9. Monomythic Time: Finn and the Hero's Journey

A*dventure Time* is frequently described as "random," and while this descriptor is usually meant as a way to compliment the show's limitless goofiness, it can also come across a bit dismissive, implying that the show has no "real" or stable narrative. This could not be farther from the truth, and while it is true that there was an aspect of chaotic creativity at the heart of the show that allowed it to grow organically, *Adventure Time*'s main story—that is, Finn's journey of self-discovery in which he grows from innocent boy to enlightened hero—has a complex, plottable structure. To explicate the details of this structure, the present chapter will employ the thought of mythologist Joseph Campbell, perhaps best known for his seminal 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he proposed the monomyth, better known as the "hero's journey.

I should stress that, despite the contents of this chapter, I do not consider myself a devoted structuralist; in fact, when it comes to mythology, I find structuralism to be somewhat ham-fisted, given its tendency to take complex stories and either divide them up into vague "mythemes" and then sort them into broad categories. I am not alone in this belief, and in the last half century or so many other scholars have abandoned structuralism's more universalizing ideas in favor of a nuanced approach to mythology and folklore. Having said that, I should point out that this section is not an attempt to vindicate Campbell's comparative approach to *mythology*. Instead, I simply seek to repudiate the idea that *Adventure Time* is "random" by illustrating

that the show's main plot follows—albeit in a clever and refreshing way—the storytelling model that Campbell and his pupils long ago described.

A Brief Look at the Monomyth

Because Joseph Campbell's formulation of the monomyth has been explicated in numerous books,[1] what follows is but a brief outline of the journey: The monomyth begins with a stage called the "departure." In this section of the story, the hero is introduced and is called to adventure. At first, this call is refused, but soon the hero relents, crossing the threshold into a new, usually supernatural world. From here, the monomyth segues into the second stage, called the "initiation," in which the hero experiences a variety of trials, culminating in a "meeting with the goddess" and an "atonement with the father." The hero then undergoes an apotheosis and secures the object of their quest. This point marks the start of the monomyth's denouement, the "return," which usually includes some sort of magic flight in which the hero is "rescued from without." The hero then crosses the return threshold and finds themself back in the ordinary world. It is here that the hero experiences a final transformation or a resurrection, and thereafter becomes the master of both the ordinary and special worlds, who is "free to live."

According to English scholar Donald E. Palumbo, "The hero's physical journey symbolizes everyone's psychological journey of rebirth and rediscovery,"[2] of which the end result is "enlightenment."[3] While this term might come across as overly "spooky" in our age of science, it really means nothing more than a person becoming fully aware of their entire Self, rather than worrying about what they could be, should be, or are not; in this way, it is arguably comparable to what pyschologist Carl Jung calls "individuation." Inherent in this sort of self-understanding is the acceptance of aspects with which a person might be uncomfortable, or which they might otherwise actively repress. According to Campbell, this recognition of the Self is often depicted in mythology as the reconciling of the myriad dualities in existence (e.g., life and death, light and darkness, good and evil), which in turn is often simplified as the union of the "masculine" and "feminine." It is for this reason that the heroes of myth tend to "atone" with the father (thereby coming to terms with their "masculine" side) and "connect" with a mother-goddess (thereby coming to terms with their "feminine" side); the merging of these two halves into one is a metaphor for the hero perceiving and accepting the many parts of their psyche that collectively form the Self.

In *Adventure Time*, Finn's monomythic path to enlightenment is portrayed gradually across three cycles, which I have called "ordeals." In the first, he meets his deadbeat father, who *via negativa* causes him to reaffirm his he-

roic spirit. Given that in Western culture, heroism is more often than not culturally-coded as a "masculine" attribute, Finn's reaffirmation of this trait can be read as the metaphorical acceptance of his "masculine" side. Conversely, in the second ordeal, Finn connects with his mother and learns that the two share an intrinsic want to help others. A tendency to help is also culturally-coded in the West, but instead of being seen as "masculine," it is usually understood as "feminine"; as such, Finn's reaffirmation to help signifies the metaphorical acceptance of his "feminine" side. By the end of the second ordeal, Finn manages to reconcile the masculine and feminine into a unified whole—his "hero heart"—which he uses to save Ooo in the *Elements* miniseries. Finn's enlightenment is then finalized in the third ordeal, wherein he confronts and integrates Fern, a manifestation of his Shadow. This final reconciliation signifies the merging of consciousness with unconsciousness, which allows Finn to achieve full individuation, and by extension enlightenment.

First Ordeal: Atoning with Martin, the Ogre Father

Adventure Time's first major storyarc focuses on Finn meeting and accepting his human father, Martin. Predicated on fatherhood and the father-son relationship, this ordeal can be understood as the process by which Finn fully recognizes and comes to terms with the aspects of his being that are culturally-understood as "masculine"—namely his heroic nature.

