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**The *Star Wars* Trilogy:
Mythology and Modernity**

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Honors Thesis

Director: Dr. Jack May

**"What we are looking for is a way of experiencing the world in which we are living
which will open to us the transcendent."**

--Joseph Campbell

Why Science Fiction Film and Religion?

In an age of film when the top-grossing American films are in essence secular, why is it that the genre of Science Fiction remains religious? Many film critics and academics are quick to point out that American films have become a predominantly secular art, replacing spirituality with action, the search for meaning with meaningless violence. Yet in the past twenty-five years, the sci-fi genre has embraced the mythical and spiritual elements of life, yielding some of the most mythical films in film history. Joel Martin points out that the sci-fi genre is the perfect vehicle for bringing mythic or religious themes to secular audiences because the genre by definition is oriented towards the unknown, towards the mysterious and amazing as is myth (Martin, p. 69). Often relegated to the status of B-movie or adolescent fantasy by academics and film critics, this genre deserves much more attention in its connection to spirituality and the "religious interpretation of film" (John May, "Contemporary Theories").

Vivian Sobchack points to Kingsly Adams' definition of sci-fi as a possible answer to the connection between sci-fi and religion:

Science fiction is that class of prose [in our case film] narrative treating a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovations in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extraterrestrial in origin (Sobchack, p. 19).

What Adams neglects to add to his definition is that this futuristic world which cannot be known is by definition a religious world. It is based in faith -- faith in technology or science -- like the faith of religions which await a world of the future, be it a spiritual or physical realm. The realm of sci-fi is a world of the supernatural, a world which transcends this world in accordance with

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law which states, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Sobchack, p. 56). In this sense, the world of the sci-fi genre is not only composed of spaceships and extraterrestrials, but also the timeless myths and religions which are an essential part of the human condition.

In this brave new world, men still search for meaning and salvation, thinly cloaked in the guise of science and technology (Ferlita and May, p. 1-17). Mandell and Fingesten offer this commentary:

We see that the new mythology is a subtle point-for-point exchange of traditional religious doctrines for modern concepts....The spaceship...displaces the church as the vessel of salvation....The pilot or astrogator leads his community of saints like a savior....The dashboard paraphernalia and control dials become as potent and dominant as icons and sacraments -- faith is placed in technological efficiency... The breakthrough into space, bursting through gravitational pulls, constitutes a baptism or a climactic initiation into the heavenly mysteries (Sobchack, p. 56).

In this light, the sci-fi genre seems perfect for exploring man's quest for meaning through his new "modern mythic structures" (Solomon, p. 204-221). Having conquered space, "the final frontier," man is left only inner space to discover. As if forced to turn inward having conquered the known universe, man looks into himself through a new mythology. This new set of myths transfers classic theology and spirituality from the Earth to the vastness of space as film takes on the function of high art -- to both enlighten and entertain.

Mythology and Modernity

When one hears the term "myth" today, often the image which is conjured up in the mind is that of a tall tale or of a fable. It is the idea of an ancient tale, amusing and interesting, yet which

has no meaning to us, to "modern man" who believes he has furthered himself beyond the need for myth. Yet, if we look at the definition of myth through the ages, we find that especially in our technologically advanced society, there is indeed a place for myth in society, and in fact there is an innate need for myth in mankind. Joseph Campbell describes the major attitudes towards myth throughout history as follows:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Muller); as a repository of allegorical instruction to shape the individual and his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it serves today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age (Campbell, Hero, p.382).

Viewed in this light, mythology can be seen not as a collection of false tales or of fables designed to satisfy the curiosity of children, but as a system of thought which yields insight to mankind today as it has throughout times. For Campbell, the function of myth is: 1) to instill and maintain a sense of awe and mystery of the world; 2) to give a symbolic image of the world; 3) to maintain social order; and 4) to harmonize man with the cosmos, society and himself (Segal, p.x).

The problem with Campbell's understanding of the function of myth is that to modern man it seems displaced from himself and his societal world view. Modern men view myth as a collection of stories created by ancient, ignorant people in an attempt to explain their place in the world and to explain the world itself. The problem which arises with this concept of myth is that

few people are willing to accept that myths are as much a part of the modern world as they were for our primitive ancestors. Appealing to the scientific mind, one can use Darwin's theory of selection as an analogy for myth: only those organisms which have the ability to adapt are able to survive. Myth is indeed an organic creature -- it changes, adapts, and continues on in each successive age in which it is found. This point is easily illustrated by examining the myths of past societies, not only "primitive" tribal communities but also "civilized" nations. In tribal communities, the focus of myth was the tribe itself -- its history, its doings, and its structure (each member's part of the whole). Tribal stories explained the world in a manner which enabled the tribe to survive as a whole, not as a collection of individuals. In this manner, primitive religions began as attempts to explain the simple events of nature which allowed the tribe to survive: the seasons came to be personified by the death and resurrection of the gods; the sun became the passing of a god across the sky. In essence, the survival of the tribal unit became the focus of tribal mythology.

In comparing myths through the ages, an interesting point is raised by Campbell in an interview with Bill Moyers. Campbell states that a simple way to judge the dominant forces within a society is through its architecture. As the world view of a people changes, so, too, does the emphasis of a culture: in medieval times, the town or city was focused around the church. The spires of the great cathedrals reach towards heaven from earth as did the people. During the 16th century, the palace and the royal courts began to rise above the grand cathedrals, focusing the energies of the people on the earthly realm, making the king a god of this world. In our own time, the dominant structure of society has become the skyscraper (Campbell, "Hero's Adventure"). These towers stretch high above man, literally touching the sky in glory that would be the envy of Babel. Ironically, the occupants of these skyscrapers would be the first to scoff at the idea that

their lives are ruled by myth, much less that one can examine a society's mythology from its architecture.

