A Study of Monomyth Subversion in the Novel *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King*

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Abstract. This study discusses the subversion of Joseph Campbell's monomyth structure in a novel written by Christie Golden entitled *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King*. In most stories following the monomyth, the hero goes through three main stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return. These stages usually show the hero growing as a person and bringing something valuable back to help others. However, Arthas Menethil's journey in the novel takes a different path. Using Campbell's theory and an intrinsic literary approach, this study looks at how Arthas changes from a noble prince into a dark and feared figure known as the Lich King. Instead of learning wisdom or becoming a better person, Arthas becomes more obsessed, loses his morality, and turns away from the people he once wanted to protect. The analysis shows how the novel uses the monoymyth stages but changes its purpose, from a story of growth and enlightenment to one of downfall and destruction. The findings reveal how the novel repurposes the monomyth into a tale of obsession, moral collapse, and the rejection of reintegration. This study helps to understand how stories can break away from traditional patterns to explore deeper themes like failure, corruption, and the making of a villain.

Keywords: *Arthas Menethil, Hero's Journey, Lich King, Monomyth, Narrative Structure, Subversion*

INTRODUCTION

A coherent narrative structure is fundamental to the effectiveness of most literary works, as it provides a logical and engaging progression of events. James Scott Bell (2004) asserts that narrative structure serves as the foundation of successful storytelling, identifying four essential components: the Hook, Rising Action, Climax, and Resolution. Similarly, Campbell's (1949) theory of the monomyth, or usually also called hero's journey, outlines a cyclical narrative pattern consisting of three principal stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return. This study applies the monomyth framework to the novel written by Christie Golden entitled *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King*, which notably subverts traditional expectations. Rather than returning as a heroic figure who benefits society, Arthas completes his journey as a villain, fully embracing his transformation into a malevolent being called the Lich King.

David Adams Leeming (1981) views the monomyth as more than a heroic tale, seeing it as a metaphor for personal growth and psychological transformation. Franco and Efthimiou (2017) support this, describing the monomyth as a blueprint for healing and development. Christopher Vogler (1997) highlights its practical use in storytelling, helping writers craft emotionally resonant narratives. However, Robert Segal (1996)

warns against rigidly applying the monomyth, noting that not all myths follow its linear stages. Similarly, Sadri (2020) argues that while influential, the monomyth can be overly simplistic and flawed.

To explore the monomyth subversion, this research is guided by two central problems. First, how does Arthas' journey in the novel subvert the traditional expectations of the Monomyth? This question focuses on identifying which specific stages of the monomyth are altered, inverted, or undermined throughout Arthas' narrative arc. Second, how does Arthas' transformation into the Lich King challenge the concept of the heroic return? This question investigates how Arthas' final state contradicts the Monomyth's ideal of the hero returning with wisdom or a boon for society, and instead concludes with his complete descent into darkness and isolation.

The Monomyth was chosen because it offers a powerful framework for understanding the narrative structure of heroic transformation across cultures and time periods. Unlike more limited narrative theories that focus solely on plot mechanics or character types, Joseph Campbell's concept allows to trace a universal pattern of the monomyth—including trials, transformation, and return—that resonates deeply with myth, literature, and popular storytelling. This is especially relevant in the context of this novel of Golden's, a novel that reimagines the hero's path by subverting traditional expectations. By applying the Monomyth, this study can critically examine how Arthas's descent into villainy challenges the assumptions embedded within the classic heroic narrative.

Most studies focus on how literary protagonists adhere to the stages of the Monomyth. Sembayu (2024) analyzes Bruce Wayne's transformation using the 12-stage Hero's Journey framework by Christopher Vogler, a framework influenced by Joseph Campbell's Monomyth theory, in his study *Exploring the Batman Journey in Matt Reeves's The Batman*. Then there is Zorba (2019) who explores Frodo Baggins' journey in *The Lord of the Rings* in his study *A Study on Frodo's Quest within the Framework of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth*. In the same year, Fakhruddin and Retnaningdyah examines the journey of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* series in their study *Monomyth Analysis on Katniss Everdeen's Journey in Suzanne Collin's The Hunger Games 1st Series*. There is also Wahyuni (2018) who investigates the journey of Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* within Campbell's stages in her study *Joseph Campbell's Monomyth in Agatha Christie's Novel Murder of the Orient Express*.

In this study, the monomyth is also analyzed, focusing on how Arthas Menethil's journey in Golden's novel follows and subverts Campbell's monomyth. The similarity between this study and other studies is the application of Campbell's monomyth framework to analyze a protagonist's growth. However, the key difference lies in the outcomes of each stages of the journey. While prior studies examine protagonists who fulfill the monomyth's expectations, this study examines how Arthas' journey deviates from the traditional heroic narratives, leading to corruption rather than enlightenment.

