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The Hero's Journey Through Therapy: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1949) is a common narrative structure throughout ancient mythology and modern storytelling which describes the transformation of a hero through a journey of trials and represents the experience of psychological healing throughout various cultures. Because of the ancient and common nature of this structure and the psychological importance of personal narrative and storying even from an early age (Boyd, 2018; Klees, 2016), this thesis hypothesizes that a client's experience throughout psychotherapy will follow the stages of the Hero's Journey and that invoking this structure within the therapy room, particularly for drama therapists, will empower clients toward change and transformation. This thesis lays out the three stages of the Hero's Journey (departure, initiation, and return) and key subsections of each stage and draws parallels with client's progression through drama therapy and dramatic reality. The literature on psychotherapy and narrative supports the empowering structure of the Hero's Journey and framing client's experiences in therapy as heroic. For drama therapists, exploring the history of the Hero's Journey grounds the work of drama therapy in the past and promotes spiritual integration into the therapy room. Though some work has been done to integrate the Hero's Journey with certain drama therapy interventions (Klees, 2016; Minerson, 2017) the work has been limited in scope. This thesis aims to draw parallels throughout all drama therapy processes in therapy with the Hero's Journey and to encourage therapists to promote empowerment and transformation in their clients through this narrative structure.

Keywords: Hero's Journey, drama therapy, narrative therapy, storytelling, dramatic reality, psychotherapy, empowerment, and transformation

Author Identity Statement: The author is a White, cis-gendered Woman from Arizona studying drama therapy and working with populations in community mental health

The Hero's Journey Through Therapy: A Literature Review

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. —Maya Angelou

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a Lion and a Mouse. Once upon a time God created a man and a woman. Once upon a time there were two wolves, one good and one evil, locked in combat. Once upon a time Beauty met the Beast, a tale as old as time, and a little girl in a red cape went to visit her grandmother, and there was a glass slipper left at the stroke of midnight. Once upon a time a king wished he could turn anything he touched to gold, and a girl fell down a rabbit hole, and quoth the Raven, "Nevermore". Once upon a time Romeo met Juliette, and Gilgamesh met Enkidu, and Dr. Frankenstein created a monster, and this Christmas thousands of children will tell their parents about what Santa has brought them this year. And once upon a time, a very long time ago, man first learned to tell stories.

Long ago, stories began to define our humanity (Boyd, 2018). They took shape as linear forms with the capability to help us understand and relate to one another, to our world, and to ourselves (Boyd, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1991). Over time these narratives began to take on similar structures throughout history in various myths, originally identified by Joseph Campbell (1949) as The Hero's Journey or the monomyth. The Hero's Journey describes a narrative structure of a hero who is called away into a mysterious place where they overcome trials and adversity and return to the world with new knowledge, wisdom, or understanding to share with the world. This structure has been used repeatedly to analyze the stories we tell. As stories become more of a focus in our modern world, and even research itself is taking on a narrative format (Heikkinen et al., 2000; LaMarre & Rice, 2016), it seems a logical next step to apply narrative structures to the

arc of therapeutic transformation. This work is in part the focus of drama therapy, which aims to apply the principles of story and storytelling to therapy.

Stories, Others, the World, and Ourselves

Human speech developed from an interest in communicating something that exists in the mind of one person to the mind of another (Boyd, 2018). As language took on a narrative form, humans were able to understand more about one another, about actions, experiences, and perspectives that were different from the individual. With this development came cooperation, societies, and relationships. Narrative is the bridge that "allows us beyond the limits of our lives, gives us access to the experience of others, to the past, the private, the imagined." (p. 6). Stories also came to communicate societal norms and expectations, often reinforced through religious lore, legends, and hero narratives (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Swindler, 1986). Even gossip, telling stories about someone else to another person, helped to reinforce societal expectations about the way a person should or shouldn't act (Boyd, 2018). Conversely, stories can provide a path to challenge dominant narratives through uplifting individual voices (Encisco et al., 2023; LaMarre & Rice, 2016). In this way, narratives form a dynamic relationship between the individual, others, and society, shaping and defining one another.

Stories also developed as a way for us to understand our world and to cope with continuous uncertainty (Brockman, 2013). Brockman argued that the more certain something is to someone, the less likely they are to tell a story about it. Math equations and step-by-step building instructions don't often make for very good stories. But answers to questions like, "Who am I?", "Why am I here?", "When will I die?", and "How was I made?" make for much more compelling narrative arcs. This can be seen, for example, in the stories of the Bushmen of Africa and Native Americans who lived primarily off hunting animals (Campbell et al., 2012). The

cycle of killing to live forced them to contend with the uncertainty of daily living. What if the animals didn't come? What if something else got to them first? How would the people survive? Without animals, the people would starve. So, the hunters conceptualized a sender of animals, a higher power that they honored through their rituals. In this way the hunters claimed some form of ease around life's uncertainty. The animals would come because someone continued to send them, and the hunters honored that someone through the stories they told and the rituals they practiced.

