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Mythology Period 7

10/9/11

### A Hero's Journey: Jason Bourne

The series of films called *The Bourne Trilogy* made a deep impression on me and my family. We have watched them several times now, and we always end up in pretty deep discussions afterwards about the nature of change and redemption, and concepts such as accountability, repentance, atonement, and restitution. However, it was not until this Mythology class assignment that I realized that Jason Bourne is even more than I had previously imagined—Jason Bourne is a mythic figure, a Campbell-esque hero. I will explore this theme by comparing the elements of the “monomyth,” as explicated by Joseph Campbell, and the story of Jason Bourne (as outlined in the movies, not in the books, for I have not read the books)

#### **Plot**

We first meet Jason Bourne bobbing, gravely wounded and unconscious, in the ocean. He is picked up by fishermen, and he cannot remember anything about who he is. There is a chip implanted in his body that the fishermen remove, giving a bank address and account number in Switzerland. He is dropped off by the fishermen to the shore, who help him with clothing and money, and he sets off for the bank to find some answers.

At the bank, he unlocks a safety deposit box filled with multiple passports—all with his photo—wads of money in various currencies, and a handgun. He takes

all of it, except the gun, and attempts to leave. By this time, the bank has called Bourne's shadowy handlers, and he is chased by police mobilized by these handlers, who are apparently high up in the US government by some capacity.

He escapes and meets a girl who decides to help him. In Paris, both familiar and unfamiliar to Bourne, he finds the apartment he used to live in. In the apartment, he and the girl are viciously attacked by someone he does not know. In self-defense, he kills the unknown assassin. While in the apartment, he finds enough clues to give him some direction.

Later, he and the girl become lovers. He is forced to kill yet another assassin, and gains more clues from him. He and the girl are separated. He is able to confront one of his handlers, and escape from him. The handler is killed by his own higher-ups. Bourne and the girl reunite, and have a season of peace in exile far away.

That peace is shattered when a Russian assassin sent to kill Bourne kills the girl by mistake. Bourne comes out of exile, begins to remember things about his past, including his own culpability in the murders of innocents by the orders of his superiors. He makes the decision to atone for those murders by contacting the surviving child of his victims and telling her the truth about how her parents died. He is hunted by the same assassin who killed his girlfriend, and is seriously wounded. In a showdown, he neutralizes his enemy, but refuses to kill him. He confronts another of his previous handlers (who had the first handler killed and who is responsible for sending the Russian assassin to kill him), and this man confesses to his misdeeds on tape. Bourne makes sure that the tape is provided to

this man's superiors, and the man then kills himself. Bourne continues to remember more and more of his past.

At the beginning of the third film, he finds a writer who has investigated Bourne's past and could possibly tell him more about who he is and what he did. The writer is promptly assassinated, but Bourne has gained enough clues to lead him to someone who knows the truth. Another assassin is sent to kill that man before Bourne can reach him, and the assassin is successful, though Bourne then kills the assassin before he can kill one of Bourne's helpers. The clues he receives help him remember that he was trained as an assassin by the US government, and that this program went rogue and wound up assassinating American citizens without trial. (Gee, sounds like today's headlines.)

He comes back to the USA in the end. He is hunted, for the remaining handlers know he will expose them. He steals the incriminating documents and flees. One government official, a woman, begins to understand that Bourne is right and that the people she works with are immoral and corrupt. They are able to meet, and Bourne gives her all the documentation necessary to expose the wrongdoing of these officials. He goes on a final journey to meet the doctor who originally tortured him in order to turn him into an assassin.

The doctor is waiting for him. Bourne's memory returns in full. He realizes how evil the people were who trained him. He realizes that he himself became evil as a result of his training. Instead of killing the doctor, he leaves, knowing the doctor will eventually be exposed. But an assassin comes after him—an assassin that Bourne now understands is just like he was in the past, in the same program.

He says a few simple things to the assassin that cause the assassin to realize what he really is doing, and the assassin decides not to kill him. But one of the top evil handlers manages to shoot Bourne as he jumps into the Potomac River.

