

only to agree with me that, indeed, Mr. Lindner is an instance of the demonic tempter offering Walter Lee Younger, a Faustian bargain; I want them to be able to reach that conclusion without me. I know they can, with practice, patience, and a bit of instruction. And so can you.

1

## **Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not)**

OKAY, SO HERE'S THE DEAL: Let's say, purely hypothetically, you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid—let's call him Kip—who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted, is on his way to the A&P. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore deeply humiliating, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it even worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including a minorly unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd, topped off in the supermarket parking lot where he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and horsing around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new Barracuda. Now Kip hates Tony already because he has a name like Vauxhall and not like Smith, which Kip thinks is

pretty lame as a name to follow Kip, and because the 'Cuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. So Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who has recently asked her out, and she keeps laughing. (She could stop laughing and it wouldn't matter to us, since we're considering this structurally. In the story we're inventing here, though, she keeps laughing.) Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up, and as he reaches for the bread, he decides right then and there to lie about his age to the Marine recruiter even though it means going to Vietnam, because nothing will ever happen for him in this one-horse burg where the only thing that matters is how much money your old man has. Either that or Kip has a vision of St. Abillard (any saint will do, but our imaginary author picked a comparatively obscure one), whose face appears on one of the red, yellow, or blue balloons. For our purposes, the nature of the decision doesn't matter any more than whether Karen keeps laughing or which color balloon manifests the saint.

What just happened here?

If you were an English professor, and not even a particularly weird English professor, you'd know that you'd just watched a knight have a not very suitable encounter with his nemesis.

In other words, a quest just happened.

*But it just looked like a trip to the store for some white bread.*

True. But consider the quest. Of what does it consist? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail (whatever one of those may be), at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sound about right? That's a list I can live with: a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherds), a Holy Grail (one form of which is a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least one dragon (trust me, a '68 'Cuda could definitely breathe

fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (who can either keep laughing or stop).

*Seems like a bit of a stretch.*

On the surface, sure. But let's think structurally. The quest consists of five things: (a) a quester (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) a real reason to go there. Item (a) is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, usually he doesn't know. Items (b) and (c) should be considered together: someone tells our protagonist, our *hero*, who need not look very heroic, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for bread. Go to Vegas and whack a guy. Tasks of varying nobility, to be sure, but structurally all the same. Go there, do that. Note that I said the stated reason for the quest. That's because of item (e).

The real reason for a quest *never* involves the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. So why do they go and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, mistakenly believing that it is their real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don't know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves. **The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge.** That's why questers are so often young, inexperienced, immature, sheltered. Forty-five-year-old men either have self-knowledge or they're never going to get it, while your average sixteen-to-seventeen-year-old kid is likely to have a long way to go in the self-knowledge department.

Let's look at a real example. When I teach the late-twentieth-century novel, I always begin with the greatest quest novel of the last century: Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Beginning readers can find the novel mystifying, irritating, and highly peculiar. True enough, there is a good bit of cartoon-

ish strangeness in the novel, which can mask the basic quest structure. On the other hand, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century) and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596), two of the great quest narratives from early English literature, also have what modern readers must consider cartoonish elements. It's really only a matter of whether we're talking Classics Illustrated or Zap Comics. So here's the setup in *The Crying of Lot 49*:

- 1) *Our quester*: a young woman, not very happy in her marriage or her life, not too old to learn, not too assertive where men are concerned.
- 2) *A place to go*: in order to carry out her duties, she must drive to Southern California from her home near San Francisco. Eventually she will travel back and forth between the two, and between her past (a husband with a disintegrating personality and a fondness for LSD, an insane ex-Nazi psychotherapist) and her future (highly unclear).
- 3) *A stated reason to go there*: she has been made executor of the will of her former lover, a fabulously wealthy and eccentric businessman and stamp collector.
- 4) *Challenges and trials*: our heroine meets lots of really strange, scary, and occasionally truly dangerous people. She goes on a nightlong excursion through the world of the outcasts and the dispossessed of San Francisco; enters her therapist's office to talk him out of his psychotic shooting rampage (the dangerous enclosure known in the study of traditional quest romances as "Chapel

Pentious?); involves herself in what may be a centuries-old postal conspiracy.