As much as stories can tell us about how to relate to others and understand the world, they may tell us the most about how we understand and relate to ourselves. The way we convey our memories, our life stories, to others displays how we represent ourselves (Josselson, 2009) and our self-concept is powerfully intertwined with the stories we tell (McAdams, 1996), whether they be positive (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; King, 2001; McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams et al., 2001) or negative (Adler et al., 2006; Cowan et al., 2023; Lilgendahl et al., 2013). Stories also reveal the ways we make meaning out of our lives (Rogers et al., 2023; Ryu & Price, 2022; Wang et al., 2015).

The Hero's Journey

As the narratives of relationship to others, the world, and ourselves formed over time, the ones that endured the most began to take on a narrative arc with similar pieces. Joseph Campbell (1949) compiled these stories and simplified the structure, which he defined in this way:

> 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. (p. 30)

In this conceptualization, the journey of the hero takes place in three stages named by Campbell: departure, initiation, and return. First, the protagonist is called to a quest or journey into another realm (departure). Within that realm the hero faces trials and, with the aid of others, is able to overcome them (initiation). On returning home the hero has experienced some transformation and is able to share the fruits of the journey with others (return).

Campbell (1949) argued that the myths that followed the structure of the Hero's Journey were meant to reflect experiences within the human psyche. He presented it as a "general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale" and posited that "the individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls." (p. 121) In this theory, humans have been telling the story of psychological transformation for millennia, passing down a pathway for later generations to follow.

Perhaps the most important evidence for this prevailing structure of the Hero's Journey is how it continues to be found within the narratives of our modern storytellers. It seems that the Hero's Journey continues to prevail in our books (Butchart, 2019), movies (Boukemmouche & Al-Khawaldeh, 2022; O'Connor, 2022; Riggs, 2019), animation (Prokhorov, 2021; Wong & Achin, 2021), and video games (Pugh, 2018).

Drama Therapy and the Hero's Journey

Given that stories have been foundational to self-discovery and understanding for thousands of years back in human history, it seems reasonable that the act of storytelling and narrative exploration would remain an important foundation to build on for therapeutic practice. Drama therapy aims to draw directly on this concept. It is defined as an approach that "can

provide the context for participants to tell their stories, set goals and solve problems, express feelings, or achieve catharsis." (NADTA, 2021)

This paper aims to explore the stages of the client's journey through the drama therapy process and to draw parallels with the protagonist's quest through the stages of the Hero's Journey. Campbell (1949) believed that the Hero's Journey provided a road map for people to be able to view their life's journey and that placing their lives in that context would help to provide clarity. Similarly, this paper hypothesizes that the Hero's Journey will provide a useful structure for both clients and clinicians as they navigate the therapeutic process together.

Methods

The primary source for research was Lesley University's Library and open-access sources for peer-reviewed journals found primarily through Google Scholar. Methodology for finding sources began with reading Joseph Campbell's work *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* which provided the primary structure for organizing literature and peer-reviewed articles. All included sources were reviewed, sorted based on structural relevance, and annotated and organized by topic. As more resources were discovered and read the process continued to evolve. The research focused on intersecting drama therapy (or dramatherapy or psychodrama) and therapeutic process with the search terms story, storytelling, narrative, narrative therapy, therapeutic theatre, the Hero's Journey, warm-up, de-roling, play space, liminal space, dramatic reality, ritual, roles, narrative interventions, heroes, social determinants of health, barriers to treatment, transference, therapeutic alliance, attachment style, unconditional positive regard, transformation, and psychotherapy termination. All sources were periodically reviewed for relevance.

Literature Review

Setting the Stage

Campbell (1949) described the Hero's Journey as taking place in three stages: departure, initiation, and return which will also be the titles for the main sections of this literature review. Each of the three sections are divided into subsections that follow the chapter titles of Campbell's book and connect the details of the Hero's Journey to part of a client's therapeutic experience. Briefly described, the three stages of this journey are as follows.

In departure, the hero receives the call to some adventure or quest (Campbell, 1949). Often the hero goes through a period of rejecting this call but eventually receives some kind of supernatural aid to allow the hero to cross the first threshold into another realm. For initiation, the hero undergoes a series of trials in this other realm which test the hero and prepare them to face the goddess and the father, each of which must be reckoned with in some way for the hero to grow. The hero then reaches the highest point of transformation and is ready for the return. Like the rejection of the call to adventure, the hero often initially refuses the return, but eventually they cross the return threshold and arrive back in their original world. With this journey undertaken, the hero now has access to both worlds and can share their discoveries with humanity.