We cut away to new footage showing that the sympathetic women official has indeed exposed everything. The doctor and the evil handler who shot Bourne are locked away for good. And in the final scene, showing Bourne floating through the water (just like the very first scene of the first movie), we wonder if he is dead—until we see him start to swim. We know he is alive and safe and has recovered his memory. And we know he has chosen to be someone different now; someone who is a good guy, and who will be on guard forever to ensure that evil remains vanquished.

## **Analysis**

Those who know the Bourne trilogy would know that Bourne goes through at least three cycles of the hero monomyth. We begin with the trilogy with the knowledge that he has no memory, and throughout the trilogy, parts of his memory come back. However, in the three-year span of the trilogy, Bourne becomes a vastly different kind of hero than he was before his amnesia.

Right before the beginning, he was apparently having the typical life of a first class secret assassin. But the big rupture that begins the adventures of the trilogy is when he gets shot in the back and gets amnesia. He is therefore obliged to begin a quest to find out who he is. Helpers appear in the story as fishermen, who bring

him out of the sea and nurse him back to health. Another helper would be the girl that he meets at the bank.

Bourne crosses his first threshold on his quest when he kills the first assassin (the one who swings into his Paris apartment). While he doesn't know it at first, the assassin was from the very same organization that Bourn was in; so the fight was a brother battle (as Campbell calls it). In fact, there are multiple brother battles since most of the assassins out to kill him were in the same black ops organization he was in.

The crossing of thresholds brings his "sacred marriage;" that is, his love affair with the girl from the bank. Because of her, not only was Bourne able to succeed in his trials, she sparked in him his ability to decipher what is right, and what is wrong. And as he begins to realize his murderous past, he wants to reject it.

We do find one element that I didn't see in Campbell's analysis: a time of rest. At the end of the first film, he goes to India with his girlfriend to live happily in refuge and exile. However, another assassin comes and kills his girlfriend while attempting to kill him as well. Right next to her place of death, he burns her passports and all evidence of her legal existence he possessed. This was his "belly of a whale moment," where things look very dark. This tragedy calls him to continue his quest.

While there is no real example of an atonement with a father figure, an atonement does take place. He goes to the daughter of a previously targeted couple he had killed and confesses his homicide to her. Before his confessions, she had been told that her mother killed her father right before committing suicide. Bourne

changed the pain of her past by telling her that her parents loved each other very much, and it was he that killed them.

After this atonement for his past, Bourne now will uncover the taproot of evil, which taproot lies back home. He must go back home to the USA and clean house. Unlike Campbell's monomyth, he does not initially refuse to do this. This is something he passionately wants to do, for he knows it will result in his own resurrection—that is, he knows he will regain his memory. But he also knows he will not become what he was, that he has the power to be something different and to make things different for his world. So he crosses back over the ocean to the USA, his homeland (the crossing of the return threshold, in Campbell's parlance). And there he steals the magic elixir (the documentation of the abuses of his superiors), then flees and is pursued, in keeping with the monomyth as explained by Campbell.

While his previous victories were physical (killing all of the assassins), his final victory would be his moral victory. He stands up to the ultimate evil-doers, the fathers of his evil past, and he said that he is no longer Jason Bourne the assassin. And while given the chance to kill them, he leaves them without giving them a scratch. He leaves them to face the justice of the court. In fact, he is able to convince the final assassin sent against him to cease the assassination attempt of his own free will, enlightened by Bourne's higher perspective.

And so, he concludes his journey by being shot by one of the higher-up evildoers and he falls into the Potomac River. He conquered his evil past as well as any enemy that crossed his path. And, being "dead," he is free to live, and to start a new life. As Campbell puts it, Bourne has the power to "regenerate his society." And

we see that this is a *choice*, for in the very last scene, we are unsure for a moment if he is dead or alive. But the final moment shows us that Bourne indeed lives, and that he is larger now than life. And, in keeping with Campbell's analysis, Bourne realizes he was not on a journey of discovery, but one of rediscovery; not of attainment, but of re-attainment.

So, in my book, he is a mythic hero.

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