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Transforming the Rebel Self: Quest Patterns in Fiction by William Styron, Flannery O’Connor and Bobbie Ann Mason
Introduction
“Swimming Against the (Main)stream”:
The Southern Quester in Post World-War II America

The quest journey, one of the oldest and most constant structural patterns in narrative literature, can be traced from earliest mythology to contemporary writings. The “Suchwanderung,” the search expressed through a goal-oriented journey, presents a fundamentally human characteristic or activity (Schulz 6). The Odyssey and J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings are just two examples of the quest in its most traditional form, the former work pivotal in defining the motif as we understand it today. While there is hardly any literature that does not exhibit at least one aspect of the quest motif, identifying the pattern this thematic form takes in a single work provides valuable insight into the inner struggles of the protagonist. Environment plays a crucial role in the motif, and its influence on the hero’s thoughts and actions further reveals the deeper cultural effects of a given time and place in shaping the quest.

Throughout the twentieth century the quest motif emerges with a focus on the predicament of the individual as a member separate from the community. In The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature, Murray Roston describes the sum of events and circumstances that combined to isolate the individual as the repercussions of two world wars and great socio-economic changes worked their effects on society (Roston 7). Whether or not a mission is articulated, it is, however, the act of questing itself that holds the greatest possibility to reveal the modern-day hero as an individual, as decisions are made about which “turn in the road to take.” As opposed to underscoring a state of isolation, the quest journey often becomes an act of introspection, resulting in the recognition of one’s unique potential and qualities.

The motif takes on a distinct form in the literature of the post-war American South in view of the region’s traditionalism and focus on social interaction. In William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice (1976), Flannery O’Connor’s The Violent Bear It Away (1955) and Bobbie Ann Mason’s In Country (1985), the hero’s search involves the conscious and subconscious process of assimilating the worlds of the past and present, an undertaking made particularly dramatic against the backdrop of the South. This is finally a solitary undertaking with initial separation from the community forming a necessary part of the journey. The hero is placed in the precarious position of being “on the outside looking in,” which involves stepping out of the regional conventions in which he or she has been raised and responding to the dictates of a contradictory world beyond the South-
ern fringe. Because of the peril of this undertaking, it is no surprise that the protagonists in these works are often portrayed on the run, physically “escaping,” whether on foot, in a train, or in a car. The flight that literally and figuratively drives them forward on their search opens new perspectives and creates the conditions necessary to bring about change.

As an introduction to the works of this study, the quest motif will first be presented in its urform, following the pattern described by Joseph Campbell. Particularly revealing are archetypal images and symbols that resurface in the journeys of the twentieth century heroes. The setting of the quest following World War II opens up a dramatic change in the climate of American culture. Thus the shifting attitude in the country at the time periods in which the three novels are set is an important point of departure. Society’s transformation in the American South – seen in the periods following World War II and the Vietnam War – took on its own dynamics that also impact the hero’s quest in a very personal way.

In his groundbreaking work, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), Joseph Campbell presents the hero’s journey “beneath its varieties of costume,” examining mythology and religion from every corner of the world linked by the common bond of the hero’s search for enlightenment. Despite widely differing cultures, the similarity between the patterns of the quest and the hero’s final transformation is immediately evident. Campbell’s study demonstrates how deeply mythology is rooted in the psyche, where symbols serve as important keys to unlock timeless aspects of the human character.

The linear development of the quest journey is cumulative, each part adding to the whole of the individual’s growth. The hero undertakes a physically and emotionally arduous journey. This journey is characterized by circumstances that lead to introspection and, often, a redefinition of goals. For the modern-day hero, this dramatic phase commonly takes the form of a painful inner search for self-identity set in the battleground of an alienating environment. When the search for awareness comes to fruition, the hero experiences an outwardly directed transformation as the newly awakened self is endowed with the potential to bear witness to others.

While the external form the quester’s journey takes – such as a confrontation and reconciliation with a conflicting force – may serve as the focal point of the narrative, an internalization of the journey is essential for the individual’s metamorphosis: “a retreat from the desperations of the waste land to the peace of the everlasting realm that is within” (Campbell 17). The image of the wasteland con-

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1 The pattern of the “monomyth” described by Joseph Campbell, comprised of the three stages: separation, initiation, and return, reflects a post-modern understanding of the search for identity.
tinues to serve an important function in the modern-day quest. Alan and Barbara Lupack’s study, *King Arthur in America*, examines the detailed role that the Arthurian legend plays in twentieth century American literature. Particularly through the use of Grail imagery writers have shown the desolation of the background against which the quest for the elusive self takes place: “Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner were all inspired by Eliot’s poem, which shifted the focus of the Grail story from the quester and his achievement to the wounded king and his ravaged land, images in which Hemingway in particular found perfect symbols for the post-World War I world and the disillusioned and scarred soldiers returned to a new society” (xiii). That a “uniquely American” interpretation of the Grail story is given new life in the landscape of a specific time reinforces the enduring nature of the hero’s search for selfhood.

The universal hero, which Joseph Campbell describes, is “the man of self-achieved submission” (16). This submission lies in the act of rebirth – of being born to something entirely new. The hero’s transformation, which in some cases may be a transfiguration, stands as a rebuttal to the finality of death. While this rebirth is an intensely personal moment, its effect is ultimately shared by the community. For the “inward passage” plumbs “depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revivified, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world” (Campbell 29). Thus the solitary, introspective phase of the journey is followed by movement that is directed outward, as if the hero is compelled to confirm the transformation by reaching out to others.