Departure

I. The Call to Adventure

Campbell (1949) wrote that the call to adventure is often brought by a herald of some kind, some entity which calls for the hero's life to change. This herald is rarely received well or immediately accepted by the hero. They are usually regarded as abominable or disgusting in some way, a "representative of the unconscious deep… wherein are hoarded all of the rejected, unadmitted, unrecognized, unknown, or underdeveloped factors, laws, and elements of existence." (p. 52) In stories, this herald may take the form of a beast, representative of some

repressed instincts, or may be some shadowy or hidden figure representing the frightening unknown. Either way, the herald "is often dark, loathly, or terrifying, judged evil by the world." (p. 53)

Similarly, the call to therapy is not the epic summons that might often be associated with the idea of a hero. People don't typically attend therapy because they feel happy, satisfied, and content with their lives or feel they are living up to their ultimate potential. While the presentation, histories, and personalities of clients vary, the common thread between them is that they struggle with "attaining their life goals, maximizing their potentials, and leading basically contented lives." (Goldstein, 2013, p. 1) Goldstein defined these problems as either causing discomfort or interfering in client's lives and adds that at least a part of the problem is not known to them, much like the shadowy call of the mysterious herald to explore the unknown.

Murdin and Errington (2004) wisely wrote in the first line of their book on beginning psychotherapy that, "The beginning is not the beginning" (p. 1). Clients experience much before the ugly call of the herald and by the time they enter the therapy room, much has already taken place. Some clients, due to the distress, elect to enter treatment on their own. However, other factors in play are referred to in research as pressures in treatment entry. These can include informal, formal, or legal pressures, such as family and friends, work, or court ordered treatment respectively (Marlowe et al., 2001; Storbjörk, 2006) although these pressures may not necessarily affect a client's ability to engage with treatment on entry (Wild et al., 2006). Little research has been done on pressures on treatment entry in clients presenting with concerns outside of substance use, but given the general ugliness of pressure for therapy, whether internal or external, it is no wonder that most clients experience some form of rejection of the call.

II. Refusal of the Call

After the hero receives the initial call, Campbell (1949) wrote, "even though the hero returns for a while to his familiar occupations, they may be found unfruitful." (p. 56) Often in the life of the hero, this initial refusal or attempt to return to the typical ways of being result in progressively more insistent signs pushing the hero toward their destined journey. For clients, as the symptoms they experience increase, therapy may become more of an imperative, meaning that by the time clients enter the therapy space they may be acutely in need of treatment.

Some of the reasons for refusal of the call to treatment are very practical, often referred to as the social determinants of health (Jensen et al., 2020; Langley et al., 2010; Tambling et al., 2022). These can include things such as availability and accessibility of resources (e.g. transportation and distance) (Jensen et al. 2020), the perception that therapy is too difficult or not relevant to the experienced problem (Kazdin et al., 1997), stress or time constraints (Jensen et al., 2020; Kazdin et al., 1997), and financial challenges (Jensen et al., 2020; Langley et al., 2010). Additional factors can include generational traumas and poor perceptions of mental health providers amidst minority groups (Alegria et al., 2010; Kilbourne et al., 2006; Nadeem et al., 2007; Tambling et al., 2022). All of these constitute reasons for the potential hero-client to deny the call to treatment.

Another prominent barrier that contributes to rejection of the call is the perception of stigma around mental health treatment (Jensen et al., 2020; Nadeem et al., 2007; Tambling et al., 2022). This rejection of the call can have dire consequences, leading the hero toward a lack of agency (Seidman et al., 2019; Toivonen et al., 2019). Campbell (1949) wrote that "Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative… the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved." (p. 59) However, Campbell also advocated for the resiliency of the hero that does refuse the call saying, "sometimes the predicament

following an obstinate refusal of the call proves to be the occasion of a providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release." (p. 64) This natural resiliency or recovery is rarely the focus in literature but can be seen in some research studies (Mellor et al., 2021). Whichever the path, once the hero accepts or is pushed into acceptance of the call to journey, the hero is provided some form of aid to encourage them on their way.

III. Supernatural Aid

"For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure… who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass." (Campbell, 1949, p. 69) Having accepted the call to treatment, often clients find themselves in the first session with a therapist, nervous or skeptical or whatever other mixed feelings may come along with it. And the therapist takes on the task of beginning to build a relationship with the client, and to build up the tools that clients need to aid them in their journey through therapy.