Separation from the Ordinary World

At the start of the series, Finn lives with his adoptive brother Jake in the Land of Ooo. While a fantastical realm for the viewer, Ooo is nevertheless an **ordinary world** for our characters—replete with "old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns."[4] For years, Finn has been at peace doing the same old things (e.g., fighting monsters) in the same old places (e.g., the Candy Kingdom), but this begins to change during the events of the second-season installment "Susan Strong." At the start of this episode, Finn explicitly confesses to Princess Bubblegum that thinking about his origin causes him to become "all soul-searchy."[5] Soon thereafter, by "apparently the merest chance,"[6] Finn stumbles upon a mysterious hatch in the ground that leads him to Susan Strong—a large, muscular women who appears, at least on the surface, to be a human. Deep down, something in Finn's soul stirs.

For his entire life, Finn has been operating under the assumption that he is the last of his kind. It is for this reason that Finn finds Susan so interesting. Who is she, Finn wonders, and does her existence have anything to do with his origin story? Because she engenders these questions, Susan is a

herald, and her arrival can be seen as a **call to adventure**, beckoning Finn to leave the familiar boundaries of Ooo so as to finally solve the mystery of his humanity. But Finn—still but an innocent boy—is not yet ready to know of his origin, and so he **refuses this call** (ironic, given the series title). A season later, in episode "Beautopia," Susan returns, enlisting Finn's help in cleansing the titular city of the demonic Lub Glubs; once again, her existence calls Finn to adventure, and once again, he refuses. Finn, it seems, is still unable "to put off the infantile ego," thereby remaining "bound in by the walls of childhood."[7]

Initiation into the World of the Father

Several seasons later, in the fifth-season finale "Billy's Bucket List," Finn decides to complete the titular bucket list of his deceased **mentor** Billy so that the great warrior's spirit can be at peace in the afterlife. For a hero like Finn, most of these tasks are easy. However, the final task is a doozy: float peacefully in the ocean. Since the first season, the audience has known that Finn's greatest fear is the ocean. This means that even thinking about the briny deep sends a shiver down Finn's spine. But Finn decides that Billy is worth overcoming his fear. Unfortunately, the manifestation of Finn's dread, the Fear Feaster (voiced by Mark Hamill) appears and torments Finn, reminding him of his weaknesses. The Fear Feaster is a quintessential **threshold guardian**, who hinders Finn and prevents him from traversing too far into the Unknown. Normally, fear is a powerful deterrent, but this time Finn is determined to overcome his trepidation. Finn seizes a board and beats himself in the head. This knocks him unconscious, allowing him to fall into the ocean without a struggle. Through (painful) trickery, Finn has passed **the first threshold** and is entering into a new world.

As Finn sinks into the murky depths, he has a startling vision in which he follows a whale through a labyrinthine underwater maze composed mostly of pre-Mushroom War ruins and rusting shipwrecks. Eventually, Finn's hat grows to an enormous size and chases after him, forcing him to swim away and breach the surface for air. The dream culminates in a striking visual: Finn, helplessly trapped on the crest of an immobile wave, as the large whale opens wide its mouth and swallows him whole. It is in this way that Finn very literally finds himself entombed in the **belly of the whale**. This is an important visual, for according to Joseph Campbell, "The passage of the magical threshold ... is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale."[8] This imagery indicates that Finn is leaving his old self behind and is, in a sense, being reborn into a special world.

Finn awakens from his reverie to find himself floating in the middle of the ocean. Once again, the Fear Feaster manifests and torments him, but this time, Finn uses his grass-sword to destroy the specter, thereby indicating his

transformation while also affirming his commitment to a greater quest. As Finn floats, no longer afraid of the ocean, the ghost of Billy manifests in the starry sky. Billy thanks Finn for completing his bucket list, thereby letting his spirit rest. Just before his soul presumably departs "into the infinite cosmos [for] an endless journey of wonder and discovery,"[9] Billy let Finn know that his human father is alive and imprisoned in some corner of the Oooniverse known only as the "Citadel." This serves as the final call to adventure—one that Finn is now ready to answer.

At the start of the sixth-season premiere "Wake Up," Finn rushes back to his tree fort to tell Jake the news, and soon thereafter the two set back out on the **road of trials**. Seeking **supernatural aid**, they turn to their **ally** Prismo—a laid-back, two-dimensional wish-master with almost omnipotent powers—and ask for his assistance in gaining access to the Citadel.

Prismo tells our heroes that the only way to get into the otherworldly prison is to commit a cosmic crime. Prismo then sends Finns and Jake on a final quest to locate a specific sleeping old man, who is later revealed to be the corporeal body of Prismo himself; the wish-master instructs Finn and Jake to wake up the man, which will 'kill' Prismo and earn Finn and Jake a one-way ticket to the Citadel. Prismo assures the two that when the old man falls back asleep, Prismo will effectively return from the dead, righting any wrong that was done.