While most modern men would agree that the mythology of a tribe can be seen as giving direction to its people, the modern intellect would simply state that it was because these people were primitive; that they were not "civilized." Yet, looking back to the architectural model and mythology, the civilized societies were also guided by their cultural mythology. During the Middle Ages, men believed in the Great Chain of Being. Using Rollo May's definition of the function of myth, one can see that the Great Chain does indeed fulfill the functions of myth: from the King to the lowliest peasant in the field, this binding myth provided : 1) a sense of personal identity, 2) a sense of community, 3) support for the social structure, and 4) insight into the nature of the universe (May, p. 30-31).

Once again, most modern men would simply state that those were the "Dark Ages," and that the myths were used to support the wealth of the few and to suppress the lower classes. That may be true, but this argument is quickly turned to our own society. In modern America (and increasingly the rest of the world as we become a "global village"), the same principles which allowed the Great Chain of Being to "control" or "enslave" the workers are, from a modern vantage point, still at work: only the myths have changed. Discussing myth and modernity, Max Muller writes,

Depend upon it, there is mythology now as there was in the time of Homer, only we do not perceive it because we ourselves live in the very shadow of it, and because we all shrink from the full meridian light of truth (May p. 25).

Hearing this, many men would laugh and say that Muller is speculating, that there is no "mythology" which controls our actions. My question is this: why is it that we live in a society in which the aim of mankind is to amass wealth? If one looks to our cultural mythology as Americans, it is easy to see that the pursuit of life, liberty and wealth has been the aim and focus of our history. We live in a society in which our cultural history, our common history, is a succession of business myths. Our ancestors founded this nation to be the best nation in the world; we have a cultural idea that America is the greatest nation in the world because of our freedom and our hard work; manifest destiny pushed the settlers to the farthest reaches of the west, and when we could go no further we began to move upward-- which brings us back to the skyscraper. These cultural myths of "pulling oneself up by the bootstrap" and "doing well in business" are the myths that drive men to work eighty hour weeks so that they can move up the corporate ladder so that they can work harder so that they can earn more money so that they can invest more time and energy into work so that they can amass more wealth. The pattern goes on and on.

The "corporate ideal" was driven home for me by a story a close friend recounted to me. Having graduated from an Ivy League school in business, my friend was offered a position as a stock analyst for a "Fortune 500" company in New York. When he arrived in New York, the epitome of our skyscraper society, he found that his new position fulfilled his expectations, his "dreams" of being successful. Because of his ability to predict the trends of stocks and bonds, he was given an office with his name on the door, a secretary, and a great view of Wall Street from his office window. What he told me next is what really astonished me: part of the standard office furniture for young executives in this company is a collapsible bed which fits into their closets. Apparently it is not only normal, but also expected by the company that these young employees will work so hard and so long at the office that they will basically have no need of going home at

the end of the day; they simply remain at the office for days on end in an attempt to climb the corporate ladder. With this "real life" example of a modern myth in action, it is hard to comprehend how anyone can deny that there are indeed myths which control our daily lives and our motivations.

The Cry for Myth and Film in Popular Culture

Concerning the perceived lack of myth in modern America, Sam Warner writes, "I have made the discovery that Americans have no urban history. They live in one of the world's most urbanized countries as though it were a wilderness in both time and space...not conscious that they have a past and that by their actions they participate in making a future" (Kreuziger, p. 60). It is this denial of myth, something viewed as "primitive" or naive which causes many of the psychological problems which plague our modern society. Psychologist Rollo May deals with the problem of myth and modernity in his book *The Cry for Myth*, claiming that myths no longer make sense of our modern world and that people have therefore turned to drugs, cults, and interestingly enough, psychotherapy to fill the void left by the lack of myth (May, p.16). In this manner, May views many of the modern social ills as "cries" for myth -- as a cry for help. He writes, "Myths are our self-interpretation of our inner selves in relation to the outside world. They are narratives by which our society is unified" (May, p. 20).

Where, then, are the myths which unify our world? Subscribing to the belief that the values of a society are preserved in the art of that culture, one must then turn to film as the dominant art form of twentieth century culture. Fewer people attend performances of "high art" (i.e. opera, ballet) or go to museums any longer, but instead live lives filled with "popular culture." While the lack of high art is often criticized by scholars and sociologists, popular culture has

become the receptacle of the values once carried by high art, rendering it the vehicle for myths and values today. Referring back to Campbell's idea of architecture being a watermark for a society's values, one has only to look at many of the great movie houses built in the first half of the century such as the Saenger in New Orleans to see that they have become the communal gathering sites, the churches if you will, of the twentieth century. Joel Martin expresses this idea concisely when he writes, "Our ancestors would gather around the fire; we go to the movies" (Martin, p.65). He continues:

Film is an extraordinary popular medium today, but films do much more than simply entertain. Films, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspectives, ideological assumptions, and fundamental values. Films bolster and challenge our society's norms, guiding narratives, and accepted truths. In short, films can and do perform religious and iconoclastic functions in American society (Martin p. vii).

Andrew Greeley attributes the popularity of film, and in particular sci-fi film, to the fact that organized religions in our technological age have downplayed the fantastic or miraculous aspect of the humans psyche while sci-fi has embraced it. He argues that sci-fi is "implicitly religious" because it deals with the wonderful and the strange. Greeley writes, "You can demythologize Wonder out of your sacred books, but you can't demythologize the hunger for the wonderful out of the human personality" (Kreusiger, p. 120-121).

Lucas and Mythology

When George Lucas was asked what he was attempting to create when he began work on his *Star Wars* trilogy, he responded:

I had done a study in the fairy tale or myth. It is a children's story in history and you go back to *The Odyssey* or the stories that are told for the kid in all of us.... You just don't get them any more, and that's the best stuff in the world -- adventures in far-off lands.... I wanted to do a modern fairytale, a myth (Gordon, p. 74.)