It is well known that therapeutic relationship is one of the foremost elements of transformation in the therapy room (Aponte, 2022; Matos & Dimaggio, 2023). This relationship is important to begin to build in the very first session with a client as something that can predict positive or negative outcomes in treatment (Tsai et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2006). In this way, the therapist establishes themselves as a helper, allied with the goals of the hero and committed to aid in navigating the client through the trials to come.

Clients and heroes often begin with ideas of a lack of self-agency (Pol et al., 2023; Seidman et al., 2019; Toivonen et al., 2019). They often feel lost and ill-equipped for the task before them. Studies that focus on lack of self-agency stress the importance of therapists identifying these tendencies and finding ways to counterbalance them, to provide the amulets of

protection, such as identifying and reaffirming personal values to aid in lessening feelings of self-stigma and increasing self-disclosure (Seidman et al., 2019). Additionally, the therapist works to prepare clients for their role in therapy, referred to as role induction, through honest information about what a client can expect from treatment and what the process will look like (Swift et al., 2023). This preparation for the hero's role significantly increases positive outcomes for early treatment and posttreatment.

At the beginning of *The Gift of Therapy*, Yalom (2009) described the purpose of the therapist being "to remove obstacles blocking [the] patient's path." (p. 1) Campbell (1949) also wrote that if the helper is able to provide the hero with tools to remove obstacles to their path, then they will find the rest of the help they need within. "Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side." (p. 72) This is important to emphasize and distinguish for the therapist-helper. The therapist is not supernatural nor are they capable of magic, though the methods of the therapist may seem mystical to the hero-client at times. Rather, the therapist provides tools to the hero and offers to journey with them on the road ahead as one equally mortal. Yalom (2009) advocated for use of the term "fellow travelers" (p. 8) to describe the therapeutic relationship. And with the aid of the fellow traveler, and the initial tools to begin to face the challenges ahead, the hero is now ready for the crossing of the first threshold.

IV. The Crossing of the First Threshold

With their guide and helper beside them, the hero advances to the first threshold, beyond which "is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe" where the hero finds "their fear of the fabled leviathans, mermaids, dragon kings, and other monsters of the

deep." (Campbell, 1949, p. 78) Truly a terrifying place. Is it any wonder the hero often feels inadequate to the tasks required of their role? The role of the therapist is to help the client cross this barrier, to be able to explore the unknown. In drama therapy, this process is typically done using ritual and warm-up.

Ritual is often experienced in everyday life and can range from simple and personal, to complex and public, but research suggests that the common factors in all rituals is that they help mediate distress tolerance (Hobson et al, 2018; Keinan, 1994; Lang et al., 2015) and they connect the psychological to the physical (Hobson et al., 2018; Yun et al., 2023). Psychotherapy often involves feelings of anxiety and distress, and ritual is a way to moderate some of those difficult emotions. For the hero-client, this serves the very important function of preparing for the crossing of the first threshold into the uncertainty beyond. In drama therapy, this is the crossing of the threshold between reality and dramatic reality (Pendzik, 2006). Emunah (2020) in discussing dramatic ritual noted how it helps the client to move "from fictional to real-life material and from safety to risk-taking" (p. 25). Jones (2007) in complement emphasized how ritual provides a sense of connection with others and feelings of empowerment. In this way, ritual flows into exploration (Lavie et al., 2019) and opens the way forward. The role of the guide-therapist through this process is to begin to co-construct the dramatic reality space, which awaits just beyond the first threshold, with the client and help to facilitate their transition as the "specialist in dramatic reality" (Pendzik, 2006, p. 227). The dramatic reality space is fragile and requires that at least two people agree on its construction. This mutual agreement constitutes a shared experience and allows for an encounter to take place, wherein all parties involved agree that, at least for a time, all things that occur within the space are influential and meaningful,

taking on a kind of reality, albeit one that is malleable and changeable in form, precisely because it is not real. Through ritual, therapist and client prepare for this encounter.

Warm-up is about connection, both to the self and to others (Howie & Bagnall, 2015; Kroll & Mikahilova, 1992). In a contemporary sense, warm-ups are understood to connect the athlete to their body, the musician to their instrument, the comedian to their audience, and the actor to their role. The idea in each scenario is to prepare for further action, and to engage a person's energy for the action ahead (Kranz, 1991). Emunah (2020) described warm-ups as goal-driven, designed to prepare the individual or group for the coming work. Because the dramatic reality space is co-created by nature (Pendzik, 2006), warm-ups also provide the opportunity for therapist and client to lay the groundwork for creating together and to prepare for the encounter they will have together within that space. Through this connective preparation to the self and the drama therapy space and to one another, the therapist guides their hero-client to this first threshold and builds a safe enough space for the client to step across to the unknown beyond.

