Save Earth's people	Superman	From Metropolis to the whole world	Lois; Superman is submerged in a pool that nearly becomes a permanent tomb	Lois raised from the ground; Superman is saved from the pool by Eve	With Jonathan Kent's ideals (after rejecting Jor-El's directive)	New life

First Call: Go and Live with Earth's People

Jor-El (Marlon Brando), Kal-El's father and the greatest scientist on the planet Krypton, believes the planet is doomed, but his heralded prediction is squelched by Krypton's disbelieving Council. The Council refuses Jor-El's call to evacuate the planet. As a last resort, Jor-El and his wife, Lara (Susannah York), place their infant son, Kal-El, in a spacecraft aimed at Earth.

Kal-El's relationship with his father is foretold as a mystical/technological bond. When Lara despairs that their son shall be isolated and alone on his journey, Jor-El replies, "He will not be alone." (He holds up the green crystal that contains a holographic computerized memory of them.) "He will never be alone."

Jor-El gives a benediction to his son as they prepare the spacecraft:

We will never leave you, even in the face of our deaths. The richness of our lives, this will be yours. All that I have, all that I've learned, everything that I feel, all this and more, I bequeath you, my Son. You will carry me inside you all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, see my life through your eyes, as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father and the father the son."

This mystical deep connection will suffer separation, reunion (atonement), and another separation once more as the story progresses.⁶

The launched spacecraft narrowly escapes the destruction of Krypton as its sun explodes into a nova. Kal-El is called to escape death by traveling to Earth, and

as an infant he cannot resist that call even if he wanted to. His escape is enabled by the (ally) crystalline spacecraft that resembles a nativity set's Star of Bethlehem.

During the flight at near light speed across thousands of light years, he ages three years while the computerized memory of his father mentors the supertot about physics, history, and astronomy. For three years he is entombed in the small spacecraft ("whale's belly" according to Campbell or "cave" according to Stuart Voytilla who adapts Campbell's mythic structure for film analysis⁷) as it crosses the threshold of interstellar space. He is symbolically dead since no living soul knows of his existence.

The spacecraft finally blazes through the Earth's atmosphere and crashes into a wheat field. Then Kal-El rises from his technological tomb and unites with (allies) Jonathan and Martha Kent, who name him Clark. After years of isolation in the spacecraft, the toddler experiences atonement with a new adoptive father. A childless couple obtains the elixir of a new family.

He is now in his special world—which is the ordinary world to us. He cannot physically return to his original ordinary world of Krypton since it is destroyed (although in science fiction ways can be found around nearly any obstacle).⁸

Second Call: Retreat from Earth's People

According to Campbell,⁹ "the child of destiny has to face a long period of obscurity." Clark's life before crashing to Earth is a mystery to his family as he grows to be a teenager on a small family farm. As a teenager, Clark (Jeff East) is frustrated because he must hide his superior powers. He could easily be the greatest football hero ever, but instead he takes on the humble role of a servant as locker-room boy.¹⁰ He endures the trials of being different, of being superior in every way, of being able to score countless touchdowns, but hiding all those powers. Jonathan Kent (Glenn Ford), just before dying of a heart attack, tells Clark that he must hide his abilities (refusing the call temporarily) until he can understand his destiny. "You are here for a reason. I don't know whose reason or what reason . . . but I do know one thing—it's not to score touchdowns." His "reason" for being on this planet is a question that echoes several times during the film.

Clark is traumatized by his adoptive father's death. Not only is the inevitable sense of loss present, but he felt, for all his great powers, that he was still powerless to save him from death. Furthermore, he is partly responsible for his death, since his playful race with Jonathan triggers the heart attack.

Soon afterwards, Clark feels drawn to a glowing green crystal - a remnant from the spacecraft - hidden in the barn, and he realizes he must leave home. Compelled by the mysterious urge, he hesitates, not wanting to leave his widowed mother, but then he accepts his call and wanders through the wilderness of the polar

icecap. He throws the crystal out onto the ice, and a crystalline Fortress of Solitude constructs itself through superengineering technology.

Inside, he experiences atonement with his Kryptonian father via an interactive hologram of Jor-El. Jor-El says that he is Clark's true father, and he mentors Clark with the Kryptonian catechism for 12 years until he is ready for his mission on Earth. During the 12 years, Clark takes a virtual-reality tour back in space and time, back to his original ordinary world of Krypton. At the end Jor-El tells him:

I have chosen Earth for you. It is now time for you to rejoin your new world and to serve its collective humanity. Live as one of them, Kal-El. . . . They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, the capacity for growth, I have sent you, my only son.

For a dozen years Clark has been "dead" to the outside world, willingly entombed in this crystalline cave (whale's belly), until he is ready to re-enter our world. On that day, he (Christopher Reeve), now garbed in his traditional blue-and-red suit, flies out (resurrects) into the world, crossing the return threshold, with the elixir of new powers that he will soon share with the world.

Third Call: Save Earth's People

Wearing the trickster mask of a comically fumbling "mild-mannered reporter," Clark obtains a position at the *Daily Planet* (his new "ordinary world")

and meets coworker Lois Lane (who becomes his goddess). No one on Earth (except his mother) is aware of Clark's shapeshifting alter ego - until he gets his final call to become the paradigmatic superhero.

During a helicopter accident, Lois (Margot Kidder) dangles off the top of a skyscraper. Clark hurries through the crowd, in a race against time (ticking clock), to find a hidden place to remove his mask. In a revolving door he changes into his blue-and-red suit and rescues Lois as she is falling. While he is at it, he also foils robberies, saves a cat from a tree, and helps Air Force One land safely. From pussycat to President, his elixir of salvific power stuns the world. His destiny in the world is now disclosed.