While all of this is going on, the Lich—an avatar of death and one of Finn and Jake's greatest enemies—has been sitting in the corner of Prismo's time-room, waiting. Having been trapped in the room since the events of the fifth-season premiere "Finn the Human"/"Jake the Dog," the Lich appears powerless, but this is all a deception,[10] and the primordial being of evil is actually biding his time for the right moment to act. While the Lich is usually seen as the series' Big Bad, it is important to note that in this first ordeal, the Lich is not the *primary* villain; he is but the fiercest of the many enemies guarding the path to the innermost cave. Nevertheless, his role is still of paramount importance, for once Finn and Jake "submit to [his] deception,"[11] the Lich strikes, murdering Prismo in the blink of an eye.

Because killing a wish-master like Prismo is a cosmic crime, a giant Crystal Guardian—the wardens of the Citadel and threshold guardians of immense power—materializes and begins to transport the Lich to the Citadel. At this point, "Wake Up" ends and immediately segues into the episode "Escape from the Citadel," which opens with Finn and Jake grabbing onto the Crystal Guardian's hand and hitching a ride to the Citadel, thereby **approaching the innermost cave**—an unknown realm of trials and mystery, abounding with "its own ... [g]uardians, agendas, and tests."[12]

Once they arrive at the mysterious prison, Finn and Jake track down Finn's father—whom they learn is named Martin—and set him free.

Unfortunately at this same time, the Lich manages to corrupt the entirety of the Citadel, killing the Crystal Guardians, destroying the infrastructure of the prison, and letting a number of interdimensional criminals loose in the process. During this absolute bedlam, Finn **confronts his father**, inquiring as to why Martin abandoned him when he was a baby. Much to Finn's vexation, Martin provides a non-answer—the first overt hint that Finn's father is not a hero like his son, but rather a deadbeat.

Finn is suddenly distracted by the Lich, who has emerged from the collapsing ruins of the Citadel and is delivering a monologue about the destruction he will soon unleash upon the multiverse. Martin uses the Lich's appearance as a diversion to sneak away from the carnage, and he and several other interdimensional criminals climb onto a piece of debris connected to the imploding Citadel by only a slender cord.

Meanwhile, Finn and the Lich "join in direct combat,"[13] and the former accidentally defeats the latter by touching him with the restorative blood of the Crystal Guardians. This fluid—resembling in function *Amrita*: the "nectar of deathlessness"[14]—causes the demoniac being to grow organs and flesh, thereby negating death with life. This is an important bit of foreshadowing, as it provides a clue as to how Finn will escape the upcoming nadir of his psychological journey.

Despite this brief moment of victory, Finn realizes that his father has run away. Finn gives chase at the same time one of the interdimensional criminals attempts to cut the cord loose from its tether. When the cord snaps, Finn grabs each end, and his grass-cursed arm grows to enormous proportions as he struggles to hold on. Suddenly, Finn's grass arm detaches completely from his body. In this way, Martin **symbolically castrates**[15] his son. Not only does this humiliating abandonment leave Finn physically maimed, it also breaks Finn's heroic spirit. In his mind, Finn had built up this idea that his father would be some great hero like himself, but it turns out that Martin and Finn could not be any more different.

Finn, now doubting everything that he had previously believed about his role in life, comes to see Martin as the **ogre father** who must be stopped. Embracing oedipal rage, Finn initially schemes to track down Martin and rip *his* arm off in the sixth-season episode "The Tower," but this wrath quickly gives way to depression.

And thus Finn—bereft of both an arm and a dad—begins his descent into the metaphorical **Abyss**. The bleak suffering that Finn experiences at this time—which Carl Jung called *nigredo* ("the descent into darkness")[16] and which the Roman Catholic priest John of the Cross famously called the "dark night of the soul"—is the result of Finn's heroic spirit being dissolved by doubt and uncertainly, leaving him to feel like an empty husk. With all of this talk about emptiness and blackness, it is no surprise that in the sixth-season

episode "Breezy," Finn expresses his melancholy with a song entitled "Lost in the Darkness."

Finn eventually decides to fill the void in his being by kissing as many princesses as he can. It is here that we also get another trope from the Hero's Journey: **women as temptresses**, as personified by Breezy the bee, who encourages Finn to eschew his heroic duties in favor wooing princesses. Finn subsequently goes from princess to princess in a desperate attempt to find happiness via physical pleasure, but instead he only finds more emptiness. Finn's coping behaviors quickly become self-destructive, and he hits rock bottom one night when he "goes to the deep end" with Lumpy Space Princess.

At the end of "Breezy," Finn finally has a breakthrough. In an ecstatic reverie, he sees Breezy transform into Princess Bubblegum holding a sword made from his own essence. The apparition of Princess Bubblegum is a manifestation of Finn's **anima**[17]—that is, "the eternal image of woman ... every man carries within him[self]"[18] In addition to representing a man's "feminine" side, the anima also functions as an intermediary between the conscious and unconscious; this means that Anima-Bubblegum also functions as a herald from beyond Finn's immediate awareness, bringing him a message. This message, it so happens, is actualized as a sword, the trademark weapon of a hero. Anima-Bubblegum is thus telling Finn that while he might feel defeated, his heroic inner self still exists. Raising the sword above her head, Anima-Bubblegum then commands Finn to "let love be [his] guide," revealing that only love of what is—that is, a love of life—can overcome the darkness of what is not; it is not a coincidence that this is the same moral Finn received when he defeated the Lich a few episodes earlier.

