Abstract: During the last six millennia, the hero’s journey to the underworld of the dead has been a main part of epic storylines. It is also a literary tradition adopted by cinema in the last century. The author analyzes this journey as a rescue, an experience of death, and purification.

Key words: eucatastrophe; Hades; hell; hero’s journey; midpoint; resurrection; Tolkien, J. R. R.; Vogler, Christopher

In film or literature, it is necessary to look far beyond the simple facts or the story that the author tells. A writer’s first and most important choice consists of deciding whether the story’s hero is already shaped or is just starting a journey of initiation (i.e., “candidate to be hero”).

Twenty-three centuries ago, Aristotle explained that action is character and that character is revealed by a person’s actions (Poetics vi); thus, the identity of a hero depends on his or her own adventures. But it is also true that the epic plot will be very different if the hero is not completely shaped at the beginning of the story. In that case, the scriptwriter will have to tell a journey of initiation, or heroic journey, which will also be the account of this character’s development. That is not the case of Indiana Jones, Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird, Andy Dufresne in Shawshank Redemption, Guido Orefice in Life Is Beautiful, or James Bond in any of his missions. They are already heroes, or at least they have the right stuff to be heroes from the very first page of the script. On the other hand, main characters of other fairy tales, scripts, and novels—such as Bastian Balthasar Bux, Clarice Starling, Luke Skywalker, Chihiro, Harry Potter, Molly Moon, Neo, Willow, Holden Caulfield, or Dorothy—become heroes and heroines only after completing long journeys of initiation, which coincide with their adventures.

Hell Visitors of Old

The journey to the underworld of the dead has been a favorite part of epic storylines, and it is also a literary tradition adopted by cinema in the last century. Scriptwriters never forget to include a dramatic visit to the underworld, regardless of the age or maturity of the hero. Since the age
of myth, fully shaped heroes or heroes-to-be have traveled through horror-filled exotic worlds to rescue suffering souls. No doubt, the experience is more impressive when it is part of a hero’s journey of initiation.

Old myths tell of journeys to the underworld to challenge death, to attempt to triumph in the realm of the dead, and to free those suffering there. The gods allowed Orpheus to enter Hades to rescue his wife Eurydice, but they did not let him make a single mistake: He looked back in mistrust and lost her forever. This myth inspired the script of What Dreams May Come. The film tells the journey of an ordinary man who decides to go to Hades to save his wife who had committed suicide. The art department of What Dreams May Come looked to the aesthetics of Dante’s Divine Comedy for inspiration. Moulin Rouge!, by Baz Luhrman, is another personal and tragic version of Orpheus, whose main character cannot avoid separation from his beloved.

A quick glance at other journeys to Hades shows a series of classic myths that have served as models for modern storytellers. In his last journey, Hercules went into Hades to capture Cerberus; along the way, he rescued Theseus, who was suffering the penalty of the chair of oblivion. It was Theseus’s ill reward for challenging the god of the underworld to free Persephone, the goddess of spring, who was kidnapped by Hades. Theseus had to look for Persephone because, when she entered Hades, the world sank into perpetual winter.

A Sumero–Babylonian epic tells of the giant Gilgamesh’s journey into Hades in search of immortality. In the Middle Ages, Nordic Edda tells a story similar to that of Persephone’s, with thundering Thor as the main character: Thor goes into Utgard, the infernal dwelling of trolls, to prevent the wedding between goddess Freya, symbol of fertility, and the king of giants because the wedding would have tragic consequences for nature.

De profundis clamo ad Te, Domine!

Film heroes act like their mythological models and usually must venture into underworlds to rescue those suffering torments or death threats. Vietnam movies, such as Missing in Action and Rambo: First Blood Part II, tell the stories of veterans who return to the hellish jungle in search of imprisoned comrades years after the war’s end. In these pictures of the 1980s, which started a popular trend in cinema, the main characters are moved by solidarity with the prisoners of war and, above all, by the sheer desire to wash away their country’s humilation after the defeat in Vietnam.

