

YOUR JOURNEY TO HELL AND BACK

The Greek concept of katabasis can provide analysis and structure for creating strong narratives.

By Linda Lappin

Once upon a time, we made sense of ourselves and our world by telling a story, conjuring an archetype or creating a symbol. The myths, symbols and stories that sprang from our imagination in those distant days are some of the most powerful and enduring creations of world culture. The old myths still move us, reverberating in our unconscious, in our dreams and in the stories we keep telling and retelling. From our earliest bards to the Romantic poets, from modernists Virginia Woolf and Ralph Ellison to contemporary masters Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Toni Morrison, or mainstream authors J.K. Rowling and Dan Brown, writers have looked to mythology for inspiration, plot patterns and imagery.

In his famous essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” published in the *Dial* in 1923, T.S. Eliot praises James Joyce for his use of myth in his masterpiece *Ulysses* and explains why recourse to what he called “the mythical method” was vital for the writers of his time: “It was simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” For Eliot, the old belief systems of western civilization had crumbled after World War I, but the ancient myths on which they had been built remained intact and alive beneath a heap of shards. Whether we agree with Eliot’s pessimistic view or see the universe as a whirling mosaic of particles in constant change, myth is an extraordinary instrument for organizing experiences into patterns guaranteed to trigger deep responses in readers.

The word “myth” is very hard to define. In colloquial usage, “myth” refers to something that is untrue, imaginary or fictitious: beliefs or ideas that dissolve if subjected to rational enquiry. Perhaps you studied the Greek myths in elementary school and remember them as strange, old stories clothed in archaic language about the intervention of supernatural beings into human life, related to fairy tales and essentially for children. You may have learned that myths are explanations of natural phenomena, dating back to a time when scientific observation was unknown. If you have studied psychology, you know the great pioneers of psychoanalysis used Greek myths to express psychological states and processes and viewed them as keys to understanding the unconscious. If you have studied European art history or literature, you will also have noted that Greek mythology in particular carries a certain aura of prestige.

Writers and painters of every era have referred to it in their work and although styles may have changed across the centuries, figures drawn from the Greek myths never seem to go out of date, remaining frequent subjects for contemporary poetry, art, music and performance. You may consider myths highbrow, artsy and remote from contemporary experience. Nothing could be further from the truth, for myths, as with dreams, are constructed from archetypes shared by all human beings from all ages. The word “myth” is related to the words “mystery” and “muthos,” meaning story or speech. The Roman philosopher Sallust in his treatise on myth and the gods claims that myths are divine, that they “are things that never happened but always are.” We might say that they are stories for understanding our inner world.

Joseph Campbell, one of the greatest 20th century explorers of myth, said that myths are collective dreams, and dreams are personal myths. Myths may unlock our creativity by accessing a realm of our psyche in which dreams and archetypes mingle and our most intimate, immediate and subjective experiences merge in the ocean of the ageless and universal. Using myth as inspiration or writing prompt can help a writer explore new material and get beyond the strictly personal while gaining new perspective on the meaning of personal experience.

Campbell dedicated his life to studying the myth of the hero in cultures all over the globe. From this immense body of material, he extracted a single formula that he called the monomyth. He charted an itinerary

of quest and initiation from the great mythologies, legends, folklore, fairy tales and religious narratives of the world, from Osiris and Prometheus to Buddha and Christ. In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he sums up the monomyth: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” He then identified a series of phases in the hero’s journey: the call to adventure, the road of trials, the goal or boon. These three phases may also be described as separation/departure, initiation and return, and are in turn divided into several minor phases or, we might say, plot variations. The study of this formula and its application in analyzing or constructing the plots of fictional or nonfictional narratives offers endless possibilities to the creative writer. We will be examining one of the early phases in the formula: katabasis, or the hero/heroine’s descent.

KATABASIS

According to Campbell, in myths, fairy tales and fictional narratives of mythic resonance, the hero’s or heroine’s descent to the underworld is often preceded by a “call to initiation” and separation from family and home environment. This going down into, or “katabasis” in Greek, entails journeying into the deeps of the earth or into the depths of oneself. It is a time of solitude and doubt, mourning and danger, anguish, fear, alienation, often estrangement from what we hold most dear: our sense of who we are. Thus do the mythic characters of Cybele, Gilgamesh, Aeneas and Ulysses enter the gates of the underworld; thus does Dante trudge through the freezing circles of hell in *The Inferno*.

In the great myths and epics of antiquity, descent to the underworld signified a journey to the realm of the dead or the gods, a world with its own very realistic geography and landscape that mirrored our own world, with whirlpools, deserts, giant boulders, massive trees, fiery lakes, marshes and mud – often described by ancient poets in very concrete detail. Although we may not be deprived of our dominant sense of sight as we make our way across its murky terrain, we will be required to rely heavily on other senses – hearing, smell, intuition. Very often we require a guide, a map, precise instructions, a goal, to help get us out again, such as the golden branch Aeneas plucked from a sacred tree to use as his passport to Hades.

In this shadowy subterranean realm, the protagonist undergoes tests and trials and may be captured, imprisoned or enslaved. Often, like Orpheus or his Japanese counterpart, Izanagi, he will meet dead loved ones whom he is powerless to rescue or who have important messages to deliver. During the journey, the hero/heroine will encounter allies and enemies, lose a possession or receive a gift, find a treasure, discover his or her true origins, acquire knowledge, and/or achieve liberation for him or herself or for another before returning to the light of day, transformed and ready for a new stage in the journey to selfhood. It is easy to see how this formula underpins many fictional narratives. It also appears disguised in many memoirs in which quest, conflict, resolution, and transformation are key phases.