Immediately following this beatific vision, Finn's arm-flower glows before growing into a magnificent tree that explodes in a spectacle of bark and goo. This moment is what Jung called *albedo* ("whiteness"), denoting a sort of spiritual purification. Finn, now ready to ascend from his mental abyss, peels away the remaining integument and discovers a new arm, complete with a **brand** (in this case, a small thorn in the palm of his hand) to remind him of what he has learned. In this way, Finn metaphorically **seizes the sword** and reaffirms his heroic spirit.

Return to the Land of Ooo

Finn now sets out on the metaphorical **road back**, which takes up most of the show's sixth season and comes to a head in the season finale "The Comet." In this episode, the space-demon Orgalorg (another enemy and avatar of death) hijacks Princess Bubblegum's rocket and flies into space in an attempt to absorb the power of a catalyst comet. Finn and Jake, however, refuse to let Orgalorg win, and so they pursue the demon; in this way, the set piece is what screenwriter Christopher Vogler calls a **villain escape** chase,

a variation of the Campbellian **magic flight**, in which an enemy "escapes ... and becomes more dangerous than before."[19]

Alas, in the process of pursuing their foe, Finn and Jake are separated from one another in the void of space. Floating alone and helpless, Finn realizes that he has no escape plan, and that "the world may have to come and get him."[20] He then sings a song entitled "Everything's Falling into Place," in which he expresses his belief that he is "right where [he] should be." Finn gives himself over to the Universe—and the Universe responds! In that instant, against all odds, Martin appears, riding a space-moth, and he **rescues Finn from without**. By this one deed, Martin has proven to Finn that, in addition to being an ogre, he can also be a **protective father**.

Finn again focuses on stopping Orgalorg, who has managed to seize the comet and is consuming its raw power. In a moment of fearlessness, Finn launches himself into the beast's maw. This unmediated expression of pure heroism causes Finn's grass-arm to activate once more, growing into a powerful whip-like weapon. Finn uses his arm to slice open Orgalorg's stomach, freeing both himself and the comet from the demon's innards. By heroically journeying into the maw of death and returning unscathed, Finn has been metaphorically **resurrected.**

The comet, now freed from Orgalorg's clutches, addresses Finn, announcing that it has existed since time eternal and has "embodied all that is good and evil." The comet then offers Finn the chance to ascend to a higher plane of being, but Finn decides to remain in his imperfect "meat reality" and "see it through" until his natural demise. In this way, *Adventure Time* plays with the expectations of the hero's journey, eschewing a literal **apotheosis** for a psychological one in which Finn better understands his place in this world.

Soon thereafter, Finn turns to Martin and asks him why he feels the need to flee from people. Martin gives another non-answer, but this time, something finally clicks in Finn's heart. Martin, Finn recognizes, is neither an evil ogre nor a perfect protector. Instead, he is just a man, and Finn cannot force him to play the hero-dad of his dreams. Letting "love be his guide," Finn finally accepts his father for the imperfect person he is, and thus the two are **atoned**.[21]

With the party over, Martin accepts the comet's offer to transcend to another state of being; Finn and Jake, meanwhile, hitch a ride on Banana Man's rocket ship and **return** to the ordinary world of Ooo to resume their role as heroes. It is here where most stories begin to trail off, culminating in a satisfying conclusion. But for Finn, only a portion of his journey is finished. He has thus entered into phase that the writer Victoria Lynn Schmidt calls the **"Eye of the Storm,"**[22]—that is, a period of relative peace and stability, wherein he remains for the entirety of the seventh and most of the eighth seasons. During this period of intermission, Finn continues to grow as a hero

by meditating on what he has learned, making amends with those whom he has wronged in the past (e.g., Flame Princess), and helping his friends actively fight off evil.

Second Ordeal: Connecting with Minerva, the Helping Goddess

Adventure Time's second ordeal focuses on Finn meeting and connecting with his human mother, Minerva. Predicated on motherhood and the mother-son relationship, this ordeal can be understood as the process by which Finn fully recognizes the aspects of his being that are culturally-understood as "feminine"—namely his want to help others.

Separation from the Ordinary World

The blissful interlude following Finn's first ordeal continues until the eighth-season episode "Preboot", in which our hero meets an enigmatic cyborg scientist named Dr. Gross, whose obsession with science is matched only by her desire to "improve" the natural world. Dr. Gross is a cyborg, but her vestigial humanity once again reminds Finn that there are others out there like him. In a way, this chance meeting with Dr. Gross serves as a second **call to adventure**, but just as before, Finn initially **refuses the call** by turning back and focusing on his life in the **ordinary world** of Ooo.

