The Quest

(...and some guy called Campbell)

Once upon a time there was a boffin named Joseph Campbell, who was a famous American academic who had a hankering to study mythology. He studied all manner of historical stories from all around the globe: myths, adventures, epics, fables, fairy tales, folk stories, legends, religious parables...you name it, he probably studied it. When he did this, he was looking for the things they had in common, and root out what ‘storytelling’ is all about.

Once of the things this boffin Campbell discovered was that many stories are set around a ‘quest’ (a type of huge, important, epic journey to find, reclaim, capture, or destroy something). More importantly, he discovered that where the quest became the central part of a story, these stories began to share a very similar structure, and they all contain very similar elements.

The quest is central to the mythologies of most countries. Quests appear in our traditional folk-lore, in our myths and legends, and in our religious texts. The quest, if written properly, is a powerful story: it appeals to the reader on a deep, primal level.

Many people say that The Hobbit is a quest, and a good one at that. Surely J.R.R. Tolkien, the famous scholar and grandfather of modern fantasy, knew what he was doing? However, Tolkien wrote The Hobbit before Campbell completed his work, which meant that Tolkien had nothing to follow but his own understanding of English folk-lore and old-English literature. Did he inadvertently tap into the foundations of all Western literature? Or did he fall a bit short?

Let’s see how close Tolkien got to the true, historical, epic quest through comparing the story of The Hobbit against the elements of the quest that Campbell discovered...
The Quest According to Campbell...

This boffin named Campbell devoted his life to parsing over myths and legends in order to unlock what lies at the root of good storytelling (because what do we love more than a good story, right?). He identified three stages that every epic quest has:

1. Departure Phase: where the hero of the novel discovers the nature of the quest, is forced to join that quest (often against his will), and begins his or her journey, passing a spiritual and physical threshold between their ‘known’ world and the dangerous ‘unknown’ world beyond. This stage requires several things to be established:
   a. Ordinary World: This is the hero's normal world before the story begins. It should be a wonderful place, but a bit boring (somewhere nice to come back to).
   b. Call to Adventure: The nature quest needs to be revealed, and the hero called upon.
   c. Refusal of the Call: The hero should refuse to participate, often because of fear.
   d. The Mentor: The hero is in no state to fulfil the quest when he begins! He needs a mentor – someone more experienced – to help and teach him, at least at the start.
   e. First Threshold: The departure stage ends when the hero passes through his first challenge. He will usually do quite poorly. This is the ‘threshold’ between the ‘known’ and the ‘unknown’, the ‘safe’ and the ‘unsafe’. This is when the adventure begins!

2. Initiation Phase: the complication of the narrative or the “Road of Trials” which must be passed, leading to the climax of the story where the quest object is finally returned to its rightful place. The hero will be faced with a thrilling life-or-death battle, where he is required to call upon everything he has learned. In the climax of the story, the hero is asked required to make a final ‘sacrifice’ of some sort – a difficult and selfless decision which results in the conflicts being resolved.

In particular, this stage requires the following elements:
   a. A precious object or person that is the subject of the quest;
   b. A long journey to find this object;
   c. A hero who is able to find this object;
   d. Helpers who assist the hero in his or her journey;
   e. A series of tests to identify the hero and remove impostors;
   f. A guardian of the precious object who must be overcome by the hero.

3. Return Phase: the hero, changed due to the lessons he or she learned during the journey, must go back to the society from which he or she departed at the beginning of the novel. There should be a big difference between the position the hero had in this ‘Ordinary World’ at the beginning of the quest, and his place within it at the end. However, the skills or objects that the hero gained in his travels should be able to help the people back in this ‘Ordinary World’ when he returns.
The Quest and The Hobbit

Task Overview: You will need to form groups of 4 or 5 in order to discuss the Quest Narrative, decide how it links with The Hobbit and produce a poster of your findings.

Step One: Discussion and Brainstorm

Do you think The Hobbit fits the Quest Narrative outlined by Joseph Campbell? Go through each phase (Departure, Initiation and Return) and their individual requirements, and see if they match up with anything in The Hobbit.

Step Two: Research

Within your group, give each person an area which they need to research in the novel. For example, two people may do aspects of the Departure Phase, three people may work on different elements of the Initiation Phase, and one person may do the Return. You will need to explain how The Hobbit matches each phase, providing examples from the text: quotes would be brilliant!

Type up your responses, and work together as a group by sharing your ideas, knowledge and resources as you work through the task.

Step Three: Create a Poster!

The end goal of your group is to create a poster that links all your responses together. Before you start typing up your answers, you should figure out how your poster will be assembled:

- Do you want to fit your results into a map of Bilbo’s journey?
- Or into a circular ‘cycle’ that shows how the journey comes around full-circle?
- Or perhaps a more straightforward linear three-way split between the three elements?

The level of detail you can include will be determined by how you lay out your poster. You should also try to include some pictures and a nice heading, so that it is interesting and presentable.