Growth is an essential element in the hero’s journey. Campbell links the process involved in this growth with symbolic “rites of passage.” The literal use of this phrase describes the rites in societies that herald a new stage in life, such as birth, adulthood, marriage, and death. Campbell uses the term to delineate the stations of the hero’s journey defined by the archetypal quest pattern: “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return, which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (30). The “monomyth” gives further meaning to the quest pattern in modern literature as symbols providing keys to understanding the hero’s transformation may be revealed in each station.

In the first phase of the traditional quest journey the male hero leaves his native environment, either by his own will or that of a higher authority. Causal factors are often involved that reflect a disharmony between the hero and society. In the middle phase, the hero must undertake or endure a number of adventures. Here his mettle is tested. In a foreign, often aggressive, environment he must physically combat forces that often take the form of evil creatures or the seduction of a female temptress who attempts to lead him off the right path. In the face
of enemies, there may also be helpful figures who support the hero with advice and assistance. The adventure often peaks in a decisive battle. In the third phase and conclusion of the adventure, the hero returns to the community. These stations find their way into the modern quest in symbolic and literal terms.

Following World War II, the setting of the journey motif often manifested itself in more frightening conditions than those found in the first half of the century:

[as] postwar life offered further socio-economic and political corroboration of the reality of wasteland – a wasteland more extreme than Eliot could ever have conceived. The fallout of the atomic bomb ushered in the nuclear age of fear, anxiety and distrust ... . Science seemed to be shifting its collective force from improving life to systemizing death, while the inhumane technology that created eminently efficient warfare and other not-so-brave new worlds became itself a plight of modern man overwhelmed by totalitarian forces very much out of his control. (Lupack and Lupack 210)

Moreover, the restlessness of modern life was reflected physically in the geographic makeup of the country, as large groups of the population migrated from the country to the city. The position of the quester in relationship to this phenomenon opens up aspects of character central to the greater themes of American literature. Departure from the native land has often been understood as a demonstration of hope and daring. The hero’s journey is physically and emotionally in and of itself a quest for “strangeness,” which Ihab Hassan describes as a search “for the self in some other guise or disguise” (28). Hassan views the quest as a “vital, symbolic option in the post-modern world” (4). The quest answers “a mystery which remains to be explored,” the outer physical journey mirroring historical tendencies of the American move westward and the search for “otherness” (6). From these nationally conditioned tendencies, America “constructed its own histories, myths, and legends, its own ethos of quest, in and out of literature” (5). These traditional patterns, as altered as they might have become throughout time, follow the “ideology of contemporary displacement,” for as Hassan states, “we have all become tourists” (13).

In connection with Hassan’s premise, it is significant that the heroine in Bobbie Ann Mason’s, *In Country* leaves her homeland literally as a tourist. This journey, which takes the form of a sightseeing trip, is crucial to the dénouement of the novel – a scene that centers on the station of unification with the community. The act of departure has a special significance in the Southern quest, where the cultural identification of the hero is particularly tested and the understanding of the self therefore more “at risk.”

The chivalric tradition in the South provides a link to the Arthurian quest story and its influence on the Southern hero: “As in Walker Percy’s fiction, the
Grail imagery of medieval romance thus finds in Sophie’s Choice not simply a parallel in the strong Southern chivalric tradition, but also a hope for redemption in the wasteland of the world” (Lupack and Lupack 236). The conflicting forces take on a universal meaning; the dark landscape of the wasteland suggesting “the dearth of real values, chivalric or otherwise, and the pervasiveness of evil and immorality” (Lupack and Lupack 211). In the Lupacks’ King Arthur in America, the protagonists in both Sophie’s Choice and In Country are identified as heroes following in the tradition of the Grail knight.

The transcendental elements found in the modern-day quest echo the timeless myths described by Joseph Campbell, for “the epic hero seeks deep knowledge of something beyond life and death” and “his heroic self aspires to what is not itself,” the initial action is first to “transgress” and then to “restore the order of Creation” (Hassan 22).

The quest is an especially relevant form of expression in a period marked by uncertainty and trauma in the aftermath of war. The initial emotion of separation felt by the quester is contained in William Styron’s description of his personal experience: “I think immediately after a major war like World War II people like to retreat. The commitment is enormous. When you have a major enterprise like that – a savage involvement in events – the tendency, especially if you’re young, as I was, is to withdraw, and to become hermetically sealed” (Cologne-Brooks, 213). The solitary nature of the youthful quester is evident in Styron’s expression of his feelings at this time – with inward withdrawal implying a parallel action of outward movement away from the “source of alienation,” and potentially toward a purpose or goal.

In the time following the Second World War, the mood in society crystallized into frequently incongruous contradiction: material wealth and an idealistic family image juxtaposed with underlying feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction; social aspirations to become part of a collective who contrasted with fears of being stripped of individual identity. The end of the war heralded a new world order, which was viewed by many with expectancy as well as apprehension:

America had produced on these shores the society and government which, since the late nineteenth century, many politicians and intellectuals had hoped for. Fulfilling those utopian dreams made the United States a success, not only in terms of winning the war, but also in terms of winning the battle to create the kind of world that in the previous century had been merely a wish. Ironically, however, this moment of triumph was accompanied by something disturbing: a new self-consciousness of tragedy and sense of disappointment. The postwar success was also the ‘age of anxiety.’ (Susman with Griffin 19)

Warren Susman and Edward Griffin examine sources for the dissatisfaction and restlessness felt by the general population in the period after World War II, when