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Jacob wrote this essay in Dustin Marquis’s English 103 course in the fall of 2010.
Joseph Campbell’s reluctant hero is an individual who, in today's society, represents uncertainty and doubt in one’s life. This insecurity is a central idea in media today, and the myth of the reluctant hero is essential to culture today because of its critical role in storytelling. Campbell’s idea of the reluctant hero explains that one is initially hesitant of the role that has been forced on him or her and, in some cases, tries to deny it completely. However, there is a defining moment, or epiphany, that turns this person back to his or her destiny. In media today, particular examples of the reluctant hero include characters from the following works: The Power and the Glory (by Graham Greene), The Lord of the Rings (by J.R.R. Tolkien), The Matrix, Spider-Man, and the song “Knights of Cydonia” (by Muse). All of these examples possess a key part of Campbell’s reluctant hero: their protagonists are often alone, face all odds, and may occasionally give up their quests. But eventually, a moment of actualization or divine providence turns all back on their paths, and they often emerge as superior individuals as a result.

The concept of myth, in relation to modern day media, is a story that (in most cases) involves persons of god-like or preter-human status. However, it does not necessarily require the individual to possess a unique physical power or godlike powers. In some cases, the person in question may be presented with a heightened sense of morals or choices that are beyond the scope of the common man. Relating to more modern examples, the individuals at the start of their journey (in the examples listed prior) all begin contextually as ordinary, even perhaps anti-heroic individuals. Particularly in The Matrix and The Power and the Glory, Neo and the Priest live paltry lives, often committing petty crimes or being especially sinful. While in the cases of The Lord of the Rings and Spider-Man, Frodo and Peter (Spider-Man) live very much within the norm; while certainly not rich, they both enjoy living a meager, albeit happy, existence. It is by chance, or prophecy, that these individuals are presented with extraordinary expectations and responsibilities. But, because of the mediocrity of their previous
lives, they are hesitant about the tasks that have been presented to them.

This anti-heroic hesitance, then glorious actualization, can be best analyzed by Campbell's idea of the “reluctant hero.” Basically, the individual is an ordinary person who is thrust into extraordinary circumstances or presented with extraordinary problems. The individual typically abandons his or her destiny and is “rescued” either by his- or herself or by a sort of “divine entity.” Campbell refers to this as the “Rescue from Without”: “The reluctant hero loses all desire to abandon his bliss; he does not want to take on the burdens of the world ... An overriding reason is necessary to bring the hero back to the world to save it.” In most cases, this “reason” is presented by a supernatural being or person. But the heroes portrayed in (most of) the media today typically change their ways as a result of the culmination of situational precipices that come to fashion who they are and what they have to do. Perhaps the most drastic change of the examples mentioned is that of Neo (The Matrix). Neo, during his fight with the “Agent Smith” possessed individual, becomes blinded and is jokingly referred to as the “blind messiah” by Smith. Only through this wounding does he take on his true power of “seeing” the matrix in reality. His power, now amplified, allows him to ultimately destroy Smith and overcome his “death.” (As a result of destroying him, there is peace between humanity and the machines.) In Neo's case (as is true for the rest of the individuals), there is not an entity, but a hidden self that emerges in cases of dire stress or despair.

The first embodiment of the reluctant hero, and perhaps the most relatable, is the plight of Graham Greene’s “Whiskey” priest in the novel The Power and the Glory. The priest was found amidst a deadly clerical purge in one of the states of Mexico. It had been deemed that religion was the cause of strife in society as it exacted services and held requirements to the people in order for them to “prosper” in the afterlife. Therefore, they reasoned that eliminating the members of the clergy would eliminate the problems of society. Eventually, nearly all of the priests had either been executed or had become prisoners of the state. This situation不幸ly meant that the public was without their Sunday mass, which was a necessary part of access into heaven under their faith. The unlikely savior in this case was an alcoholic priest, who was by no means the epitome of the faith. He initially did not want to
become the last hope for the people of the state; but because of his belief in the faith, he was not going to allow the public to go to hell for his apathy, even if it meant he would go to hell. The priest in many ways is a reluctant hero because throughout the majority of the novel, he constantly questions (and occasionally abandons) his role as a Catholic priest, often in the form of inner monologues. To the priest, he has helped scores of villages and hundreds of people but is never revered (at least in person) for his acts. However, he has only focused on the sins and missed opportunities in his life. By the end of his journey, when faced with his death, he realizes that he is more saint-like than he has given himself credit for.

He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at the moment, that it would have been quite easy to be a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. ... He knew that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.

(Greene, part three, chapter four, 210)

The central idea behind *The Power and the Glory* is that even the most unlikely people can be rescuers. Though initially they are reluctant because of their flaws, they realize that despite their personal limits, they can achieve great acts with the support of others.

The most “mythical” case of the hero’s reluctance in media today is the role of Frodo in the trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the beginning of the story, Frodo is a content individual in the Shire, which much resembles the grassy hills and agricultural lifestyle of medieval Europe. It is when he comes to inherit the ring of power, the embodiment of evil in the story, that he is entrusted with the responsibility to destroy it and, ultimately, to save the world from centuries of oppression and darkness under the ethereal eye of Sauron. By the middle of the novel, Frodo becomes aware that the journey to destroy the ring is daunting and inevitably will be the demise of most of his friends and protectors. On a few occasions, he tries to rid himself of the ring; but knowing that it corrupts whoever possesses it, he realizes that only he can “bear its burden.” As a result, he takes a semi-solitary journey to the fires of the volcano from whence the ring came in order to destroy it and the spirit of Sauron. Despite being a mythical epic in which it was completely “possible” to be encountered by a divine being, the actualization encountered by Frodo was entirely self-manifested.
His friends’ reactions and their deaths, consequently, led Frodo on his journey, instead of his being swayed by a divine being. The broadness of the ring’s corruption, and the dreadful environment which Frodo and his friend Sam traversed, would have made him abandon his calling for good. Were it not for a noble few to buttress them, Frodo would have been a tragic hero and not a reluctant one. As in *The Power and the Glory*, the reluctant hero is able to accomplish seemingly insurmountable tasks with the support of friends and the sacrifices of others.

