

# Beyond the Sword Maiden

A Storyteller's  
Introduction to the  
Heroine's Journey



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## CHAPTER 2

# Exploring the Sword Maiden's Journey

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 (Campbell 30).

THE SWORD MAIDEN'S JOURNEY IS COMMONPLACE, but it is often identified by its masculine title of the "Hero's Journey." The Hero's Journey appears across the globe throughout religion, literature, theater, cinema, and song. American comparative mythology scholar, Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), saw patterns and motifs<sup>2</sup> repeated when studying the myths and folklore from around the world. In 1949, he published his groundbreaking work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, combining these observations of patterns and motifs with the theories of Freud, Jung, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Campbell herein presented the idea of the *Monomyth*, that all mythic narratives are variations of a single story, and he outlined the Hero's Journey. The Hero's Journey parallels the Sword Maiden's Journey and both include the following basic steps:

1. Call to Adventure
2. Threshold Crossing into the Unknown
3. Tests & Helpers
4. Triumph
5. Return

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2. A classification of narrative elements found in folktales.

Let us expand this structure with a few details.

### **SWORD MAIDEN STEP 1: CALL TO ADVENTURE**

Early in the story, the sword maiden sets forth from the common world, job, hut or castle. The setting forth can be voluntary—an opportunity to seek one’s fortune and have a better life, an assigned task, quest, or even a simple invitation. It can be involuntary—fleeing from danger, abandonment, natural disaster, or abduction—and is not seen as negative victimization. Additionally, it can be whim, curiosity, or even a mistake that sets the sword maiden down a path into the unknown. Sometimes it takes several “calls” before the sword maiden answers. Regardless of how or why the sword maiden sets forth, she is motivated by a sense of destiny; the sword maiden must follow the call, just as we all must “leave home” at some point in our lives.

If the sword maiden refuses to answer the call, she faces negative consequences. The story of Jonah from the Judeo-Christian tradition is one example of what happens if one refuses the call. (God called to Jonah and told him to go to the city of Nineveh. However, Jonah ran away, was thrown into the sea, then swallowed by a large fish. He stayed in the belly of the fish for three days. When Jonah finally decided to obey God’s call, the fish expelled Jonah, who finally went to Nineveh as God had commanded.) Perhaps the worst consequence of refusing the call is that the main character is reduced to insignificance, banished to obscurity, and forgotten—for there is no story to tell.

### **SWORD MAIDEN STEP 2: THRESHOLD: CROSSING INTO THE UNKNOWN**

Now the sword maiden faces the unfamiliar. Often, she crosses the threshold into a world that is completely different from the one

she knows. In many stories, she must cross a physical boundary, i.e. “stepping over the line.” Traveling into the forest or the mountains, crossing the sea, falling down a rabbit hole or stepping through a looking glass, the sword maiden leaves the safety and security of the known world behind. She must pay or defeat the “guardian” of this new world to enter and continue her adventure. This guardian may be a force that must be physically defeated—or at least outwitted—or a more benevolent creature to whom the sword maiden must prove her worthiness by correctly answering a riddle.

### **SWORD MAIDEN STEP 3: TESTS & HELPERS**

Beyond the threshold, the sword maiden journeys through a world of unfamiliar, yet strangely intimate, forces where she meets odd magical helpers. The helpers may be servants or family members of those she meets in this unfamiliar world or may be some sort of animal, bird, fish, or reptile who takes pity on the sword maiden. Often the helper is a ragged old man or woman to whom the sword maiden has shown compassion and kindness, and who, in return, provides alliances, knowledge, and information. This information may sound like nonsense at the time, but is necessary to complete a future required task. The magical helper often gives tokens to the sword maiden—perhaps everyday items with magical properties, such as a cloak or hat of invisibility; a magical weapon; some sort of food; a tool; or a blessing that brings endless luck or ability. Whatever the token is, the sword maiden needs it to successfully pass the tests and overcome the trials that are placed in her path.

### **SWORD MAIDEN STEP 4: TRIUMPH**

Once the barrier is overcome, the test passed and the monster slain, the sword maiden is identified as superior. She might receive

some sort of formal recognition; she might marry; she may come to a new realization of herself; perhaps she is transformed; and/or she may even be granted supernatural power of prophecy. The story may end here, or, it may be merely the end of the first part of her journey. At this point, stories often reflect cultural patterns as the sword maiden faces further obstacles, more tests to be completed. (The number of obstacles is usually determined by the importance of certain numbers within a culture such as 3, 4, 7, 12.) Each additional obstacle requires that the sword maiden cross the threshold, complete another test, and return with the prize until—finally—she faces a supreme ordeal. The stakes are high. Lack of success means death for the sword maiden.

#### **SWORD MAIDEN STEP 5: RETURN**

With the final ordeal favorably completed, the sword maiden wins an ultimate reward. Once the final quest has been accomplished successfully, the Sword Maiden must return to the common world. Just as refusing the call in the beginning has negative consequences, refusing to re-enter the common world also has negative consequences. If she stays behind in the alien world, the sword maiden will remain emotionally stunted and is never completely accepted within that community.

Upon her return to the human world, she is required to share her newfound knowledge and/or the physical prize with the community who sent her on her quest. The return trip may be short and easy or it can take years, and be filled with more tests and challenges as in *The Odyssey* by Homer. Regardless, once the sword maiden crosses the return threshold, the transcendental powers she possessed in the alien world must remain behind; she re-emerges

with the boon that restores the world.



To illustrate these five steps of the Sword Maiden's Journey, we have chosen two variants of Tale Type ATU 328 Treasures of the Giant (aka Jack and the Beanstalk).<sup>3</sup> Story #1 is Barbara's retelling of a Norwegian folktale from the 1859 collection *Popular Tales from the Norse* by George Webbe Dasent that features a male hero.

**STORY #1: "BOOTS AND THE TROLL"**

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Once upon a time, there was a poor man who had three sons. When he died, the two oldest set out into the world to try their luck, but they refused to take the youngest, Boots, with them.

"As for you, Boots," they said, "you're fit for nothing but to sit and poke about in the ashes."

The older brothers made their way to the palace where one found work with the coachman and the other with the gardener. Boots set out too, taking with him a great kneading-trough.<sup>4</sup> It was the only thing their father had left them, and even though it was heavy to carry, he did not want to leave it behind. He trudged along and finally he, too, came to a palace and asked for work. They told him there was nothing for him, but he smiled so sweetly and begged so nicely that he got a job in the kitchen, bringing in wood and water for the kitchen maid. Boots was quick at his jobs and pleasant to be around, and in no time at all, everyone liked him. His two brothers, on the other hand, were dull and slow, so they got

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3. ATU Tale Type see Glossary of Terms.

4. A shallow bowl-shaped vessel made of wood, earthenware or bronze. In it, flour and water are mixed and worked into dough.