Psychologists tell us that these journeys to the underworld are explorations of the individual or collective unconscious in which we may encounter repressed and buried instincts, desires, emotions, secrets and unacknowledged needs. This is the realm of chaos and the irrational, and yet a source of creative and vital power. It is home to what depth psychologist C.G. Jung called the shadow – the dark side of the self that we cannot easily recognize because it contains repressed, negative and unfavorable aspects of ourselves that Jungians psychologists believe must be integrated into our greater self to achieve full realization of our true nature.

For the ancient Romans and Etruscans and in several Native American traditions, the underworld could be entered through caves, tunnels and caverns situated in our so-called real world. In other traditions, however, the inner realm of danger, penitence or treasures need not necessarily be “under the ground” – it may be beneath or across the sea, in a desert or forest, enclosed in a mountain such as the Chinese hell, Feng-Du, which the Chinese imagined to be a series of efficiently run prisons. The underworld is, however, just

outside the realm of immediate perception, hostile to human life and often accessed by a magic entry existing within the ordinary world. In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, that door to the other world was behind old clothes hanging in a closet. In *Black Orpheus*, Marcel Camus' film based on the Greek myth, it is found in the basement beneath the Bureau of Missing Persons in modern day Brazil. As Rene Daumal writes in his allegorical novel *Mont Analogue*, the door to the invisible must be visible.

In ancient Roman and Greek literature, the journey to the underworld sometimes requires preparation: instructions on what to do or not do, on when to be silent or to speak, and things to bring along: coins to pay the ferryman or oat cakes to throw to the ferocious three-headed dog Cerberus so that it will not tear the seeker to pieces. Sometimes an object or device is needed to find your way back again like the thread Ariadne gave Theseus to lead him out of the labyrinth in the myth of the Minotaur or the pebbles Hansel scatters on his way into the forest in the Grimms' classic tale *Hansel and Gretel*. Before penetrating the other realm, there is usually a boundary to overcome (a river to cross, for example), and a gatekeeper to be dealt with through cunning, negotiation or combat. Once we get past the guardian, the journey may progress in stages. In the Mesopotamian myth of Inanna's descent to the underworld, the goddess was required to shed her veils and garments at each successive gateway until she reached the bottom stark naked, symbolizing that she had attained essential truth.

Once we are all the way down, we discover a world operating under its own laws. The place may be extraordinarily beautiful but somehow uncanny, or horrible and life-threatening with extreme temperatures or a menacing landscape. It may contain an uncontrolled proliferation of natural forms relating to death, disease and fertility as in the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, or it may be strewn with treasures. It may be desolate or teeming with creatures human or otherwise, crowded with dead people and objects vanished long ago. Or it may take the form of an absolute deprivation, containing absolutely nothing. Time also may be suspended. A 24-hour journey may seem like a lifetime, as happens to Dante.

As we maneuver this terrifying environment, we may encounter a helper to prepare us for the confrontation with the reigning entity: the shadow. In classical literature, the shadow was the Minotaur, Pluto or other inhabitants of the underworld. It may also be a person, an animal, a form of addiction, a self-destructive tendency, a fear, disease, an unpleasant side of ourselves, an evil twin. Whatever or whoever the shadow may be, it must be dealt with before we can go up again. Confrontation with the shadow is a dangerous undertaking that marks the hero's or heroine's initiation. At the resolution of this confrontation, we will receive a boon: power or knowledge to take back up again to the world we have left behind and to which we will return transformed.

Dante's katabasis in *The Inferno* ends with a harrowing encounter with Satan himself, the ultimate shadow. Then Dante and his guide escape by passing through the center of the earth where they physically experience a shift in gravity, and after a long trek up through diminishing darkness, they finally emerge in the opposite hemisphere, beneath a sky brimming with stars. The poet uses strong metaphors to convey the great change that has taken place in his inner world: a reversal in the earth's gravitational pull, his arrival in a different hemisphere, a move from darkness to starlight. The poem concludes with the word "stars," a complex symbol in Dante's time associated with destiny, time, nature, God and hope. After katabasis, the return to our ordinary realm may not necessarily bring perfect happiness – Orpheus cannot bring his dead wife back – but it does confer upon us a new identity and a new awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings subjected to greater laws in which both faith and hope have a role to play.

PROMPT: YOUR JOURNEY TO HELL – WRITE YOUR OWN MYTH OF KATABASIS

Using elements in your immediate environment, write a narrative of descent based on the patterns just discussed. It is important to emphasize that we need to feel free when working with myths, as indeed ancient writers did. If the exercise below seems schematic, you may vary, transgress, elaborate or reduce as you wish.

1. Create a character and the circumstances through which he or she finds himself alone, separated from family or community. Give him or her a goal to reach, a quest to fulfill, a problem to solve.
2. Imagine the portal to your underworld. Situate it within something *ordinary*. In E.M. Forster's short story *The Celestial Omnibus*, the hero finds himself transported to literary heaven by a bus that leaves each day from the square at dawn. In Marcel Camus' film *Black Orpheus*, set in Brazil, the portal is in the basement of an office building.
3. The portal may be guarded by someone or something so that it is not *immediately* visible or perhaps not easily accessible. Identify and describe the guardian and give your seeker a means with which to deal with him or her or it.
4. Narrate the journey further down (or across or through), describing the passage across the threshold of the underworld. What sense perceptions or landmarks signal entry into the other realm? What concrete details might convey his or her emotions?
5. Describe the landscape of the underworld.
6. Create an encounter with a helper or guide in any form.
7. Meet the shadow. Describe his or her physical appearance. What makes him or her so fearsome?
8. Narrate the conflict, and find a resolution. What gift or boon is given or withheld?
9. Bring your character back into the light of day. Focus on the moment when he or she exits the underworld. What does he or she find at the moment of transition? How does he or she look at the world with different eyes?

For more information and inspiration

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