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The Hero's Journey: Patterns in Dreams and Reality

Inevitably, patterns are omnipresent: appearing as natural patterns, explained by the biological processes including natural selection, as well as underpinning theories of mathematics, physics, and chemistry. The study of patterns can be traced back to early Greek philosophers such as Plato, Empedocles, Democritus, and Aristotle (Lennox, 2006). Fast forward a few hundred years to Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist and writer, who dedicated his research to unmasking patterns and routines of human experiences. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell breaks down The Hero's Journey, a narrative structure of patterns found in literature, myth, and psychological development. The infamous monomyth serves as a template for all stories that involve a hero's adventure during his/her quest of discovery. During the journey, the hero often finds himself/herself being tested, facing crises, and ultimately finding their way home after undergoing a physical and/or psychological transformation. Campbell divided the theory into twelve stages: The Ordinary World, The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, Crossing the Threshold, Tests & Allies & Enemies, Approach of the Innermost Cave, The Ordeal, The Reward, The Road Back, The Resurrection, and concluding with The Return with the Elixir. Screenwriter, director, and producer, Christopher Nolan applies Campbell's literary device in his 2010 film *Inception*. Although *Inception* is not an epic tale involving mythological creatures, wizards, and magic, it follows Campbell's structure nonetheless. Instead of using traditional literary elements found in works depicting the hero's journey, Nolan explores the subconscious and defamiliarizes concepts of time and reality. Through a maze of dreamscapes intended to question not only the protagonist's drifting perception of reality but that of the viewers', Nolan plants his own form of inception, relating patterns found in reality to patterns found in dreams.

Identifying the first stage of Cobb's hero's journey using Joseph Campbell's structure immediately raises challenges. Traditionally, the hero embarks on a journey from his/her home in The Ordinary World. In this case Dominic Cobb, the protagonist, finds himself in the middle of an already complicated situation. The opening sequence, an allegory to Homer's the *Odyssey*, shows an aged Cobb regaining consciousness on the shore of what is later identified as Limbo, "unconstructed dream space." From Limbo, Cobb enters the second dream level, then the first, and then finally returns to 'reality' fifteen minutes into the film. The confusion of events that take place in the film's opening is reflected in the confusion which represents Cobb's life. As Christopher Vogler states in his work *The Writer's Journey*, "The opening image can be a powerful tool to create mood and suggest where the story will go. It can be a visual metaphor that, in a single shot or scene, conjures up the Special World of Act Two and the conflicts and dualities that will be confronted there" (Vogler, page 85). Nolan, like Vogler uses the opening image or scene as a tool to foreshadow what is to come. In *Inception*, as well as in his other works, including *The Prestige* (2006) and *Interstellar* (2014), the image acts as a clue, or "A cinematic cypher leading the spectator down a false path [...] [representing] the relationship between trauma and memory" (Furby, 2015). Nolan symbolically establishes Cobb's already twisted sense of normalcy. By continuing to delve into dreamscapes, Cobb has created his own, alternate reality, in which he is drowning in his own subconscious.

The Call to Adventure on the other hand is easily identified. After Cobb and Arthur try to escape from a failed attempt to steal information from Saito, the owner of a powerful corporation, they find their loyalties shifting. As they are now on the run from Cobol Engineering, Saito offers them a job which will protect them. When Cobb confronts Saito on his intentions, Saito demands "inception [...] Is it possible? [...] If you can steal an idea

from someone's mind, why can't you plant one there instead?" After a brief discussion in which Arthur explains that "the subject's mind can always trace the genesis of the idea" and that "true inspiration is impossible to fake," Cobb interrupts, affirming that it can be done. Through Campbell's structure, Nolan uses Cobb's affirmation of inception as a means of expressing his apprehension. Cobb's previous experiences with the Call to Adventure and the sacrifices and repercussions of those calls, set him part.