This study aims to analyze the subversion of the monomyth in Christie Golden's novel, focusing on how the protagonist Arthas Menethil's journey subverts the traditional heroic narrative. By examining the ways in which Arthas' transformation into a villainous figure challenges the stages of the monomyth, this study seeks to highlight how the narrative structure is portrays a fall into corruption rather than ascension to enlightenment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses Joseph Campbell's Monomyth to analyze the subversion of the outcomes of this narrative structure in *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King*. The monomyth is a narrative structure that outlines the typical path of an archetypal hero found in numerous myths, religious traditions, and stories. Made widely known by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the monomyth follows a pattern that consists of three main cyclical stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return. They can be understood as follows:

- **Departure** marks the beginning of the hero's journey in the monomyth. It is the stage in which the hero is separated from the familiar world and embarks on an adventure into the unknown. Darbellay (2017) states that it is the stage where the hero or main character is summoned to leave behind their ordinary life and enter a period of extraordinary experience. This stage includes the hero's initial hesitation, guidance from a mentor, a committed crossing into a new realm, and a symbolic separation or transformation that prepares the hero for the journey ahead. (Reynolds, 2021)

- **Initiation** represents the hero's immersion into the unfamiliar world where the true trials of transformation occur. As Darbellay (2017) states, this stage marks the transition into an unfamiliar world where the hero moves forward through trial and error, confronting new challenges along the way. It is within this stage that the hero is tested, undergoes death and rebirth, and gains the knowledge or power necessary to complete the journey. (Reynolds, 2021)

- **Return** is the final stage in the monomyth,. After undergoing transformation and achieving enlightenment in the special world, the hero must return to the ordinary world, bringing back the wisdom, power, or boon acquired during the journey. Darbellay (2017) states that in this stage, the hero has not only experienced a profound transformation during this extraordinary journey and the wisdom it brought, but is also capable of passing on his newfound knowledge and abilities to others. This stage emphasizes the reintegration of the hero into society and the application of their newfound insight to benefit others, leading to personal transformation and the achievement of inner balance, purpose, and peace. (Reynolds, 2021)

METHOD

This study employs an intrinsic approach grounded in Joseph Campbell's (1949) Monomyth theory to analyze the narrative structure of *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King* by Christie Golden. As Wellek and Warren (1949) assert, the intrinsic approach focuses on the literary work itself—its form, structure, style, and meaning. The Monomyth provides a framework for examining the stages of the hero's journey—Departure, Initiation, and Return—allowing for an analysis of how these stages are followed or subverted. This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis research design, which, according to Bryman (2012), enables in-depth interpretation of language to uncover themes and narrative patterns. The primary data source is Golden's 212-page novel, with data in the form of words, phrases, and sentences relevant to the research focus. Data collection involves a close reading of the text, identification of monomyth stages, annotation of significant passages, and classification according to the three main stages of the hero's journey, with emphasis on deviations. Data analysis then interprets these classifications in light of Campbell's framework, identifying subversions that challenge the conventional heroic

arc, particularly in Arthas' transformation and failed return. The analysis concludes by discussing the thematic implications of these subversions in the context of anti-heroic narratives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
A. How Arthas' Journey in the Novel Subverts the Traditional Expectations of the Monomyth
The first findings of this study reveal that Golden's novel subverts the traditional structure of the monomyth in two major ways: by corrupting the stages of the journey of the hero, and by denying the protagonist a redemptive return. Arthas Menethil's journey initially follows the recognizable path of the monomyth's three stages—Departure, Initiation, and Return—but diverges at critical points to portray a descent into moral collapse, obsession, and inhumanity rather than enlightenment or heroism.

In the Departure stage, Arthas is introduced as a noble prince with strong mentorship and moral guidance. However, instead of evolving through trials with humility and wisdom, he exhibits early signs of recklessness and self-righteousness. Events such as the death of his horse Invincible and his aggressive attitude toward political tragedy reveal a distorted reaction to crisis, laying the groundwork for his eventual fall.

The Initiation stage, typically a transformative phase where the hero gains insight and strength, instead accelerates Arthas's moral decay. His relationships with mentors such as Uther and Muradin, and his romantic partner Jaina, are not sources of growth but casualties of his obsession. He disregards their guidance, ultimately severing ties with them as he prioritizes personal vengeance and control. Key turning points such as the culling of Stratholme and the claiming of the cursed blade Frostmourne function as corrupted trials—rather than emerging wiser, Arthas becomes increasingly unhinged and consumed by the need for power. His "boon," Frostmourne, strips him of his soul and further drives his descent, subverting the traditional reward of the monomyth.