Oskar Schindler of Schindler’s List is another visitor to Hades. In Schindler’s personal journey, Hades is the Holocaust, represented by the Plaszow extermination camp, where Jewish people await the “final solution.” In one of the crudest scenes, Schindler watches the horror as Allied armies advance and SS soldiers try to get rid of the corpses. The vision of this hell makes such an impression on Schindler that, from then on, he does everything in his power to save from death as many people as he can. The following is the Dantesque scene created by the film’s screenwriter, Stephen Zaillian:

Bodies being exhumed out of the earth, out of the mass graves in the forest. The dead lay everywhere, victims of the ghetto massacre, victims of Plaszow.

Arriving, Schindler sees Goeth standing up at the tree line. Approaching him, furious, he hesitates. He sees a wheelbarrow trundled by Pfefferberg, a corpse in it.

In The Shawshank Redemption, Andy Dufresne is locked in a different hell, this time a prison. During his first night at Shawshank, Dufresne hears the screams of a fellow newcomer. The next morning, that man is dead, the result of a brutal beating by the guards. For twenty years, Andy devotes all his energy to trying to dignify the lives of his prison mates. Andy’s is a journey of moral rescue based on hope that will permit a real redemption of their lives. Andy and Red, the old prisoner who controls the prison black market, survive their own hell.

Sometimes heroes are protagonists Schindler’s List (Steven Spielberg, 1993). The Holocaust as hell.
of romances in the underworld, as in the myth of Orpheus. In Vertigo, Detective Scott’s attempts to rescue the mysterious woman he has fallen in love with are thwarted. The film’s subtitle, From among the Dead, suggests that she has come from the underworld. Fairy tales abound with romances in which one kiss—a true-love kiss—has redeeming power and gives life back to a bewitched princess. In Beauty and the Beast, the roles are reversed, and it is the young villager who frees the charming prince from the spell that kept him hidden under a hideous face.

In City Lights, the tramp (Charles Chaplin) breaks a peculiar spell: A beautiful blind flower girl is convinced that her benefactor is a handsome young man of quality, but it is really a tramp who gives the money the girl needs for an expensive surgery. Once the girl regains her sight, the protagonist's heroism is shown when he tries to go away unnoticed, his only reward the miracle that she is out of her hell of blindness.

In The Sixth Sense, the visitor to hell is a psychologist. Night M. Shyamalan’s script tells of Malcolm Crowe’s efforts to cure Cole, a boy who has to bear daily visits from dead people. To carry out his task, Malcolm visits Cole’s personal inferno and endures a terrible experience with him. The rescue—the healing—will occur only when the psychologist convinces the boy to help his visitors from the grave. Paradoxically, the successful ending of this mission consists of converting Cole into a hero who will “protect and serve” the dead who visit him. The transformation of the boy into a hero is expressed through a metaphor in the last scene of a play the children perform at school: Cole plays the part of Arthur, a young palfrey who removes Excalibur from the anvil and thus becomes king and savior of his country.

In The Sixth Sense, Cole’s rescue starts with a peculiar call of help: De Profundis clamo ad Te, Domine! [Out of the depths I cried to you, O Lord!] (New Jerusalem Bible, Ps. 130), the psalm from the Funeral Mass. Cole’s call comes from the very realm of death.

Hades in the Midpoint

In the aforementioned examples, the hero’s most important task has been a journey to hell. This journey is the whole cinematographic storyline. However, this terrible excursion into Hades can be no more than an episode, a necessary element in the middle of a hero’s journey. To underline the importance of this step, Christopher Vogler called it the supreme ordeal (181–201), according to the theories of Joseph Campbell on heroic myths in literature of all ages (391). To call it supreme may exaggerate the importance of the episode to the detriment of the fight between hero and death, which must necessarily occur in the last step of the initiation journey in the final climax.

Indeed, a descent into hell usually happens halfway through the story, in the middle of the adventure or, in cinematographic terms, when the script goes through the central axis of the middle act. Adventure scriptwriters usually introduce a dramatic device during this long act to give the action a push. Syd Field, an expert on screenwriting techniques, names this device midpoint (106), which can be an unexpected drawback to the mission. A descent-into-hell episode fits perfectly in this middle of the script, as it provides dramatic pulse when the story runs through a long second act and action may be losing momentum.