The inevitability of Lucas' creation of a mythological structure can be traced through his influences as a child attending films, especially westerns and 40's sci-fi serials such as *Flash Gordon*. Both of these genres are in essence modern re-creations of morality plays. They are the stories of a lone man who sets out to save the town or the universe; they are simple stories of good versus evil -- they are retellings of timeless myths. Because of this formula, *Star Wars* has often been accused of being a flat, two dimensional collage of earlier films and even earlier myths. On one level, this accusation is completely justifiable: *Star Wars* is predictable because it is composed of the themes which have run throughout western culture. Lucas himself states that the film is "a compilation.... It's all the things that are great put together" (Gordon, p.78). In this sense, Lucas combines the great themes which have enlightened and entertained children for centuries to create his own modern mythic structure. It is the resonance of these themes that has allowed the films to endure for nearly two decades, capturing the imagination of children young and old. Stuart Kaminsky notes that "the more popular a film (the more people who see it), the more attention it deserves as a genre manifestation. If a film is popular, it is a result of the fact that the film or series of films corresponds to an interest -- *perhaps even a need* -- of the viewing public" (Ellis, p.84, emphasis added). Rollo May adds that the film has remained popular because it addresses the need for myth in modern audiences. He relates the emergence of such popular phenomena to Gilbert Highet's simple definition of myth as he writes:

The central answer is that myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all the problems which do not change because men and women do not change. They deal with love; with war; with sin; with tyranny; with courage; with fate: and all in some way or another deal with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes to be cruel, and sometimes, alas, to be just (May, p. 39).

The Star Wars Mythology

In any great mythical system, there exists a history, a backdrop against which the story may unfold, and so like any great myth-maker Lucas establishes a history. He begins his epic *in medias res* in the classical tradition of Homer and Virgil, commencing with "Episode Four." Parallel to many myths and certainly the majority of western "fairy tales," Lucas introduces his saga with the simple written words, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." (Star Wars, p. 1). In doing so, Lucas immediately invites the audience to participate in the film by making it clear that this is indeed a modern myth, a fairy tale which we can both relate to and learn from. On more than one occasion, Lucas has stated that in making the *Star Wars* trilogy he based his character Luke on Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces" and attempted to create a monomyth, therefore Campbell's discussion of myth and society is, therefore, the most pertinent to this discussion.

In Campbell's theory, the "monomyth," he constructs a pattern of separation, initiation and return which all myths follow (Campbell, Hero p. 30). With this in mind, Lucas structures the *Star Wars* trilogy in a way which utilizes and expands upon Campbell's theory of the hero, creating his own mythological system from the hero cycle. Thus, Lucas' trilogy corresponds to Campbell's division of the hero's adventure: *Star Wars* is essentially a story of separation, of a calling into a greater world; *The Empire Strikes Back* focuses on Luke's initiation, on his psychological and

spiritual growth; and *Return of the Jedi* is the story of Luke's fulfillment of his destiny and his return to society. As Campbell points out, the reason the cycle works so well even today and is so enduring is that like all myths it is essentially and allegorically about "growing up" from the state of childhood to the return to society as an adult (Campbell, *Power of Myth*, "Hero's Adventure").

Star Wars: Episode Four -- A New Hope

According to Campbell's monomyth, the first step in any hero's journey is "the call to adventure." Campbell writes:

This first stage of the mythological adventure -- which we have designated the "call to adventure" -- signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountain top, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight (Campbell, *Hero* p. 58).

Following this pattern, Luke's calling is precipitated by a "vision" of Leia. Trapped on a farm with his uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, Luke's destiny is advanced by the arrival of two droids, C3PO and R2D2, both of whom have escaped the clutches of Darth Vader and the Empire and have arrived on Tatooine with a message for Obi-Wan Kenobi. While cleaning the droids, Luke stumbles across the message and an angelic image of Leia appears, pleading for help, repeating, "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope. Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi..." (Star Wars, p. 23). In this manner, Lucas immediately informs the audience that we are viewing destiny in progress -- that Luke has indeed been chosen by divine powers to join the Rebellion. By using the classical

"damsel in distress" motif, Lucas transforms Luke from a young boy stuck on a farm into a character whom we know is destined for greatness. Lucas also reinforces the idea of a divinely-willed destiny through the appearance of Leia. In both the incredible appearance of the droids (and therefore the calling for help) and also in Leia's physical appearance, Lucas maximizes the knight/damsel paradigm which morally justifies Luke's actions. Thus within the first few minutes of the film, the audience already knows that Luke will slay the proverbial dragon and save the girl -- he has already been placed within the mythic realm of the hero.

Following Campbell's monomyth paradigm, Luke is brought further out of his own world and into another through the introduction of Ben Obi-Wan Kenobi. Literally sent into the desert in search of this mythic figure to aide in his quest to help Leia and the Rebellion, Luke is ambushed by Sand People. These inhuman, utterly nightmarish creatures resemble something from Dante's visions of Hell or from classical Hades, shrouded in sack cloth and uttering horrifying sounds. Luke is attacked and defeated by these creatures but is saved by Ben, who himself appears like something from a dream, dressed in the robes of a holy man or priest and howling otherworldly sounds which frighten the Sand People away. At this point the first explicit Christian symbolism occurs as Ben kneels over Luke and touches his eyes, both healing his physical wounds and symbolically opening his eyes to the larger universe which he has entered. This idea of otherworldliness reinforces the idea that Luke is indeed on a psychological or mystical journey as well as a quest to save Leia, bringing him into another realm. Concerning the introduction of supernatural aid, Campbell writes, "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dangerous forces he is about to pass" (Campbell, *Hero*, p. 69).

What Ben imparts to Luke are the tools which he will need on his journey -- knowledge and faith. Like Virgil to Dante, Ben begins to guide Luke on his journey into the unknown. During their conversation Ben reveals parts of Luke's past, part of his own history to show that he is indeed destined to fight the Empire, that he has been called by a higher force:

Luke: ...No, my father didn't fight in the wars. He was a navigator on a spice freighter.

Ben: That's what your uncle told you. He didn't hold with your father's ideals. Thought he should have stayed here and not gotten involved.