Saito makes it clear that Cobb has a choice in the matter, to which Cobb replies that "I choose to leave, sir." In this brief moment the Refusal of the Call takes place. However, once Saito makes a better offer, giving Cobb the opportunity to go home to America and see his children again, he can no longer turn away. He needs to plant an idea in Robert Fischer's mind, convincing him to break up his father's business empire, so that Saito's competing company can stay in business. Cobb's sole purpose and motivation is made clear in this pivotal moment: he is willing to risk everything to see his children again. The Refusal is grounded in Cobb's previous, detrimental experience with inception.

As Saito has instructed Cobb to assemble his new team, Cobb and Arthur make their way to Paris, where Cobb seeks his father-in-law's advice. After it is made clear that he taught Cobb everything he knows about "navigating people's minds" and building worlds, he begs Cobb to "come back to reality." However, the only way for Cobb to truly come back is to go deeper. In silent understanding, Professor Miles gives Cobb the name of his brightest student, who easily masters the art of dreamscape architecture. Although the Meeting with the Mentor is most likely this meeting between Cobb and Miles, as he offers valuable advice and assistance, the true mentor in Cobb's life becomes Ariadne, the new architect. As Cobb explains the nature of a dream and the dreamer and the importance of creating worlds from imagination, Ariadne catches on to clues concerning Cobb's reality. During training, Ariadne

and Cobb find their way blocked by Cobb's projection of Mal, his dead wife. After a panicked escape from the dream, Cobb uses his totem, a spinning top, as assurance that he finds himself in reality. In this case, the top falls, confirming he is indeed in the real world. In a dream, his totem would simply keep spinning. Ariadne recognizes Cobb's troubles and discerns that through his guilt his subconscious projection of Mal is able to take control, which ultimately allows Mal to sabotage the dream. Ariadne is the only person who truly understands the power Mal has over Cobb, later stating that "Your guilt defines her. Powers her. If we're going to succeed in this, you're going to have to forgive yourself, and you're going to have to confront her. But you don't have to do it alone." From this moment, Ariadne guides Cobb through his endeavors and later gives him the strength to face his obstacles. Uniquely, Nolan establishes that Ariadne, although new to the world of dreams, is equally or even more powerful a mentor than Miles, the master of this profession.

The fifth stage in Campbell's hero's journey, Crossing the Threshold comes after Cobb has successfully assembled his team, which is now on a twelve hour and forty-five minute flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, to perform inception on Robert Fischer, convincing him to dissolve his father's business empire. Three dreams requires ten uninterrupted hours, which translates to a week in the first level, six months in the second, and ten years in the final level, to successfully plant the idea in Robert Fischer's mind. As soon as Cobb strikes a simple conversation with Fischer on the plane and is able to slip him the sedative, the team is set to cross the threshold and enter the first dreamscape. The Threshold thus become both a metaphorical and physical barrier which the characters penetrate.

Considering Campbell's words, "once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid forms, where he must survive a succession of trials", the next stage of his journey, Tests & Aliens & Enemies, is introduced. Although Robert

Fischer's subconscious houses countless enemies, Mal still proves to be the greatest threat to destroying the operation. A key error, in which Cobb's subconscious draws up a freight train in the middle of a downtown intersection throws the team off and ultimately leads to Saito's injury. In an ordinary dream, Saito's death would simply wake him up. However, they are too heavily sedated for the mission, implying that the dreamer would fall into a state of “raw, infinite subconscious” known as Limbo, rather than wake up. As the team travels down the dream levels, facing increased trials while further planting the idea during each stage, enemies such as Robert become allies, and allies like Peter Browning, Fischer's godfather, become enemies. Meanwhile, the stakes, Fischer's militarized subconscious and Cobb's personal dilemma, become greater as Nolan clarifies the real dangers of their mission; being lost in Limbo.