*The Matrix* trilogy is a prime example of the hero’s reluctance to a certain undertaking. Neo, like the heroes before him, had lived an exceptionally ordinary life as a computer designer. When he is later approached by members of the Nebuchadnezzar, he learns that he has been a part of a computer-generated reality and that they believe that he is the “prophet” who shall save them from genocide by the machines. Because he believes he is only human, he has many doubts to the truth of the prophecy, and on many occasions, he fails to live up to the expectations of the crew. His lowest point, arguably, is when the future-predicting oracle tells him he is not “the one.” It, of course, becomes evident that she only told Neo this because she needed him to be selfless in times to come. As he fits into the role that others shape for him, he becomes increasingly doubtful, not of his powers, but of his ability to deliver; after all, he is not a god among men. At the climax of his doubt, he encounters the architect of the matrix and learns that he is only the result of a recursive existence brought on by the machines in order to promote unity and stability between man and machine. Despite the feelings of helplessness and the consequences of saving others before himself, he decides that it is his choices, ultimately, that will break the causality and perhaps free humanity. Eventually, Neo is able to postpone the extermination of humanity by a proposition of peace with the machines. Throughout his journey, Neo encounters situations that would otherwise demand a change in character, but by being true to himself and his obligations, he brings peace as the prophecy predicted or is planned... His prophetic journey and his existence allow humanity to have hope for the future. His reluctance in this case is more of a planned supposition, but it is a necessary condition for bettering himself and the fate of others, even if many of his friends meet their deaths.
One of the most popularized cases of the reluctant hero, Spider-Man, tells of the unique power inscribed on Peter Parker and his cyclical reluctance, as his personal life and his heroic life become intertwined. Like the others before, Peter had a mediocre life and was thrust into his responsibilities. But, unlike the others, the result was not because of the world around him; rather, his bizarre and eventful mutation was brought on by a genetically enhanced spider’s bite. Instead of the world choosing its hero, the hero was grown into the position of maintaining justice in the world (or rather, the city Spider-Man presided in). The most publicized piece of Spider-Man’s life is his notion that “with great power, comes great responsibility.” This, in fact, is the mantra that the persona of Spider-Man lives by. Another stark difference between the examples of heroes is the fact that Spider-Man is a persona, and Peter Parker is an ordinary person. By masking his identity, Parker is able to live a peaceful life outside of crime. Ironically, it is because of this that he is considered a menace by many and is better off leaving the city. What makes Spider-Man a reluctant hero is that on multiple occasions, most notably against arch-nemesis Dr. Octopus, he has “given up” the mask and tried to pursue a normal life: “I can't live your dreams anymore. I want a life of my own. ... No Uncle Ben. I'm just Peter Parker. I'm Spider-Man ... no more. No more” (*Spider-Man 2*). While he makes fulfilling progress in his downtime, he is never satisfied by being just one person. Because of the discontent he harbors with both sides of his life, he frequently debates which side he should choose if the choice is presented. He lives with this mutual ambivalence by entrusting his secret identity to a select few. But he continues to live in doubt of his purpose. While Spider-Man/Peter Parker has yet to overcome his reluctance, he chooses to live with the life he has chosen so far, even if some of the public despises him for his choices. To him, being responsible and doing the right thing does not always mean he will be liked for it.

Lastly, “Knights of Cydonia” by Muse does not embody a concrete idea of reluctance in the hero; instead, it represents the conceptual meaning that in some way inspires the heroes to return to their journey. Like Campbell’s “Rescue from Without,” the song manifests a type of message in the listener and is a lyrical metaphor to the change encountered by the heroes (whether that change is brought on by a divine being or one’s self). The beginning of the
song starts very different from the remainder. It begins by having a slow, segmented rise in frequency and tone by the vocals, as the guitar and drums in the background (and foreground) accelerate in their musical section. The change, or climax of the set, occurs when the vocals drop off and the guitar plays to a sensation of “spiraling” downwards. This variation represents the hero’s shift in attitude, and the thought that he (or she) may not be doing what is truly right. Afterwards, there is a chaotic and cacophonous mix of bass, drums, and guitar, oscillating in their beats. This represents a duality of choices, or the weighing of one outcome to another. Finally, by the end of this set, the beat steadies and slows as the first lyrics come in to play. The narrator (or lead singer) is beckoning the listener(s) to see the world that they have lived in, and that, at its present course, it will not lead to any favorable end. After another precession of vocals and guitar, the second “realization” comes into view: “The time has come to make things right ... you and I must fight to survive.” This lyrical repetition is the representation that there is only one right choice to make and that its conclusion will not come easily. One has to “fight to make things right” in order to accomplish what one seeks to do. The song ends with a particularly fast-paced, constant beat that signifies the rigidity brought on by the hero’s choice. “Knights of Cydonia,” therefore, can be seen as a lyrical metaphor for what a hero may go through during their moment of actualization and the abandoning their reluctance in their decision.

In summation, *The Power and the Glory, The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Matrix* trilogy, *Spider-Man*, and “Knights of Cydonia” all exemplify Campbell’s construct of the reluctant hero in modern mythology. The underlying theme in each of these media examples is the notion of the reluctant individual. The individual, whose responsibilities are thrust upon him or her, at first does not want to accept the undertaking. Then, by some twist of fate, the individual embraces his or her duties and emerges, metaphysically, an empowered individual.