Luke: You fought in the Clone Wars?

Ben: Yes. I was a Jedi Knight, the same as your father.

Luke: I wish I'd known him.

Ben: He was the best star-pilot in the galaxy, and a cunning warrior. I understand you've become quite a good pilot yourself. And he was a good friend. Which reminds me...

Ben gets up and goes to a chest where he rummages around. Ben shuffles up and presents Luke with a short handle with several electronic gadgets attached to it.

Ben: I have something here for you. Your father wanted you to have this when you were old enough, but your uncle wouldn't allow it. He feared you might follow old Obi-Wan on some damned-fool idealistic crusade like your father did.

Ben hands Luke the saber.

Luke: What is it?

Ben: It's your father's lightsaber. This is the weapon of a Jedi knight. Not as clumsy or random as a blaster....An elegant weapon for a more civilized time. For over a thousand years the Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the old Republic. Before the dark times, before the Empire.

Luke: How did my father die?

Ben: A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights. He betrayed and murdered your father. Now the Jedi are all but extinct. Vader was seduced by the dark side of the Force.

Luke: The Force?

Ben: Well, the Force is what gives the Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together...(Star Wars, p.36-37).

In this manner, Luke is quickly brought into a greater realm. His yearning to escape farm life and become part of something bigger are quickly fueled by the knowledge which Ben imparts to him. Luke now has the goal of avenging the death of his father, which, according to Otto Rank's "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero," is the only true quest of the hero. Ben's explanation is enough for Luke to offer his help as far as he believes he is capable of helping, but Luke still feels a tie to his family on Tatooine. As with the arrival of the droids, fate once again steps in to prove that it is indeed his destiny to battle the Empire in a larger way as Luke returns home only to find the charred remains of his family and home, all destroyed by the Empire's forces (Gordon p. 79). Thus through the actions of fate or destiny, Luke is once again made blameless as obstacles such as his family are removed from his path. In doing so, Lucas is able to maintain a pure image of Luke, who commits no moral transgressions in his hero's journey.

In the tradition of many "Christian epics" such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Lucas employs the idea that a hero must descend in order to ascend. In doing so, the hero is forced to experience the lowest parts of humanity in order to achieve a higher spiritual state. In Luke's journey, the space port of Mos Eisley serves as the City of Dis through which the hero must pass. Like Virgil's warnings to Dante, Ben counsels Luke, "Mos Eisley Spaceport. You

will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. We must be careful" (Star Wars, p.

44). Lucas describes Luke's descent into proverbial darkness:

The young adventurer and his two mechanical servants follow Ben Kenobi into the smoke filled cantina. The murky, moldy den is filled with a startling array of weird and exotic alien creatures and monsters at a long metallic bar. At first the sight is horrifying. One-eyed, thousand-eyed, slimy, furry, scaly, tentacled, and clawed creatures huddle over drinks...(Star Wars, p. 45).

As Odysseus obtained the knowledge of how to return to Ithaca and Aeneas gained instructions for the construction of Rome, so, too, does Luke gain aid from his descent into hell (May, p. 166). It is within this den of iniquity that Luke and Ben find Han Solo and Chewbacca, two "noble savages" akin to Dante's virtuous pagans in the outer regions of hell. In the characters of Han and Chewbacca, Lucas reaches into his own childhood fascination with westerns to recreate the "Lone Ranger" archetype of a single man conquering the vast territory of the west with his faithful sidekick (Gordon, p. 76-77). Like the lone hero of the western, Han exists within a moral "gray area." Although he agrees to aid Luke and Ben, he does so for profit, not for altruistic reasons; he is a hired gun, not a man on a divine mission. In this way, Han is representative of the twentieth century mindset of personal gain rather than moral goals, and by portraying him as such, Lucas allows us to view his transformation in his journey with Luke and Ben as an underlying or secondary moral theme within the trilogy.

It is on their journey to aid the Rebellion that Luke begins his physical training as a Jedi Knight. While the two are in transit to Alderaan to deliver vital information to the Rebellion, Ben begins to teach Luke how to use two of the gifts which he has been given -- insight and his lightsaber. Lucas describes the scene:

Luke stands in the middle of a small hold area: he seems frozen in place. A humming lightsaber is held high over his head. Ben watches him from the corner, studying his movements. Han watches with a bit of smugness.

Ben: Remember, a Jedi can feel the Force flowing through him.

Luke: You mean it controls your actions?

Ben: Partially. But it also obeys your commands.

Suspended at eye level, about ten feet in front of Luke, a "seeker," a chrome baseball-like robot covered with antennae, hovers slowly in a wide arc. The ball floats to one side of the youth then the other. Suddenly it makes a lightning-swift lunge and stops within a few feet of Luke's face. Luke doesn't move and the ball backs off. It slowly moves behind the boy, then makes another quick lunge, this time emitting a blood red laser beam as it attacks. It hits Luke in the leg causing him to tumble over. Han lets loose with a burst of laughter.

Han: Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid.

Luke: You don't believe in the Force, do you?

Han: Kid, I've flown from one side of this galaxy to the other. I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe there's some all-powerful force controlling everything. There's no mystical energy field that controls my destiny.

Ben smiles quietly.

Han: It's all a lot of simple tricks and nonsense.

Ben: I suggest you try it again, Luke.

Ben places a large helmet on Luke's head which covers his eyes.

Ben: This time, let go of your conscious self and act on instinct.

Luke (laughing): With the blast shield down, I can't even see. How am I supposed to fight?

Ben: Your eyes can deceive you. Don't trust them.

Han skeptically shakes his head as Ben throws the seeker into the air. The ball shoots straight up in the air, then drops like a rock. Luke swings the lightsaber

around blindly missing the seeker, which fires off a laserbolt which hits Luke square in the pants. He lets out a painful yell and attempts to hit the seeker.

Ben: Stretch out with your feelings.

Luke stands in one place, seemingly frozen. The seeker makes a dive at Luke and incredibly, he manages to deflect the bolt. The ball ceases firing and moves back to its original position.