Initiation

I. The Road of Trials

With the crossing of the first threshold, "the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a series of trials" (Campbell, 1949, p. 97). Campbell went on to write that this stage of the hero's journey is often a favorite, with frequent representation in ancient and popular literature. This is where the hard work of therapy begins. Perhaps that is why this stage features so heavily in storytelling. People desire the representation of the hard challenges to be faced and the representation of overcoming them.

Across the threshold, the hero-client becomes capable of exploring very difficult material. This is facilitated through the dramatic reality space or dramatic distancing. Emunah (2020)

described the dramatic space as something which "provides the safeguard that promotes experimentation and gradually and indirectly invites moderate self-revelation." (p. 10) In Developmental Transformations, this dramatic reality is known as the playspace, "which offers an alternative set of norms of behavior that provide greater freedom and safety than the real space." (Johnson, 2013, p. 38) With the provisions of dramatic reality in place, the hero-client feels able to tolerate the uncertainty and difficult emotions that are discovered in the realm of trials, but also the freedom and confidence to face, overcome, and transform them. This is what the hero-client finds in the realm of dramatic reality, a space which is "always mirroring something" (Pendzik, 2006, p. 276) and provides perspective, where different possibilities for reality can be tried on and experimented with or simply viewed in a different light. The inner world of the client receives an outlet through manifestation within dramatic reality. Often personal narratives become subverted in reality. Unacceptable aspects of this narrative are dismissed or repressed because they don't fit with dominant stories (White & Epston, 1990). But through dramatic reality, these subverted experiences are allowed closer to the realm of reality where they can be accessed and integrated into personal narrative (Pendzik, 2006). Whatever is done with the contents that enter the world of dramatic reality they are invariably transformed by the time therapist and client re-enter reality.

Jones (2007) coupled his description of dramatherapeutic distancing and dramatic reality with a discussion on empathy and how this encourages emotional resonance. The drama therapist both enables emotional exploration through safe enough distance from difficult material and underpins this experience with empathic responses. In this way the therapist once again acts as the supernatural helper that Campbell (1949) described as aiding the hero through their series of trials. Here, Campbell wrote, with the aid of their helper the hero faces and ultimately integrates

their opposite, resistances are broken down, and the previously intolerable parts of the self and of others becomes tolerable.

II. The Goddess and the Father

In the alternate realm across the threshold the hero-client faces many challenges. Amongst the forms and figures the hero must face are the goddess and the father (Campbell, 1949), eventually coming to terms with and learning from each. Both represent life, its beginnings, and its injustices, as what should be caring figures are not always caring.

Early experiences with caregivers return often in the lives of clients and consequently manifest in the therapy room. Often this is explored in psychology research through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973). Early on, when the hero was most vulnerable, the mother-goddess and the father represented for them how to be in relationship to another. They are the safety for the hero to return to after daring exploration into the realm of dangers. But if the mother-goddess and father were not able to provide that safety to the hero, research displays again and again the negative consequences that follow for the hero (ex. Bassi et al., 2022; Madonna & Rangaiah, 2023). Van der Kolk (2014) discussed a study comparing typical children with those who had been abused and the ways they chose to narrate stories about various images. Often these stories from children who had undergone abuse involved horrific and dark ends with little to no hope in them, even when the images seemed positive. In children who had not undergone abuse, even when the images were more serious or melancholy, the stories often ended happily, were overall hopeful, and involved plots of escaping negative situations. The hero that has not been nurtured may struggle to see the light, the way out of the road of trials, and the vindictive goddess-mother or malicious father are likely to return again and again to haunt the hero's journey.

Fortunately, there is still hope for the hopeless hero. Other figures in the hero's life provide an opportunity to develop a secure base for their continued quest (Bowlby, 1988; Van der Kolk, 2014). This includes the hero's relationship with their therapist, the supernatural guide, and friend to the hero. With a good therapeutic alliance, the therapist and hero can begin to find ways to overcome the terrifying images of the mother and father (Genova et al., 2021; Van der Kolk, 2014). When the hero reconciles or atones with the goddess-mother and the father, Campbell (1949) wrote that the hero can endure trials and ordeals, make peace with life and death, and find rest. With this secure base, and the road of trials passed, the hero-client is ready for their ultimate transformation.

III. Apotheosis

Apotheosis is the apex of transformation. It is the climax of the hero's journey, the point the hero has been seeking most. In this section, Campbell (1949) wrote significantly about love, about how it transforms. Love subverts opposites and overcomes the line between self and other, and with this power, the hero becomes the master of opposites, able to see both and finally, to attain peace.