Finally, in the Return stage, Arthas does not reintegrate into society with newfound wisdom. Instead, he becomes the very force of destruction he once vowed to defeat. He returns not to heal his kingdom, but to destroy it, signaling a complete rejection of the heroic return. Northrend, rather than being the world of transformation, becomes his new ordinary world—cold, detached, and lifeless. The donning of the Helm of Domination seals his fate, transforming him fully into the Lich King. This represents a reversal of the monomyth's final goal of restoration and mastery of both worlds.

Overall, the novel transforms the monomyth into a narrative of anti-heroism, presenting a journey not of spiritual growth but of spiritual decay. Instead of the archetypal hero, Arthas becomes a tragic figure whose choices at each stage deviate from redemption and instead culminate in corruption. This subversion underscores deeper themes such as the fragility of morality, the cost of unchecked ambition, and the making of a villain.

B. How Arthas' Transformation into the Lich King in the Novel Challenges the Concept of the Heroic Return
The second findings of this study highlights how Golden's novel challenges the heroic return of the monomyth. In traditional hero's journey narratives, the Return marks the protagonist's reintegration into the ordinary world with new wisdom or power, often bringing healing or transformation to others. In contrast, Arthas's journey concludes with a complete rejection of this heroic ideal. Rather than returning as a redeemer or

benefactor, Arthas returns as a destroyer — a symbol of loss, dehumanization, and moral collapse. Several critical elements demonstrate this.

First, Arthas experiences a loss of self. The acquisition of Frostmourne, a corrupted magical sword, leads to the destruction of his soul and personal identity. Instead of emerging as a stronger or wiser version of himself, Arthas sheds his former self entirely. The prince who once vowed to protect his people no longer exists; he becomes an extension of Frostmourne's will and ultimately the vessel of the Lich King. This reflects a complete erasure of the "returning hero" identity.

Second, Arthas loses his humanity. He becomes emotionally numb, distant, and cruel. His final actions are not driven by love, duty, or justice, but by domination, vengeance, and cold utilitarianism. The transformation is so complete that there is no inner conflict or guilt in his final acts. This loss of empathy disqualifies him from completing the monomyth's redemptive cycle, which requires some form of healing or restitution.

Third, the consequences of his journey bring only suffering. Whereas a traditional hero returns with a boon or benefit to society, Arthas returns to Lordaeron not to save it but to annihilate it. His homecoming is marked by patricide, betrayal, and the destruction of everything he once valued. He spreads the plague rather than curing it, and his former kingdom becomes a wasteland under his rule.

Fourth, the idea of "home" or the "ordinary world" is subverted. For Arthas, Northrend — the land of death and ruin — becomes his new ordinary world. It is a realm defined by coldness and isolation, reflecting his own internal state. Rather than reintegrating into society, he withdraws further from it, choosing exile and control over connection and healing.

Finally, the Helm of Domination serves as a symbolic inversion of the final boon. Rather than wearing a crown that signifies wisdom and legitimacy, Arthas dons the Helm to seal his fate as the Lich King. It is not a symbol of completion or balance, but of eternal servitude to darkness. In this moment, the heroic return is not just unfulfilled — it is fundamentally reversed.

This analysis confirms that Arthas' transformation challenges the essential goal of the monomyth: the return to society with insight and balance. Instead, the novel presents a fall into villainy and isolation. It is a narrative that replaces heroism with tragedy, and spiritual fulfillment with moral annihilation.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed how the novel written by Christie Golden entitled *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King* subverts Joseph Campbell's monomyth by presenting a protagonist who follows the structural stages of the monomyth, only to ultimately reject its moral and redemptive core. Arthas Menethil begins as a promising and noble figure, seemingly destined for greatness. However, as the narrative progresses, his actions reflect not growth and enlightenment, but obsession, moral decay, and the loss of humanity.

Each stage of the monomyth—Departure, Initiation, and Return—is structurally present in the narrative but functions contrary to its traditional meaning. Rather than coming back to society bearing a gift that restores or benefits the world, Arthas becomes an agent of destruction, refusing reintegration and embracing corruption. His transformation into the Lich King represents a complete inversion of the heroic ideal, demonstrating that not all journeys end in salvation—and not all heroes return to stay and with benefits to share.

By subverting the monomyth, Golden's novel contributes to a broader literary trend that critiques traditional heroism and explores the complexities of power, failure, and identity. This study shows that Campbell's framework, while widely influential, is not fixed; it can be repurposed to tell darker, more morally ambiguous stories. In doing so, Arthas: Rise of the Lich King challenges readers to reconsider what it means to be a hero—and what it means to fall.

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