Ben: You see, you can do it.

Han: I call it luck.

Ben: In my experience, there is no such thing as luck.

Luke: You know, I did feel something. I could almost see the remote.

Ben: That's good. You have taken your first step into a larger world (Star Wars, pp.62-64).

Thus, Ben begins to train Luke in the ways of the Jedi Knight. Within this single scene can be found the basic tenants of Lucas' Jedi "philosophy" and the obstacles which Luke must overcome. The first barrier which Luke must overcome is embodied in Han's attitude; it is the attitude of twentieth century doubt and a self-centered personal world view. Han claims that he has no need for ancient religions, that he has no faith in a higher power which controls the universe. He is the voice of the audience itself, the doubt in a higher state of being which is somehow removed from this realm both temporally and spatially. Within this attitude rests the real obstacle which Luke must overcome -- himself. Ben attempts to open Luke to a wider world of understanding, to something which is greater than himself by reaching out to the Force -- by expanding his consciousness to that which is around him and binds all things. Lucas visually accomplishes this by incorporating ancient Japanese warrior techniques in Ben's training of Luke. Like the samurai, Luke must learn to distance himself from himself if he is to survive. According to this

warrior-philosophy, the only way to win a battle is to remove himself from it -- if he is able to stretch out his senses to incorporate all of his surroundings rather than simply himself.

Having been physically prepared, although rather quickly, Luke is thrust into the midst of battle when his ship is captured by the Death Star, the Empire's new battle station which has the ability to destroy entire planets in a single moment. Fate once again intervenes in the fact that Leia, too, has been captured and is aboard the battle station. As with most "damsel in distress" adventures, Luke rescues Leia with relative ease simply because he is destined to do so. With the aid of Ben, Han, Chewbacca, and the droids, Luke quickly locates Leia and in a typical Errol Flynn style of heroics rescues the princess. Approaching the climax of the film, the audience is not at all surprised by this daring rescue, but Lucas is quick to remind us that we are in fact dealing with a larger scope than the simple rescue of Leia. In order to do so, Lucas makes the rescue itself anticlimactic through the duel between Ben and Vader. In this scene, the audience is captivated by the physical embodiment of the eternal battle between good and evil like Manichaeans whose own salvation hinges upon this fight. Lucas describes the battle:

Ben hurries along on of the tunnels leading to the hanger where the pirateship waits. Just before he reaches the hangar, Darth Vader steps into view at the end of the tunnel, not ten feet away. Vader lights his saber. Ben also ignites his and steps slowly forward.

Vader: I've been waiting for you, Obi-Wan. We meet again, at last. The circle is now complete.

Ben Kenobi moves with elegant ease into a classical offensive position. The fearsome Dark Knight takes a defensive stance.

Vader: When I left you, I was but the learner; now I am the master.

Ben: Only a master of evil, Darth.

The two Galactic warriors stand perfectly still for a few moments, sizing each other up and waiting for the right moment. Ben seems to be under increasing pressure and strain, as if an invisible weight were being placed upon him. He shakes his head and, blinking, tries to clear his head.

Ben makes a sudden lunge at the huge warrior but is checked by a lightening movement of the Sith. A masterful slash stroke by Vader is blocked by the old Jedi. Another of the Jedi's blows is blocked, then countered. Ben moves around the Dark Lord and starts backing into the massive starship hangar. The two powerful warriors stand motionless for a few moments with laser swords locked in midair, creating a low buzzing sound.

Vader: Your powers are weak, old man.

Ben: You can't win, Darth. If you strike me down I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.

Vader and Ben Kenobi continue their powerful duel.

As they hit their lightsabers together, lightning flashes on impact. Troopers look on in interest as the old Jedi and Dark Lord of the Sith fight. Suddenly Luke spots the battle from his group's vantage point.

Ben sees the troops charging toward him and realizes that he is trapped. Vader takes advantage of Ben's momentary distraction and brings his mighty lightsaber down on the old man. Ben manages to deflect the blow and swiftly turns around. The old Jedi Knight looks over his shoulder at Luke, lifts his sword from Vader's, then watches his opponent with a serene face.

Vader brings his sword down, cutting Old Ben in half. Ben's cloak falls to the floor in two parts, but Ben is not in it. Vader is puzzled at Ben's disappearance and pokes at the empty cloak. As the guards are distracted, the adventurers and the robots reach the starship (Star Wars, pp. 95-97).

With Ben's death, both Luke and the audience momentarily believe that the battle has been lost -- that evil has triumphed over good. With a masterful touch, Lucas has the voice of Ben call out to Luke (and the audience), "Run, Luke! Run!" (Star Wars, p. 97). With these simple words, Lucas confirms the powers of the Force both in Luke and the audience, informing us that Ben has not

been defeated by Vader but that he has simply left the temporal world and has become one with the Force.

During the final battle to destroy the Death Star, Lucas creates a multilevel system. While, on one hand, Lucas portrays Luke as a great pilot with the ability to fight the Empire, he also informs us that Luke's journey as a hero has just begun. During this sequence, the Rebel fighters fight against time to destroy the Death Star before it can destroy them, a cosmic David versus Goliath if you will. In order to do so, the Rebels locate a weakness in the battle station's defenses which will allow them to destroy the battle station, but they must rely on the skill of singular pilots to do so. Of course, it is Luke who is left with the task of firing the fatal blow, yet he is not able to do so without the help of his friends. Closely pursued by Vader, at the crucial moment in which Luke is approaching his target using a "targeting computer" to guide his shot, Luke hears the voice of Ben which calls out, "Use the Force, Luke...let go....Luke, trust me"(Star Wars, p. 144). In this pivotal moment, Luke surrenders himself to the Force and to the guidance of Obi-Wan Kenobi, allowing his training to control his actions rather than his computer. As fate would have it, Han and Chewbacca appear from nowhere, firing on Vader and damaging his ship so that he is no longer a threat to Luke. Almost simultaneously, Luke fires his shots perfectly into the target which destroys the Death Star; its explosion as Lucas describes it is "a spectacular heavenly display" (Star Wars, p.149).