Love is also a transformative tool in the therapy room. Yalom (2009) urged therapists not only to show empathy, unconditional positive regard, to their clients, but to also teach clients empathy toward others. This can transform a client's relationships with others and even to themselves, as everyone is aided "from the experience of being fully seen and fully understood." (p. 18) Continuous research again and again champions the relationship between the therapist and the client, where the therapeutic relationship is the main catalyst for change.

Transformation is also a central component in drama therapy (Jones, 2007). In drama therapy, the client is offered both the means to transform themselves, through roleplay or role-

reversal, but also to transform situations, largely through enactments in dramatic reality, which "assist change by offering transformation through bringing drama and life into contact with each other." (pp. 120-122) This is the secret of the world across the first threshold: it is a representation and a reflection of the real world. As Campbell (1949) wrote, "The two kingdoms are actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And the exploration of that dimension… is the whole sense of the deed of the hero." (p. 217) The playspace or dramatic reality is both the world and not the world, capable of holding exploration, experimentation, transformation, and revelation. Life events "can be experimented with, and altered through, the playing and replaying of the experience" (Jones, 2007, p. 121) and it is the task of the hero-client to traverse this land and mine the depths of it for the newfound knowledge and understanding that ignites their own transformation. The paradox of the real/not real and me/not me aspects of the dramatic reality space is tremendously important for the hero-client to be able to discover and hold (Pendzik, 2006). "Holding a paradox is always an empowering experience: it helps us tolerate our inner contradictions and cope with the paradoxical nature of life." (p. 274) This is how the hero takes on their final form, their role as a creator, an initiator of their own fate, rather than simply an actor following a script. The act of creation itself is considered by many cultures to contain healing properties and is the principle that underpins the expressive therapies (Pendzik, 2006). With this empowerment and creativity, terror turns to mastery, and the hero "discovers the hags converted into goddesses and the dragons into the watchdogs of the gods." (Campbell, 1949, p. 217) At the end of this journey to transformation, the hero is now ready to return to the world, bringing with them the knowledge they have gained.

Return

I. Refusal of the Return

"When the hero-quest had been accomplished… the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing back the runes of wisdom… but the responsibility had been frequently refused." (Campbell, 1949, p. 193) Though the traversing of the threshold was originally a source of great fear, it is not uncommon for the hero, once this place has been reached, to hesitate to return once again to the world.

In therapy the difficulties of return are often seen through the process of treatment termination which can be accompanied by feelings of grief, anger, and abandonment. Part of the job of the therapist is to prepare the client for termination, even using the process of termination itself as part of therapeutic intervention (Shahar & Ziv-Beiman, 2020). The therapist once again can act as the secure base for clients struggling to come to terms with termination (Marmarosh & Salamon, 2020). It is also the responsibility of the therapist to maintain the empowerment and autonomy of the client throughout the process of termination, collaborating with them on what their goals are and when they feel complete (Vasquez et al., 2008). When the therapist and client agree on termination, the client experiences higher feelings of therapeutic relationship, satisfaction toward treatment, and positive motives for termination (Olivera et al., 2017). This is crucial for maintaining the hero-client's sense of independence and agency in their own life that they have gained through their road of trials.

II. The Crossing of the Return Threshold

On the other side of the journey past the first threshold is the threshold of return. "The returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world." (Campbell, 1949, p. 226) After the experiences in the realm of the divine, the dramatic reality and playspace, the hero-client must be able to return to the real world and bring with them the knowledge they have attained, applying it to their continuing life experiences. In this return journey, it is once

again the responsibility of the guide-therapist to provide aid. In drama therapy this involves two important factors: de-roling (Landy, 2009) and the life-drama connection (Jones, 2007).

De-roling is the process of stepping away from a role, character, or realm and turning toward a place of reflection (Landy, 2009). It represents the paradox of "the continuity of the me and not-me" and "the actor resumes a life in a parallel universe" (p. 100), that of reality. The goal is to move a client from the world of the imaginary to that of reality. It is essential to maintain the safety of a client's experience and connection with reality, without unknowingly or unwillingly carrying unwanted aspect of the dramatic realm into their daily lives (Busselle, 2021; Gualeni et al., 2017; Lassken, 2017). For some clients this transition can be difficult, particularly children or those dealing with psychosis, and just as it is the guide-therapist's role to help clients cross the first threshold and be able to co-construct the dramatic reality, it is also the therapists' responsibility to make clear the boundaries between dramatic reality and reality itself and facilitate a safe return (Pendzik, 2006). The dramatic space is also often lacking in reflection. When the hero-client is in the midst of traveling through the space of dramatic reality they are not often in a state of reflection on what they are experiencing and mining the encounters in the dramatic realm for insight is difficult to do in the moment. For that reason, it is important for the client-hero to be able to return to reality and to a state of contemplation. The de-roling process safely prepares the hero to mine their experiences for the gems of knowledge they are searching for.