- 5) *The real reason to go*: did I mention that her name is Oedipa? Oedipa Maas, actually. She's named for the great tragic character from Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King* (ca. 425 B.C.), whose real calamity is that he doesn't know who he is. In Pynchon's novel the heroine's resources, really her crutches—and they all happen to be male—are stripped away one by one, shown to be false or unreliable, until she reaches the point where she either must break down, reduced to a little fetal ball, or stand straight and rely on herself. And to do that, she first must find the self on whom she can rely. Which she does, after considerable struggle. Gives up on men, Tup-perware parties, easy answers. Plunges ahead into the great mystery of the ending. Acquires, dare we say, self-knowledge? Of course we dare.

#### Still . . .

You don't believe me. Then why does the stated goal fade away? We hear less and less about the will and the estate as the story goes on, and even the surrogate goal, the mystery of the postal conspiracy, remains unresolved. At the end of the novel, she's about to witness an auction of some rare forged stamps, and the answer to the mystery may or may not appear during the auction. We doubt it, though, given what's gone before. Mostly, we don't even care. Now we know, as she does, that she can carry on, that discovering that men can't be counted on doesn't mean the world ends, that she's a whole person. So there, in fifty words or more, is why professors of lit-

erature typically think *The Crying of Lot 49* is a terrific little book. It does look a bit weird at first glance, experimental and superhip (for 1965), but once you get the hang of it, you see that it follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *Huckle Finn*. *The Lord of the Rings*. *North by Northwest*. *Star Wars*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing wasn't his idea in the first place.

A word of warning: if I sometimes speak here and in the chapters to come as if a certain statement is always true, a certain condition always obtains, I apologize. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning in literary study. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not. If literature seems to be too comfortably patriarchal, a novelist like the late Angela Carter or a poet like the contemporary Eavan Boland will come along and upend things just to remind readers and writers of the falseness of our established assumptions. If readers start to pigeonhole African-American writing, as was beginning to happen in the 1960s and 1970s, a trickster like Ishmael Reed will come along who refuses to fit in any pigeonhole we could create. Let's consider journeys. Sometimes the quest falls or is not taken up by the protagonist. Moreover, is every trip really a quest? It depends. Some days I just drive to work—no adventures, no growth. I'm sure that the same is true in writing. Sometimes plot requires that a writer get a character from home to work and back again. That said, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.

## Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE ANECDOTE about Sigmund Freud. One day one of his students, or assistants, or some such hanger-on, was teasing him about his fondness for cigars, referring to their obvious phallic nature. The great man responded simply that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I don't really care if the story is true or not. Actually, I think I prefer that it be apocryphal, since made-up anecdotes have their own kind of truth. Still, it is equally true that just as cigars may be just cigars, so sometimes they are not.

Same with meals in life and, of course, in literature. Sometimes a meal is just a meal, and eating with others is simply eating with others. More often than not, though, it's not. Once or twice a semester at least, I will stop discussion of the story or

# The Heroic Journey

steps and descriptions below adapted from Joseph Campbell

- 1. The Call** – The moment the hero is called on a quest is known as his/her call. The hero may make a deliberate decision to start a journey or he/she may have no choice.
- 2. Allies** – Individuals who assist the hero during the journey are known as allies. They may be acquired at any point during the journey and may be family members, friends, guides, animals, or even gods.
- 3. The Preparation** – The hero needs to prepare for the journey. His/Her needs may be physical (e.g. training, supplies, etc.) or they may be knowledge-based, such as information. Occasionally the preparation is psychological. For instance, the hero may have to muster courage to begin his/her great adventure.
- 4. Guardian(s) of the Threshold** – The hero encounters obstacles which interfere with or delay the start of the journey. The obstacles may be literal (e.g. physical barriers or individuals who oppose the hero) or figurative (e.g. fears and doubts).
- 5. Crossing the Threshold** – The hero actually begins his/her journey, crossing over into a new and unfamiliar world. Often the hero realizes that in this new place, the “underworld,” he/she must acquire new skills or knowledge to function well.
- 6. Road of Trials** – The hero faces a series of difficult experiences which test the courage, strength, intelligence, determination, and wisdom of the hero in the “underworld.” It may even seem that he/she has no hope or chance of getting out of a dangerous situation.
- 7. The Saving Experience** – Just when things are at their worst for the hero, he/she meets a special person, has a powerful experience, or receives a special gift that “saves” him/her, enabling him/her to achieve the journey’s goal.
- 8. The Transformation** – The hero is changing, now understanding the “underworld” around him/her and adapting accordingly. The transformation of the hero is sometimes physical, often mental, emotional, and/or spiritual.
- 9. The Return** – The hero returns to the “normal world” but now sees life differently because of the journey.
- 10. Sharing the Gift** – The hero shares the gift of experience, knowledge, and wisdom—gained through the journey—with the broader community.