The final sequence of the film is quite interesting in the way it both gives closure to the first part of the hero's adventure, yet allows the viewer to know that there is more to the saga than this one episode. In a grand show of pomp and circumstance, the heroes are awarded medals by Leia and the Rebellion for their bravery and actions -- they are made public heroes or figures. But Luke has not yet truly become a hero: he has yet to become one with himself or the Force and

remains a novice on his hero's journey. More importantly, even if the second part of the trilogy had not been produced as a film or novel (or in any form), the audience is left quite assured that Luke will indeed become a Jedi Knight, and that he must still face Vader to avenge the death of his father -- in this way we know that he will fulfill his destiny as a hero, passing through all of the stages of the hero's adventure.

The Empire Strikes Back -- The Journey into the Belly of the Whale

The Empire Strikes Back is often criticized by Lucas' fans and critics as being the least exciting of the *Star Wars* trilogy, and often aptly so. The reason for this is quite simple -- the film focuses on the psychological and spiritual journey of Luke towards becoming a Jedi Knight rather than on action. In keeping with Campbell's monomyth, the warrior Lucas creates is an agent of divine will, trained not only in action but in spirit, and it is the spirit, the "magic" which gives the hero his true power (Campbell, *Hero*, p. 88). As in the Christian epic, the hero's spirit or psyche must be explored, comprehended and cleansed before the hero is allowed to proceed on his journey. Throughout the first film, Lucas focuses on the physical training of Luke to aid the Rebellion. He is given the wisdom and tools he needs to destroy the Death Star, but he is not given any true insight. Ben Kenobi states in the first film, "You have taken your first step into a larger universe" (*Star Wars*, p.64). In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke's journey as a hero is turned inward to the spiritual aspect of becoming a warrior and away from the physical world. Luke symbolically journeys into the "Belly of the Whale" where he must face his innermost fears and thoughts in order to be psychologically reborn.

In order to accomplish his spiritual training, Luke is forced to leave his friends and seek the help of Yoda, the Jedi Master who trained both Obi-Wan and Vader. Like Christ's forty days in the desert or Siddhartha's travels to find enlightenment, Luke must journey away from what he knows into the unknown -- into himself. Physically, Luke travels to Dagobah, a dark swampy land shrouded in mist. Luke contemplates this new land, describing it as being "like...something out of a dream....Still...there's something familiar about this place"(Empire, p.52, 55). With this subtle touch, Lucas informs the audience that Luke has indeed moved into a new realm, and in comparing it to a dream implies that Luke's movement has been more inward than outward -- that he has reached the edge of his own mind or spirit. Having met Yoda but not knowing his identity, Luke is given his first test by the Jedi master -- a test of will and patience. Lucas describes the scene:

Luke: How far away is Yoda? Will it take us long to get there?

Creature (Yoda): Not far. Yoda not far. Patience. Soon you will be with him. Why you wish to become Jedi? Hm?

Luke: Mostly because of my father, I guess.

Creature: Ah, your father. Powerful Jedi was he, powerful Jedi, mmm.

Luke (a little angry): Oh, come on. How could you know my father? You don't even know who I am. (fed up) Oh, I don't know what I'm doing here. We're wasting our time.

The creature turns away from Luke and speaks to a third party.

Creature (irritated): I cannot teach him. The boy has no patience.

Luke's head spins in the direction the creature faces. But there is no one there. The boy is bewildered, but it gradually dawns on him that the little creature is Yoda, the Jedi Master, and that he is speaking with Ben.

Ben's voice: He will learn patience.

Yoda: Hmmm, Much anger in him, like his father.

Ben's voice: Was I any different when you taught me?

Yoda: Hah. He is not ready.

Luke: Yoda! I am ready. I...Ben! I can be a Jedi. Ben, tell him I'm ready.

Trying to see Ben, Luke starts to get up but hits his head on the low ceiling.

Yoda: Ready are you? What know you of ready. For eight hundred years I have trained Jedi. My own counsel will I keep on who is to be trained! A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. (to the invisible Ben, indicating Luke) This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away...to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Humph. Adventure. Heh! Excitement. Heh! A Jedi craves not these things. (turns to Luke) You are reckless!

Luke looks down. He know it is true.

Ben's voice: So was I, if you'll remember.

Yoda: He is too old. Yes, too old to begin the training.

Luke thinks he detects a subtle softening in Yoda's voice.

Luke: But I've learned so much.

Yoda turns his piercing gaze on Luke, as though the Jedi Master's huge eyes could somehow determine how much the boy has learned. After a long moment, the little Jedi turns toward where he alone sees Ben.

Yoda: (sighs) Will he finish what he begins?

Luke: I won't fail you -- I'm not afraid.

Yoda: (turns slowly toward him) Oh, you will be.
You will be (Empire, p.64-66).

In this way, Luke is allowed to continue on his journey toward becoming a Jedi Knight. Having found Yoda and having been accepted as a novice, Luke begins his spiritual training, much like that of a samurai warrior or Zen Buddhist.

During the course of his training, Luke is given the most powerful weapon he can possess -- knowledge, both of self and of the cosmos. It is through the voice of Yoda that Lucas is able to expound upon the spiritual nature of the mythic system he has created. Yoda counsels Luke:

Yoda: A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side.
Anger...fear...aggression. The dark side of the Force are they.
Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down
the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume
you it will, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice.

Luke: Vader. Is the dark side stronger?

Yoda: No...no...no. Quicker, easier, more seductive.

Luke: But how am I to know the good side from the bad?

Yoda: You will know. When you are calm, at peace. Passive. A Jedi uses
the Force for knowledge and defense, never for
attack (Empire, pp. 70-71).