The process of mining the enactments in the dramatic reality space for runes of wisdom to carry into the world is done through the life-drama connection (Jones, 2007). This is where the world of dramatic reality and that of everyday life are most recognized as one, much like the hero comes to find that the world of the divine across the threshold is really just a reflection of

the world they already knew (Campbell, 1949). It is the process "of bringing life into contact with drama in the framework of intentional personal change" (Jones, 2007, p. 118) and it is how the dramatic reality space maintains its ability to transform reality. Without it "the journey to dramatic reality would be detached from life, and therefore be ineffective and futile" (Pendzik, 2006, p. 278) The hero-client is able to identify their experiences in the dramatic space as relating directly to their experiences in reality. Once the hero-client has access to these powers of reimagination and reintegration, they become the master of both worlds, capable of imagining new outcomes and enacting them on their own.

III. *Master of Two Worlds*

This is the ultimate skill that the hero-client returns to their original world bearing with them.

> Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back—not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other—is the talent of the master. (Campbell, 1949, p. 229)

The hero-client has the knowledge of this space of dramatic reality, a space distanced enough from the world to be able to imagine new outcomes but connected enough to reality to inform the client's actions, understanding the one through the exploration of the other. The therapist has provided the outside perspective, the ability to see the client through the eyes of unconditional positive regard and helped to instill the concepts of empathy into the client, both for themselves and for others. Through these things the client no longer needs their supernatural aid. They are capable of generating transformation on their own, the master of their own destiny.

Various studies support the use of narrative and storytelling in the process of transformative and lasting learning in many contexts (Acosta & Haden, 2023; Di Blas, 2022; Liu et al., 2018). Stories can help prevent devaluing the future (Epstein et al., 2021), and the narratives told about heroes are capable of inspiring heroic acts, even while being reminded of mortality (McCabe et al., 2015; McCabe et al., 2016). This is what the hero is ultimately meant to do. The hero changes the mortal world around them once they return with all they have gained from their trials. Clients are capable of doing the same, of inspiring great change around them. With the continuous research supporting the use of narratives and stories to teach and to change lives, the therapist can move through their work with confidence that guiding their clients through the narrative of their hero's journey will have lasting and far-reaching transformative change.

Discussion

Lessons from the Hero's Journey

The purpose of this literature review was to explore the integration of the concept of the Hero's Journey as outlined by Campbell (1949) with the process of the therapeutic journey undertaken by clients seeking treatment. Some integration of the Hero's Journey with drama therapy has already been explored, mostly through role theory. Landy (Minerson, 2017) simplified the structure of the Hero's Journey down to four main parts: "hero, destination, obstacle and guide" (p. 150). This simplified structure is something he described as easily translatable and able to be taken to multiple platforms for multiple cultures. Landy's focus for the Hero's Journey emphasized integration, empowering clients to accept all internal roles, and being mindful of the needs and intricacies of each. Klees (2016) also explored the Hero's Journey through role theory with a client in treatment for anxiety. Klees drew on Landy's simplified

structure of the Hero's Journey. He wrote about the importance of the narrative self, an awareness of one's own story which develops very early on in children. When personal narratives become confused, incoherent, and inconsistent, client's mental health declines. Integration and narrative synthesis, achieved through use of the Hero's Journey and role theory, were very impactful in the work Klees did with his anxious client. These approaches focus specifically on role theory in conjunction with the Hero's Journey. There seems to be scarce research on how the Hero's Journey can be integrated with other forms of drama therapy such as developmental transformations and psychodrama. Furthermore, the approaches described in this research focused either on the client's journey through specific drama therapy interventions over the course of treatment or on the much broader scale of a lifetime journey. This thesis aimed to apply the Hero's Journey to client's experience of treatment throughout the entire process of therapy including before and after a client is in the therapy room. The desire with this approach was to help provide clients and clinicians with a structure to keep in mind as they journey together through the process of therapy, drawing on Campbell's (1949) concept of the Hero's Journey as a scale for people to place themselves on to be able to understand where they are and where they are going. The theory, which the research cited in this literature review supports, is that encouraging both clients and clinicians to view clients as heroes on a journey, capable of heroic actions and overcoming multifaceted and varied obstacles, will be a source of empowerment for clients in therapy, and provide clinicians with encouragement and guidance towards supporting autonomy in their clients.