It is only at the start of the eighth-season miniseries *Islands*—the first episode of which is aptly titled "The Invitation"—that Finn decides to act. This decision is engendered by the arrival of a mysterious **herald**: a robot that attacks the Candy Kingdom in pursuit of "Seeker XJ-77" (i.e., Susan Strong). After the bot is subdued, Princess Bubblegum determines that it is of human origin and was sent from a mysterious "Founders Island." For a reason he cannot quite articulate, Finn expresses the need to journey to this mysterious island and learn about his people; Susan Strong and Jake (as well as a stowaway BMO) agree to accompany him. "The Invitation" concludes with our motley crew loading into a boat and heading out onto the open sea. The final shot of the episode depicts Finn seated at the prow of the ship, staring at the horizon as his hair blows in the wind. This is a clear visual signal that Finn has answered the call and is once again **crossing the threshold of adventure**.

Initiation into the World of the Mother

Finn, Jake, Susan, and BMO thus begin their own odyssey across the ocean. However, their journey is not easy, and Finn and company have to deal with a whole bevy of **threshold guardians**, including pirates, an annoying sea-dragon, venomous jellyfish, and a mysterious Colossus of the deep—the

latter of which wrecks their boat. Finn, Jake, Susan, and BMO are thus cast into the ocean, this time symbolically rather than literally falling into the **belly of the whale**. Campbell writes that during this stage of the journey, "the hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died."[23] This is exactly what we find: Finn awakens to find himself alone on an unknown island littered with the still-active remnants of climate-altering technology. Isolated in an unfamiliar world of ever-changing weather, Finn is nearly killed before he is rescued by a **protective figure**: an elderly human named Alva. A manifestation of "the benign, protecting power of destiny"[24] who aids the hero in a time of need, Alva is resourceful, and despite her speaking only Swedish, she nevertheless helps Finn track down Jake. Before parting ways, Alva also gives Finn a map that plots out the remaining islands in the area; In time, Finn and Jake locate BMO on an island whose inhabitants spend all of their time in virtual reality, and they find Susan on a ruined island that had once served as humanity's Hub.

By surviving the shipwreck and their subsequent separation from the group, each hero "undergoes a metamorphosis,"[25] bringing them fully into the special world. And for Susan, this metamorphosis is not just metaphorical. Since her first appearance, Susan has suffered from terrible amnesia, which has prevented her from remembering who she is. But after walking around the ruins of Hub Island, her mind clears. Soon, she is able to recall details about her former life: she was once a "seeker" named "Kara" who had been tasked with finding Finn after he had gone missing. With her memories restored, Susan functions as a surprise **mentor**, detailing to Finn the story of Founders Island, his mother and father, and how he was lost as a baby. Finn and company travel to Founders Island—which is populated by hundreds of people—and journey to the settlement's heart in the hopes of finding Finn's mother, thereby metaphorically **approaching the innermost cave**. It is here that Finn finally reconnects with Minerva, his long-lost mother, who is the de facto leader of the humans, serving them as a maternal "helper" (that is, a medical doctor, a job which is predicated on taking care of those in need). Unfortunately, Minerva no longer has a corporeal body, having uploaded her consciousness into a computer program so that she could help everyone on the island survive a terrible plague that had accidentally been unleashed by Dr. Gross years earlier.

Finn's encounter with his mother is fundamentally different than his encounter with his father. For one thing, the two ordeals differ in terms of story structure: In the first ordeal, Finn met his father and was symbolically castrated in the sixth-season premiere "Wake Up"/"Escape from the Citadel," fell into a nadir for much of the season, and was atoned with his father in the season finale "The Comet." With this second ordeal, however, Finn does

not experience the season-long crisis-nadir-resurrection pattern. Instead, the tension builds to a crisis in "Helpers," before climaxing and resolving at the end of the next episode, "The Light Cloud." This is what Christopher Vogler refers to as a "delayed crisis,"[26] given that the main ordeal in this story—Finn's confrontation with his mother—occurs close to the climax of the entire journey, rather than in the middle.

The second main difference has to do with how Finn is received by his parent. Remember, when Finn met Martin, the latter quickly abandoned him; when Finn and Minerva reconnect, however, she makes no attempt to flee, instead accepting him immediately. But this acceptance comes with a catch, as she soon becomes a maternal Calypso, demanding that her son stay with her and abandon the idea of returning to Ooo. "The Light Cloud" thus plays with two of the Hero's Journey's tropes at the same time—that is, the **meeting the goddess** and **women as temptation**—with Minerva serving as both the goddess who wants nothing more than to protect Finn and a temptress who wants to ensnare her son in the name of safety. Finn tries to resist Minerva's demands, even encouraging the inhabitants of Founders Island to journey with him back to Ooo. Our hero experiences a momentary taste of victory when most of the humans agree to his proposition, but this feeling is soon squashed when Minerva decides to upload all of the humans' minds into her "Better Reality" computer programming. By restricting her son's agency and attempting to forcibly "juice up [his] precious essence" into the "Better Reality" computer, Minerva clearly threatens Finn with a sort of **symbolic castration** that would render him a *puer aeternus* and keep him in a permanent infantile state. Minerva thus comes to embody the **bad mother**, who "holds to herself the growing child trying to push away."[27]