Much like an Eastern martial arts master, Yoda counsels Luke to look within himself and become one with his surroundings, vanquishing anger and aggression. Lucas takes this idea directly from Buddhist thought found in the *Dhammapapa*: "One should not give way to anger, but should control it. He who controls anger has power far greater than those who give way to it. The one is master of his emotions while the other is mastered by it" (Frost, p. 389). Interestingly, the universality of Yoda's teachings seems to make more sense and is more easily accepted by modern

audiences than the traditional religious doctrines which all point to the same basic beliefs on how one should live.

It is during Luke's training that Lucas produces his most brilliant scene, both visually and mythically. Lucas describes the scene in this fashion:

[Luke] turns to see a huge, dead, black tree, its base surrounded by a few feet of water. Giant, twisted roots form a dark and sinister cave on one side. Luke stares at the tree, trembling.

Luke: There's something not right here.

Yoda sits on a large root, poking his gimer stick into the dirt.

Luke: I feel cold, death.

Yoda: That place...is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go.

Luke: What's in there?

Yoda: Only what you take with you.

Luke looks warily between the tree and Yoda. He starts to strap on his weapons belt.

Yoda: Your weapons...you will not need them.

Luke gives the tree a long look, then shakes his head "no." Yoda shrugs. Luke reaches up to brush aside some of the hanging vines and enters the tree.

Luke moves into the almost total darkness of the wet and slimy cave. The youth can barely make out the edge of the passage. Holding his lit saber before him, he sees a lizard crawling up the side of the cave and a snake wrapped around the branches of a tree. Luke draws a deep breath, then pushes deeper into the cave.

The space widens around him, but he feels that rather than sees it. His sword casts the only light as he peers into the darkness. It is very quiet here.

Then, a loud HISS! Darth Vader appears across the blackness, illuminated by his own just-ignited laser sword. Immediately, he charges Luke, saber held high. He is

upon the youth in seconds, but Luke sidesteps perfectly and slashes at Vader with his sword.

Vader is decapitated. His helmet-encased head flies from his shoulders as his body disappears into the darkness. The metallic banging of the helmet fills the cave as Vader's head spins and bounces, smashing on the floor, and finally stops. For an instant it rests on the floor, then it cracks vertically. The black helmet and breath mask fall away to reveal...Luke's head.

Across the space, the standing Luke gasps at the sight, wide-eyed in terror.

The decapitated head fades away, as in a vision (Empire, pp.71-72).

Thus far, Luke's journey has been mainly physical. It is during this scene that he makes the most perilous and frightful move into himself. Cinematically, it is the most terrifying footage used by Lucas throughout the trilogy, and rightly so, because it is the inward journey that is the most terrifying for all men. With this single sequence, Lucas solidifies his whole mythic system: Luke now sees himself as part of a greater world, as part of the cosmos ruled by the Force. And like the Force itself, Luke now is made to see himself as having the potential for evil, for becoming part of the dark side. More importantly, Luke now realizes that the battle which he must fight is not truly with Vader but within himself. Of this inner battle Campbell writes, "The hero, the figure in a myth or the dreamer in a dream, discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspecting self) either by swallowing it or by being swallowed" (Campbell, Hero, p. 108). In the case of Luke, he must either defeat the dark side or become part of it as Vader did. It is by defeating his inner fears, his own psychological dark side that Luke completes his training as a Jedi and sets off to fight Darth Vader.

Luke's spiritual movement as a hero comes to an apex when he battles Darth Vader at the climax of *The Empire Strikes Back*. During this battle, Vader reveals to Luke that he is Luke's

father and attempts to sway Luke to the dark side of the Force. Vader, having severed Luke's hand and defeated the young Jedi tempts him:

Vader: There is no escape. Don't make me destroy you. You do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy.... Join me and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son. (Empire, pp.111-112).

Like Christ's temptations in the desert or Buddha's temptations under the bow tree, Luke is forced to decide which path he is to follow. Having defeated his personal demons, Luke chooses self-sacrifice rather than joining Vader and the dark side. Instead, Luke throws himself into space, choosing a "cosmic crucifixion" over the dark side. In a brilliant sequence, Luke falls from Cloud City and is saved by a cross-shaped antenna on which he is symbolically crucified. It is only after choosing self-sacrifice that Luke truly becomes a Jedi. In the final scene of the film, we watch as Luke's severed hand is replaced by a new, mechanical one, reinforcing the idea that in Lucas' system all things are part of the Force -- that Luke is as much a part of Vader as Vader is of him. It is this knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil that allows Luke to fulfill his spiritual movement into becoming a Jedi.

Return of the Jedi

Although Luke completes his training during the course of *The Empire Strikes Back*, he must still face Vader to complete his journey. Even though he has battled with his father before, Luke now attempts to save his father rather than destroy him. Luke discusses his plan with Ben:

Luke: There is still good in him [Vader].

Ben: He's more machine now than man. Twisted and evil.

Luke: I can't do it, Ben.

Ben: You cannot escape your destiny. You must face Darth Vader again.

Luke: I can't kill my own father...(Jedi, p.35).

It is this movement from a destructive goal to a preservative one that marks Luke as having truly become a Jedi. He no longer desires to kill Darth Vader but to save his father -- to restore order to his own, personal world. In returning to the personal level, Luke performs what Campbell describes as "the hero's return" (Campbell, Hero, p.245). In Campbell's monomyth, the knowledge gained through adventure is useless unless it can be brought back into the community from which the hero has journeyed. In this way, the ability to transcend the two worlds of the journey and home is what creates a true hero. Campbell explains that the two worlds, the world of the adventure and the daily world, are actually one, that the "realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know... [and] the explanation of that dimension, either willingly or unwillingly, is the whole sense of the deed of the hero" (Campbell, Hero, p. 217). Thus by transforming the battle from a cosmic scale to a personal level through the restoration of order to the family, Luke furthers his journey as a hero.

In order to complete his adventure, Luke surrenders to Vader in an attempt to bring him back to the light side of the Force. Lucas describes Luke's confrontation with his father:

Vader: The Emperor has been expecting you.