When the would-be hero nears hell, the storyteller evokes one of the darkest stages of the journey. By now, the hero candidate has received some instruction (although it is never enough), has been wounded, and possibly has heard the revelations of an oracle (Sánchez-Escalonilla 111). The path becomes more dangerous then. As Vogler explains, “emotions depressed by the presence of death can rebound in an instant to a higher state than ever before. This can become the base on which you build to a higher level” (187). The nature and shape of the extraordinary world become more and more hostile with every step the hero takes. Suddenly, a new threshold arises: the door of Hades. In the most ominous place ever visited, the hero candidate will see the face of death.
First Level: Hades as an Early Encounter with Death

There are three levels of interpretation for a journey into hell. As a storyteller, the writer or scriptwriter chooses the most convenient one according to the changes the hero must experience or the kind of adventure to be told.

On the first level, this journey can be seen as a first meeting between the hero and death. Death passes near but does not hurt the hero; but, if it does, it spares his life. A hero can look like he is dead, but he stays alive. Frodo Baggins, for instance, is not killed by She-lob’s poison. Pirate Roberts is “mostly dead,” says the miracle maker to Íñigo Montoya and Fezzik in *Princess Bride*. In *The Last Crusade*, adventurer Indiana Jones falls down a cliff onto a German tank; some minutes later, when his father thinks he has lost him forever, Jones shows up over the edge of the abyss.

Neither *Last Crusade* nor *Princess Bride* tells a hero’s journey of initiation, so it is worth remembering that a visit to Hades is not limited to the shaping of a hero. As a matter of fact, Indiana Jones experiences death in all of his adventures: In the first film, he is locked with Marion in a chamber filled with snakes; in *The Temple of Doom*, he falls temporarily under the spell of Mola Ram.

The first real crisis Neo suffers in *The Matrix* occurs when he and his companions are ambushed by Smith’s men and Morpheus is caught. The crew tries to escape from the virtual world. Treacherous Cypher starts cutting the vital links of his companions, killing them one by one until he gets to Neo. The life of the Chosen is in real danger of death. Cypher stops himself to enjoy his triumph and talks scornfully to Trinity. The risk of death and the dialogue ends like this:

**Cypher:** If he is the One, then in the next few seconds there has to be some kind of miracle to stop me. Because if he dies like the others that means Morpheus was wrong. How can he be the One if he’s dead?

He takes hold of the cord when—

She hears an EXPLOSION and a scream. (Wachowski and Wachowski)

A wounded partner, Tank, arrives in time, and Neo is saved *in extremis*, partly because of the verbosity of the villain: Verbosity is a vice that usually ruins the opponent’s plans in decisive moments, when the hero is in mortal danger.

Much like Neo, David Dunne has his own first and real experience of death in one of the most dramatic scenes of *Unbreakable*. His peculiar descent into Hades occurs after he has passed his first tests and the failed Elijah’s instruction. In the cellar, his son Jeremy had witnessed how David lifted heavy weights at the risk of his own life. One night, Jeremy decides to test his father’s superhuman powers. He loads David’s gun and aims at his father’s chest while the family is gathered in the kitchen. The emotions that flow are a serious trial to the nerves of the hero-to-be:

Jeremy starts pressing the trigger. The hammer clicks back.

**Jeremy:** Don’t be scared.

**David:** Jeremy, if you pull that trigger, I’m going to leave! I’m going to go to New York.

Jeremy freezes. David flashes a desperate glance at Megan, then back to Jeremy.

**David:** You’re right. . . . If you shoot me, that bullet is going to bounce off me, and I won’t get hurt . . . but then I’m going to go upstairs and pack. And then leave to New York.

Beat.