Pleading with his mother to stop the madness, Finn argues that while her intentions to "save" humans via upload might be good, she is still "messing with people"; Minerva counters that she is just trying to help. Finn then uses the island's advanced technology to beam into Minerva's mainframe select memories illustrating what it truly means to help others. Made up of scenes from past episodes, this memory blast illustrates Finn's ability to care for the emotional and physical wellbeing of his friends. After seeing this montage, Minerva is not only touched but also delighted to learn that her son grew up to be a "helper," just like her. In an instant, she transmutes from the bad mother into the **goddess**, who resolves to do whatever she can to help her son be who he is. As a demonstration of her transformation, Minerva deactivates the mighty Colossus—the **threshold guardian** *par excellence* who protects the Islands (and who had earlier wrecked Finn's ship)—allowing Finn and his friends to safely **return** to Ooo via boat.

Just before the boat is out of range of Founders Island, Finn plugs into the Better Reality computer program using VR equipment and has a final

moment with the digital specter of his mother. As mother and son embrace in a virtual hug, Minerva gives Finn a **gift**: pure maternal love, "the mysterious root of all growth and change."[28] By accepting this love, Finn fully accepts his calling to care for and help others—an aspect of his being which has long been overshadowed by his more aggressive role as a sword-wielding hero.

Return to the Land of Ooo (Again)

Unbeknownst to Finn and Jake, in their absence, the Land of Ooo was consumed by the four primordial elements, thanks to the meddling of Patience St. Pim the ice elemental. When Finn and Jake return, they see that their "ordinary" world has gone haywire, and they recognize that failure to act will result in the total loss of their home. After a series of misadventures, all hope seems lost when errant fire magic "kills" Finn, turning him into a monster. Luckily, Lumpy Space Princess is at hand, and she manages to "**resurrect**" Finn with a piece of Princess Bubblegum's hair. This blob of gum serves as a sort of candy **talisman**, reconnecting Finn with love, personified once again as Anima-Bubblegum; this in turn allows Finn to heed Lumpy Space Princess and "listen to the beat of [his] hero heart." With love flowing through him once again, Finn reverts to his normal form, and he subsequently assists Lumpy Space Princess in resetting the entirety of Ooo.

The phrase "hero heart" is of key importance here, as it denotes the explicit intersection—a *coniunctio oppositorum* (Latin for "marriage of opposites")—of Finn's heroic spirit (representative of his "masculine" side, which was reaffirmed in the first ordeal) with loving want to help others (representative of his "feminine" side, which was recognized in this ordeal). Finn's use of his "hero heart" thus signifies a reconciliation of the gendered father-mother, masculine-feminine split, which produces a new, unified aspect of his being—a sort of metaphorical **elixir**, into which Finn can tap to "heal [the] wounded land"[29] that is Ooo.

Third Ordeal: Integrating Fern, the Manifested Shadow

By atoning with Martin and connecting with Minerva, Finn has brought himself to the very threshold of psychic balance. But there is one aspect of the Self that Finn needs to face before he can be called whole: his personal Shadow, as embodied by Fern the grass-being. Unlike the previous two ordeals, the journey to integrate Fern does not strictly follow the hero's journey template. This is because a confrontation with the shadow is but a feature of the "road of trials" stage of the larger journey. This means that Finn and

Fern's confrontation can perhaps best be understood as the last "test" before Finn can receive the final boon: individuation.

What Is the Shadow?

First conceptualized by Carl Jung, the "Shadow" is one of many "archetypes,"[30] and can be described as a part of the unconscious human psyche in which repressed, rejected, or unrecognized aspects of the Self are contained, far from the light of conscious thought. Despite its mystical name, the Shadow is not inherently bad—in fact, it can either be positive or negative—but it does tend to seal away attributes of the Self that many associate with "immorality" (e.g., sexual feelings, violent urges). This has led to the Shadow developing the reputation as "the home of the suppressed monsters of our inner world," in which "the energy of [our] dark side" bubbles.[31] As mentioned earlier, the Shadow is unconscious, and thus eludes easy detection by the Ego. Regardless, its contents can often be ascertained by keeping an eye out for psychological "projection," wherein a person denies their own foibles and instead recognizes those defects in others.[32] It is only by recognizing the contents of one's Shadow that an individual can become individuated, which is "the realization of the [unified] Self as a psychic reality greater than the Ego."[33] Individuation, in other words, is the process by which a person becomes psychologically whole.