The Hero's Journey also provides access in the drama therapy room to the past. Often drama therapy is seen as a new practice without a theoretical or concrete basis. And yet through Campbell's (1949) work, the presence of narrative both in the internal psyche and in cultural

practices can be seen throughout time as a method for transformation and psychological healing. As drama therapists, the links to the past are important to acknowledge, both as support for continued confidence in drama therapeutic work and for representing our work to others. It is also important to maintain humility in our own practice, recognizing that what we engage in within the therapy room are old practices with ancient significance, something which may encourage both confidence and reverence. This ancient structure is also important for drama therapists to continue to learn from as we study and come to understand our own history and the ways the techniques we use have been used in the past.

Finally, the Hero's Journey draws on mythologies and religions of the past and present (Campbell, 1949). For this reason, the stories told using this structure often have a mystical and spiritual importance to them and affect people on many levels. This provides an element within the therapy room that modern research into psychotherapy is discovering the importance of: spirituality. For example, Holmberg et al. (2017) explored the stories of clients who were able and unable to voice their spiritual and religious beliefs in the therapy room and the difference that this made for them in therapy. Clients who were unable to bring in their spirituality felt misunderstood and closed off from their therapist, while those who were able to address and speak about their spiritual identity within the therapy room felt that their therapist helped their spiritual experience to grow, and they were able to integrate that aspect of themselves within therapy. Boyali (2022) wrote about the importance of spirituality as a part of viewing and treating the whole person which is a key philosophical basis for Gestalt therapy. Boyali specifically mentioned the techniques shared between Gestalt therapy and psychodrama, such as role play and empty chair, which are used to help clients achieve integration between all parts of themselves, including the spiritual, an often-neglected aspect within therapy. All this research

suggests that the spiritual aspects of a person are an important part of identity and wholeness, and this plays an important role in personal narratives. The Hero's Journey provides an ancient and spiritually informed way to integrate the spirit into the therapy room as a part of healing. Where drama therapy is largely focused on enactment, the Hero's Journey is a structure for invoking the spiritual.

Limitations

While Campbell's (1949) work has long been celebrated, some critiques have been leveled against his structuring. The most common critique has been Campbell's limited views on female figures within the Hero's Journey. Although Campbell cites the Hero's Journey as a roadmap for all people, it is often critiqued as male-centric and with good reason. Two prominent voices which have been a part of restructuring the Hero's Journey to be more viable for psychological exploration in females are Dr. Maureen Murdock, author of *The Heroine's Journey* (1990) and Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1995). Both authors discuss the importance of the return to the feminine as a part of a woman's journey to wholeness. This can have important implications for therapists who are working with women in the drama therapy room through the Hero's Journey. For example, Murdock (1990) wrote about the challenge for women of working with the body. She identified the nexus of feminine spirituality as being achieved "through movement and body awareness" the denial of which can inhibit a woman's spiritual journey, wherein she "ignores her intuition and dreams and pursues the safer activities of the mind." (p. 27) Murdock further expanded this concept by describing how the parental figures, both mother and father, have a hold on the feminine body through discomfort with sexuality. The feelings that arise from the dichotomy of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality must often be overcome along the heroine's journey toward wholeness.

These are important factors to keep in mind for the drama therapist working with women in enactment as an embodied experience, particularly in the stage described in this thesis as the goddess and the father and are concepts which are almost wholly missing in Campbell's (1949) iteration of the stages of the Hero's Journey. The therapist wishing to utilize the Hero's Journey in the therapy room must think critically about the female experience within that journey and how the feminine is welcomed or not welcomed within that space.

Another limitation is the lack of research around integrating the concepts of the Hero's Journey with drama therapy interventions aside from role theory. While the stages of the Hero's Journey seem to line up with various concepts of drama therapy, there is little research which specifically integrates the concept of the hero with the protagonist of psychodrama or the player of developmental transformations. These may be fruitful integrations to explore in future research regarding the Hero's Journey and drama therapy interventions.

Conclusion

As the narrative threads of our client's journeys through therapy come to an end, the path toward transformation is ongoing. The beginning is not the beginning, but neither is the end. Stories continue on in the lives of our clients and those around them. As therapists we don't often get to know how the story ends or the impact we had, but through the path of the Hero's Journey we may instill heroic qualities in our clients, encouraging them to continue on their path of growth and transformation, reminding them of the strength and autonomy they each carry, and empowering them to change their own lives, and perhaps even, the lives of others. The way each of us story our lives has such an impact on the way we live and view ourselves, so let's help to make our client's stories heroic ones.

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