The seemingly invulnerable superhero must face the ultimate vulnerability of his own death and the death of his greatest love. When Superman meets his enemy, he discovers his own greatest weakness. Superman's archenemy, Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), reasons the "specific radioactivity" of a planet Krypton fragment will kill Superman here on Earth. After making a Kryptonite necklace for Superman, Luthor also programs two nuclear missiles to blast both New Jersey and the San Andreas Fault.

After unsuccessfully trying to tempt Superman to join him, Luthor places the Kryptonite chain around Superman's neck and pushes him into a pool (whale's

belly), leaving him for dead. Symbolically he dies¹¹ but rises from the watery grave when Eve Teschmacher (Valerie Perrine), as a fallen goddess figure (shapeshifting ally), pulls him out of the pool and removes the Kryptonite (so that he can save her mother from the vaporization of Hackensack).

Although Superman stops the missile heading for New Jersey, he cannot beat the ticking clock for the second missile, and a nuclear explosion blasts the San Andreas Fault. After his symbolic death in the pool, Superman now "descends into hell" (another whale's belly) as he flies underground along the red-hot rock pushing the fault line back together. Emerging from "hell," Superman finds Lois dead and buried underground by the earthquake. He pulls her car from the ground, but it is a false resurrection since her body is lifeless. This is his greatest ordeal, and finally with a scream he flies up into the clouds.

At this juncture, he hears conflicting echoes from his two dead fathers. A vision of Jor-El's face in the clouds admonishes, "It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history."¹² Jonathan Kent's voice says, "You are here for a reason." And Superman remembers his own teenage inability to save Jonathan from death.

Superman rebels against his Kryptonian father as threshold guardian, and he continues his atonement with his Earthly father (or at least Jonathan's ideals).¹³ If he could not bring a loved one back from death 12 years before, this time he will.

Superman resurrects Lois¹⁴ by flying around the planet at hyperlight speeds until the Earth turns backwards (reversing the ticking of the clock) and history is changed. Leaving our ordinary world by traveling into the past, he returns with the elixir of Lois's resurrection.

The Ultimate Boon

The movie closes with a shot of Superman flying above the globe of the Earth and smiling at the camera before the closing credits. This superhero's journey has come full circle. He came to Earth from outer space, and after experiencing physical/relational life and death on multiple levels, he returns to the fringes of outer space at the end. He is master of both Earth and space, easily traveling from one to the other, just as he can easily change from his mask of Clark Kent, fumbling reporter, to his true persona of Superman.

Just before flying into space, he delivers Lex Luthor to prison. The warden thanks Superman for the elixir of making the country safe again. Superman's closing words are, "Don't thank me, Warden. We're all part of the same team."

We, as the audience of this film, do not have super powers, but we can be on the "same team." We cannot emulate Superman's physical strength and speed, but we can emulate his moral strength and integrity. We are all called to a journey of doing good and courageously fighting for truth and justice even in the face of

adversity and impossible odds.¹⁵ That is this film's final elixir. That is the meaning of this mythology for us.

¹ Dir. Bryan Singer. Warner Brothers, 2006.

² *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

³ Dir. Richard Donner. Warner Brothers, 1978.

⁴ This paper is an analysis of the movie in terms of Campbell's view of mythology. For an analysis of Superman as a Christ figure, see Anton Karl Kozlovic, "Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah," *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2002, 6 Aug. 2005. He details a very large number of Bible-film parallels in this article and two later related articles. See "The Unholy Biblical Subtexts and Other Religious Elements Built into *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Superman II* (1981)" *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 7, No. 1, April 2003, 6 Aug. 2005. See also "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts in *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Superman II* (1981)" *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2002, 6 Aug. 2005.

⁵ The cinematography of the film also has distinct stages, from the ponderous scenes of blinding whites and inky blacks of Krypton and space, to the bucolic Norman Rockwell earth tones of Smallville, to the fast pacing and comic-strip primary colors of Superman's suit in Metropolis.

⁶ This parallels Jesus's words "I and the Father are one" in John 10:30. The film's Creative Consultant, Tom Mankiewicz, said in an interview in the documentary *Taking Flight: The Development of Superman*, "On Krypton, I was intending it to be almost semi-Biblical The metaphor was clearly there when Jor-El sends Superman to Earth of God sending Christ to save humanity." (Dir. Michael Thau. Warner Home Video, 2001.)

⁷ *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 1999).

⁸ In *Superman Returns*, after astronomers discover the remains of Krypton, Superman does return there. His mission, taking five long years, is unsuccessful, however, since he finds only what he describes as a graveyard.

⁹ Campbell 326.

¹⁰ Cf. the discussion of servanthood versus domination in "The Piano and the Gospel of Mark," David Rhoads and Sandra Roberts, *Explorations in Theology and Film*, eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 47-58.

¹¹ For water baptism as symbolic of death and resurrection, see Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:3-4.

¹² This seems to conflict with his other admonition to "to serve its collective humanity." Any service to humanity is inherently interference with human history, but perhaps it is meant as a prohibition to change time and reverse events that have already occurred.

¹³ In contrast, the most recent continuing incarnation of the Superman myth is the current television series "*Smallville*," a much darker, more complex retelling of Superman's origin. In one episode, Jor-El's sinister message is that Kal-El was sent to conquer the Earth, not to serve it. In various episodes, teenage Clark rejects both his Kryptonian and Earthly fathers (but always reconciles with Jonathan Kent eventually).

¹⁴ Cf. Jesus raising Lazarus in John 11:38-44.

¹⁵ Cf. Campbell's discussion (p. 319) of the problem of interpreting heroism as "predestined" (and with great powers) versus "achieved" (by hard but human work). Superman was "predestined" for his role on Earth, and his powers could never be "achieved" by other mortals. Yet, his character can be emulated.