According to Jung, it is "the realization of the [Shadow], [that] marks the first stage in the analytic process"[34] of individuation. For Finn, this realization begins in the fifth-season episode "Blade of Grass," in which Finn purchases a "grass sword" from an unscrupulous wizard. Unbeknownst to Finn, the sword had been constituted by evil magic and will permanently infect anyone who buys it with a grass curse. Smitten by the awe-inspiring power of the sword, Finn does not think too much before he scoops it up. Initially, the sword is a godsend, and Finn is able to wield it at an almost preternatural level of technical ability, but soon Finn begins to suspect that the weapon is too good to be true. Alarm bells start to really go off when Finn has a dream in which the sword envelops his body, turning him to grass. Soon thereafter, Finn attempts to get rid of the sword by tossing it away, but the weapon returns by stalking him in waking life. At the end of the episode, the blade has firmly attached itself to his wrist. The grass sword saga culminates in the eighth-season episodes "Reboot" and "Two Swords," in which the curse detaches from Finn, takes over the Finn-sword, and produces a new person: Fern.

The process by which the grass sword seeps into Finn's life until it has become a part of him can be read as his becoming aware of the existence of his personal Shadow. Of particular note in this parallel, however, is the fact that in *Adventure Time*, full recognition of the Shadow is equated with the

creation of a new being; this echoes Jung assertion that "the Shadow can be realized only through a relation to a partner."[35] In the "real world," this partner is simply another human onto whom we *project* our repressed qualities. However, as an alternate version of Finn ensnared and wholly taken over by the grass curse, Fern is different from a run-of-the-mill relational partner. This is because the parasitic effects of the curse have led to the contents of his mind being the direct equivalent of Finn's unconscious. Fern is thus not a mere *projection*; he very literally *is* Finn's personal Shadow given fantastic form.

This brings up an important (and as of yet unanswered!) question: What exactly has Finn repressed? What attributes make up his personal Shadow? Fern's behavior and literal composition provide clues to the answer. First, Fern is an aggressive character, who is wont to attack first and ask questions later. This belligerence causes Finn noticeable unease, and in numerous episodes, Finn questions if Fern's methods are appropriate, given their severity. This suggests that part of Finn's shadow is composed of violent compulsions that the conscious Ego suppresses. Second, Fern is a green, plant-based being. In religion and folklore, plants have long been a symbol of fertility, and the color green has long been associated with lust, sexuality and the natural instinct to procreate.[36] By coding Fern as a virid plant-man, the writers seem to imply that the other part of Finn's shadow is composed of sexual impulses, which Finn has pushed down into his unconscious so as to be a chaste knight. Fern thus represents Finn's base drives, and his existence as a separate character allows Finn to recognize these drives for what they are.

Fern Goes Rogue

As was mentioned earlier, the Shadow is usually glossed as simply "a villain," but as Jung's student Marie-Louise von Franz cautions, the archetype:

> ... is not necessarily always an opponent. In fact, [the Shadow] is exactly like any human being with whom one has to get along, sometimes by giving in, sometimes by resisting, sometimes by giving love whatever the situation requires. The Shadow becomes hostile only when [it] is ignored or misunderstood.[37]

Indeed, Fern starts out as a powerful if clumsy ally to Finn and Jake, assisting them on various adventures and even watching over Ooo during the events of the *Islands* miniseries.

Unfortunately, Fern constantly compares his failings to Finn's numerous successes, leading to feelings of resentment. By the ninth-season finale "Three Buckets," these feelings have festered so much that Fern turns on Finn and attacks him. This battle is a poetic depiction of neurosis, which is

a mental struggle caused by an individual's "suspicion of being two people in opposition to each other—the Shadow and the Ego."[38] Unfortunately, Jung warns: "When [the Shadow] is willfully repressed, it continues in the unconscious and merely expresses itself indirectly and all the more dangerously."[39] This is exactly what we find with Finn and Fern: At the end of the fight, Finn accidentally fells his grass-duplicate, cutting him into a thousand shards of grass. But Fern is not dead, and he is subsequently revived as the powerful "Green Knight," who functions as a dangerous agent of Uncle Gumbald during the show's final season. Fern makes his first full appearance as the Green Knight in the tenth-season episode "Seventeen," in which he crashes Finn's birthday party. Finn and his friends initially do not recognize Fern, and so they welcome him in, upon which he presents Finn with an axe. Finn, thinking that this is all an elaborate prank by Jake, chops the knight's head off, but this does not kill him. Instead, the knight rises up and challenges Finn to several party games. The knight eventually defeats Finn, divulges his true identity, and reveals that he is working with Uncle Gumbald.