Luke: I know, father.

Vader: So, you have accepted the truth.

Luke: I have accepted that you were once Anakin Skywalker, my father.

Vader: (turning to face him) That name no longer has any meaning for me.

Luke: It is the name of your true self. You've only forgotten. I know there is good in you. The Emperor hasn't driven it from you fully. That's why you couldn't destroy me. That's why you won't bring me to your Emperor now.

Vader: You don't know the power of the dark side. I must obey my master.

Luke: I will not turn... and you'll be forced to kill me.

Vader: If that is your destiny...

Luke: Search your feelings, father. You can't do this. I feel the conflict within you. Let go of your hate.

Vader. It is too late for me, son. The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your master now.

Luke: Then my father is truly dead (Jedi, p.64-65).

In proclaiming his father dead, Luke in essence establishes himself as the new father figure of his own system. Still, he must face the Emperor who has turned his father to the dark side of the Force and displaced his father's authority. When Luke is brought before the Emperor, all which he has learned is tested as the Emperor attempts to turn him to the dark side as he did Vader. Lucas describes the final confrontation:

Vader and Luke enter the room alone. They walk across the dark space to stand before the throne, father and son side by side beneath the gaze of the Emperor. Vader bows to his master.

Emperor: Welcome, young Skywalker. I have been expecting you.

Luke peers at the hooded figure defiantly. The emperor smiles, then looks down at Luke's binders.

Emperor: You no longer need those.

The Emperor motions ever so slightly with his fingers and Luke's binders fall away, clattering noisily to the floor. Luke looks down at his own hands, free now to reach out and grab the Emperor's neck. He does nothing.

Emperor: I'm looking forward to completing your training. In time you will call me master.

Luke: You're gravely mistaken. You won't convert me as you did my father.

The Emperor gets down from his throne and walks up very close to Luke. The Emperor looks into his eyes and, for the first time, Luke can perceive the evil visage within the hood.

Emperor: Oh, no, my young Jedi. You will find that it is you who are mistaken... about a great many things.

Vader: His lightsaber.

Vader extends a gloved hand toward the Emperor, revealing Luke's lightsaber. The Emperor takes it.

Emperor: Ah, yes, a Jedi's weapon. Much like your father's. By now you must know your father can never be turned from the dark side. So will it be with you.

Luke: You're wrong. Soon I'll be dead... and you with me.

The Emperor laughs.

Emperor: Perhaps you refer to the imminent attack of your Rebel fleet.

Luke looks up sharply.

Emperor: Yes... I assure you we are quite safe from your friends here.

Vader looks at Luke.

Luke: Your overconfidence is your weakness.

Emperor: Your faith in your friends is yours.

Vader: It is pointless to resist, my son. (Jedi, pp.69-71)

Thus, Luke is forced to fight his father in order to save his friends. Luke uses his anger to strike down his father, yet he is unable to destroy him.

Luke looks at his father's mechanical hand, then to his own mechanical, black-gloved hand, and realizes how much he is becoming like his father. He makes the decision for which he has spent a lifetime in preparation. Luke steps back and hurls his lightsaber away.

Luke: I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me (Jedi, p. 87).

In this moment, Luke fulfills his destiny. Unlike the image of Vader which he struck down in the cave, Luke now understands that he and Vader are the same, that they are truly father and son. In refusing to fight his father, Luke incurs the Emperor's wrath and is struck down by the Emperor's dark powers. Writhing in pain from the Emperor's attacks, Luke calls out to Vader, "Father... Father, please. Help me" (Jedi, p. 89). Through Luke's calling, his reaching out in love, Vader is called back from the dark side and comes to his son's aide, even though he knows it will cause his own destruction. Vader lifts the Emperor up and hurls him into space. Interestingly, Vader does not use the Force or his lightsaber to destroy the Emperor, but his strength as a man. In this sense, he, like Luke, has removed the conflict from cosmic level to a familial level -- he is reduced to a mere man attempting to save his own son, and in doing so is able to regain his humanity.

As the Death Star, the symbol of evil and the Empire, begins to crumble, Luke attempts to help his father escape:

In the midst of this uproar, Luke is trying to carry the enormous deadweight of his father's weakened body toward an Imperial shuttle. Finally, Luke collapses from the strain. The explosions grow louder as Vader draws him closer.

Vader: (a whisper) Luke, help me take this mask off.

Luke: But you'll die.

Vader: Nothing can stop that now. Just for once let me look on you with my own eyes.

Slowly, hesitantly, Luke removes the mask from his father's face. There beneath the scars in an elderly man. His eyes do not focus. But the dying man smiles at the sight before him.

Anakin: (very weak) Now... go, my son. Leave me.

Luke: No. You're coming with me. I can't leave you here. I've got to save you.

Anakin: You already have, Luke. You were right. You were right about me... (Jedi, pp. 91-92).

In this one moment, Luke completes his journey as a hero -- he has restored order to his family, and in doing so has restored order to the universe. Lucas ends his trilogy with a hope-giving shot of Luke's three "fathers," Ben, Yoda and Anakin Skywalker, Luke's personal trinity of spiritual leaders in a state of resurrection and grace, all having become one with the Force.

The Hero's Return

According to Campbell's monomyth, the true test of a hero is his return and his ability to bring the knowledge which he has gained back to the community -- to reality. This idea is also applicable to Lucas as a myth-maker, and with the still growing popularity of the *Star Wars* trilogy, it is quite obvious that he has succeeded. Although the films themselves do not offer a systematic plan for living, they do offer a glimpse into the transcendent, into the world of the hero from which we can learn even today. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell encapsulates

which we can learn even today. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell encapsulates the function of myth in today's world, once again refuting the idea that myth no longer exists:

Moyers: Unlike the classical heroes, we aren't on a journey to save the world, but to save ourselves.

Campbell: And in doing that you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes. The way to bring a world to life is to bring it to life by being alive (Campbell, "Power of Myth").

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