The Approach to the Inmost Cave takes place in what is intended to be the third and final dream level. Fischer, Cobb, Ariadne, Eames, and Saito have successfully made it inside the hospital located on top of the snowy mountain. The only remaining physical barrier is the safe, which represents Maurice Fischer's contrived wish for his son's happiness, inside which the inception will be performed. As Robert walks toward the vault, Cobb's subconscious gets the better of him. Mal auspiciously smashes their mission as she kills Robert. The object of the quest remains fulfillment of inception: Fischer entering the safe. However, Nolan reminds the audience here that Cobb's true quest is to accept Mal's death.

In a last attempt to save the operation, Cobb and Ariadne take the deep plunge into Limbo, to save Fischer from Mal's grasp. The eighth stage, The Ordeal is the moment Fischer returns to the third level, after Ariadne and Cobb have saved him from Mal, and he opens the safe. Robert imagines being by his father's side and hearing his final word, “disappointment.” In an unexpected twist, however, Robert like Cobb manipulates his memories. To add more

complexity to the concept of a dream within a dream, Nolan, introduces another element, a safe within a safe. Once memories have been manipulated, reality blurs and becomes difficult to identify.

The mission, which now solemnly rests on Robert's belief of his father's redemption, is the final step in planting true inception. The Reward in this case goes deeper than simply achieving the inception. Vogler powerfully stated that “The boundaries of space and time and even the limitations of death can be transcended” (Vogler, page 293). Robert opens the safe, where he finds not only his father's will, but a pinwheel flower. The pinwheel flower is a symbol, and proof to Robert, that his father loved him. In that instance, Robert does not see an old, bitter man filled with disappointment, but rather a fragile father who cherished and respected his son. Space and time can indeed alter perceptions of reality. The Reward, therefore, is not only the successful implementation of inception, but also the redemption, whether real or not, of Robert's father.

With limited time left, the dreamers of each dream level need to trigger a series of synchronized kicks to successfully awaken from all the dream levels. The Road Back to reality is relatively straight forward for most of the team, excluding Cobb and Saito, who find themselves in Limbo. Their return demands a resilience of the mind, enabling them to keep sense of dreams and reality.

Although the operation was accomplished, Cobb's journey goes far deeper than performing inception, which he had already achieved previously. His hero's journey is powered by his grief and guilt. His Resurrection remains finding closure and coming to terms with his wife's death. While he and Ariadne find themselves in Limbo, rescuing Fischer, Ariadne fatally shoots Mal after she attacks. Cobb is finally able to confront his demons, as he holds her dying body in his arms. Cobb was indeed responsible for “the idea that killed

her.” He planted the simplest, smallest idea in her mind, which made her question her reality. “A truth that she had once known, but had chosen to forget [...] [Her belief] that her world was not real. That death was a necessary escape.” Cobb's resurrection, through his acceptance of responsibility, gives him the strength to remain in Limbo until his mission is complete, risking destroying his sense of reality forever to come back to his children.

The Return with the Elixir and Cobb's only way of getting home to see his children again, is for him to find Saito, who passed away from his injuries and now also finds himself in Limbo. Driven by this desire and by Ariadne's last piece of advice, “Don't lose yourself. Find Saito. And bring him back.” Cobb embarks on this final mission. As an old man, he finally finds Saito and reminds him of a promise he made many years ago. The scene abruptly cuts back to the plane, where all members of the team, including Robert, are awake and well. The elixir could be many things, tangible and abstract. Perhaps it is their miraculous escape, or Cobb's ability to put Mal to rest, or a simple phone call made by Saito ensuring Cobb's passage through immigration. Whether or not Cobb finds himself in a further dreamscape in the final scene of the film or whether he has indeed made it to reality - he is reunited with his children, his ultimate reward.

Joseph Campbell's popular structure of the Hero's Journey, which he famously divided into twelve stages, has been applied by countless writers and artists through history. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* uses Campbell's structure and philosophy that “the study of myth [is] the exploration of the possibilities of consciousness” while defamiliarizing its common literary elements. As the credits roll, Nolan has successfully 'incepted' the audience. Not only has he been planting ideas, he has been planting patterns, forcing his audience to question the reality of the last two hours and twenty-eight minutes, as the totem either remains spinning or topples over.

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