Fans of medieval poetry will likely recognize that this plot is a direct allusion to the 14th-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the titular knight faces off against a mysterious verdant-colored knight. The poem has long divided scholars as to its meaning, with myriad interpretations having appeared in the literature over the years. That said, in 1964, the analytic scholar Stephen Manning analyzed the story of Sir Gawain "in archetypical terms," coming to the conclusion that Sir Gawain is best understood as a stand-in for the Ego, whereas the Green Knight represents Sir Gawain's Shadow.[40] Given the obvious connection between the episode and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it seems reasonable to view Finn as the counterpart to Sir Gawain and Fern as the counterpart to the Green Knight. And if this is the case, we can therefore extend Manning's argument, concluding that Finn should be seen as a stand-in for the Ego and Fern as a stand-in for the Shadow. Ultimately, this means that Fern's role as the Green Knight is perhaps the closest the show comes to explicitly declaring Fern to be a manifestation of Finn's repressed "inferiorities."[41]

The Individuation of Finn Mertens

Jung argues that the Shadow "cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness"[42]; one can only come to terms with it. Throughout the tenth season, Finn and Fern fail repeatedly at besting one another. It is only in the series finale, "Come Along with Me," that the two eschew direct confrontation. Instead, while sharing a trippy nightmare, Finn and Fern realize that they are "two sides of the same coin." The two consequently, the two journey into their "vault"—that is, the part of Finn and Fern's mutual psyche wherein traumatic memories, as well as the personification of the

grass curse, live locked away. Here, the two are exposed to a whole bevy of shared traumatic memories, which decide to face together. Through teamwork, the two Finns locate and "kill" the grass curse that has been infecting Fern's mind for so long. By squishing the grass curse together, the two "tame their demons" (in both a metaphorical and literal sense) as one.

In the previous ordeals, Finn experienced a *coniunctio oppositorum* when he recognized his metaphorically "masculine" and "feminine" sides and distilled them down into his single, unified "hero heart." A similar distillation occurs at the end of this ordeal when Finn and Fern work together, realizing that they "complement one another [and] form a totality, which is the Self"—a unified whole that "embraces not only the conscious but also the unconscious psyche."[43] This second *coniunctio oppositorum* is signified by Fern losing corporeal form, leaving only a single Finn the Human, who is now fully aware of his masculine, feminine, conscious, and unconscious sides. Finn has thus achieved the **final boon**: individuation, which has rendered him the **master of both the special and normal worlds**. Finally in tune with his Self, Finn is at peace with who he *is* (rather than who he could be, should be, or is not), and it is for that reason that Finn the Human can be called an enlightened, monomythic hero.

Conclusion

Despite the popular misunderstanding of the show as a bright, chaotic jumble with no purpose or plot, *Adventure Time* actually has a complex, tripartite structure that focuses on Finn the Human's growth from an innocent, ignorant boy to an enlightened, individuated hero. And because this story can be clearly delineated using the monomythic schema long ago made famous by Joseph Campbell, it is possible that one day, Finn will find himself discussed alongside the other great heroes from popular culture (such as Neo, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and Katniss Everdeen), whose stories have long been analyzed by critics via the language of the hero's journey.

Endnotes

1. Chief of which is Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Other works include: Craig Batty, *Movies That Move Us*; Donald E. Palumbo, *Monomyth in American Sci-Fi*; Vogler, *Writer's Journey*.
2. Palumbo, *Monomyth in American Sci-Fi*, 3.
3. Palumbo, 9.
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 47.
5. "Susan Strong" (Season 2, Episode 18).
6. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 46.
7. Campbell, 57.
8. Campbell, 83-84.
9. Per the King of Mars. "Sons of Mars" (Season 4, Episode 15).
10. Cf. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 29-30.
11. Propp, 30.
12. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 143.
13. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 51.
14. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 192. This allusion to Amrita was first pointed out by Watching with Wizard Eyes [pseud.]. See: "The Nature of The Finn Pt 1: Character Development," Tumblr, 2013, https://watchingwithwizardeyes.tumblr.com/post/107652038477/the-nature-of-the-finn-pt-1-character-development.
15. Cf. Andrew Gordon, "'The Empire Strikes Back': Monsters from the Id," 314.
16. Carl Jung, *Aion*, 9.2, 149.
17. Watching with Wizard Eyes "The Nature of The Finn Pt 1."
18. Carl Jung, *The Quotable Jung*, 41.
19. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 192.
20. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 192.
21. Campbell, 135.
22. Victoria Lynn Schmidt, *45 Master Characters*, 211-14.
23. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 83.
24. Campbell, 66.
25. Campbell, 85.
26. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 158.
27. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 102.
28. Carl Jung, *Four Archetypes*, 28.
29. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 215.
30. That is, any one of the "primordial, structural elements of the human psyche." Daryl Sharp, *Jungian Lexicon: A Primer of Terms & Concepts,* digital ed. (Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books, 1991), s.v. "Archetypes," accessed March 2, 2020, https://www.psychceu.com/Jung/sharplexicon.html.
31. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 65.
32. Carl Jung, *Dreams*, 52.
33. Sharp, *Jungian Lexicon*, s.v. "Individuation."
34. Jung, *Aion*, 9.2, 22.
35. Jung.
36. Michel Pastoureau, *Green*, 154; William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of Gawain and the Green Knight," 64.
37. Marie-Louise von Franz, "Process of Individuation," 173.
38. Ann Casement, "The Shadow," 100.
39. Jung, *The Quotable Jung*, 38.

40. Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."
41. Jung, *Aion*, 9.2, 8.
42. Jung, *The Quotable Jung*, 32.
43. Carl Jung, *Two Essays*, 7, 177.