**Jeremy** (crying): Why? (Shyamalan)

Finally, a hero can face his first experience of death without being personally threatened. In *The Untouchables*, Elliott Ness’s mission is seriously compromised when he loses Oscar Wallace, one of his men. Wallace and a witness are murdered in a federal building elevator in Chicago by Frank Nitti, Al Capone’s gunman, while Ness and Malone are celebrating their latest victory over Capone. The end of the mission is close at hand, but now everything changes abruptly. David Mamet chose this scene to introduce a dramatic twist in the structure of his script. The assassinations performed by Nitti are much more than a heavy blow to the mission. The moment he hears the gunshots, Ness gets into the elevator and sees the word “touchable” written in blood over the corpses. For the first time, the hero experiences the proximity of death through one member of his fellowship. The terrible sight in the elevator impresses him so much that he decides to abandon his personal crusade against Capone. Only Malone’s firmness gets him out of hell to resume the adventure.
It is worth mentioning that the mentor character has an important place in cinema: He is the one who guides the hero through hell. In the Middle Ages, Roman poet Virgil was thought to be a wizard. Dante Alighieri chose him as guide through purgatory and inferno in *The Divine Comedy*; Virgil has been the archetype of guide or helper ever since. Malone, Ben Kenobi, and Gandalf follow in his steps when they guide their pupils through their own Hades.

**Tolkien’s Eucatastrophe**

Following fairy tale tradition, J. R. R. Tolkien had young hobbit Frodo Baggins set forth on a journey of initiation toward maturity, knowledge, and sacrifice. But before the protagonist can achieve this triple goal, he must experience death. The evolution of the hobbit is a paradigm of the shaping of an epic hero. His journey to hell is both an encounter with death and a rescue mission. Frodo’s heroism to redeem the races of Middle Earth leads him to perform noble actions. Those actions, according to Aristotle, can spring only from the fortitude of the hero: “Courage is the virtue that disposes men to do noble deeds in situations of danger” (*On Rhetoric* 1366b). The epic of *The Ring*, published around 1954, has influenced literature and adventure cinema in such a way that Tolkien’s work can be considered one of the most solid paradigms of the shaping of a hero.

Halfway through his tour, Frodo has been taught by Gandalf, Bilbo, and Aragorn. His body is covered with bruises inflicted by the spear of a chief orc during the battle of Moria. He has been stabbed by Mordor, and his fatal wound has not healed properly. Finally, Dame Galadriel lets him look into her mirror, and the vision fills his soul with dark feelings about the success of his mission: The hobbit fears that he will not return from his journey to Mordor. Guided by Gollum, Sam and his master ascend through endless stairs that lead to a tunnel in the mountain range of Mordor. Frodo is about to enter Sauron’s realm, but he has to trespass Hades’s threshold first and experience death in She-lob’s lair. There the hero-to-be will be stabbed by the deadly sting of a giant spider.

This experience is one of the moments of greater dramatic intensity in the shaping of Tolkien’s hero. The protagonist faces death in a real descent to hell, only to revive afterwards in a miraculous way. As we have seen, would-be heroes seem to die during the darkest moments of their adventure, but they always overcome the trial and are reborn with new strength. After the deadly episode, they prepare for their final meeting with death, which will occur in the final climax.

Indeed, the hero seems to have fallen into the infernal chasm only to be tested and to rise again before the episode ends. For some moments, the reader and the audience sink into despair, unable to assimilate the hero’s death. Soon after, the audience is amazed by his return, and the whole story has a new dramatic drive. Frodo’s case follows the rule: She-lob’s poison does not kill because the hideous arachnid does not devour dead victims. Sam finds his master alive in one of the orc’s watchtowers and continues the mission with his master.

Tolkien called this sudden resurrection of the hero *eucatastrophe*, a term he coined in 1947 and defined in his essay *On Fairy Stories* as a “peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful fantasy which can be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (64). Years later, Tolkien defined this term again as “the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce)” (Carpenter and Tolkien 100).

For the writer of *The Lord of the Rings*, every victory over death, every resurrection, has its model and inspiration in the resurrection of Christ. According to Tolkien, the adventure of a hero who experienced death as a necessary step before the triumph is a clear echo of the Gospel:

> the Resurrection [of Christ] was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible in the greatest Fairy Story—and it produces that essential emotion: Christ-
ian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are as one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.” (Carpenter and Tolkien 100)

On the other hand, in the millennia before Christ, there is no account of a hero triumphing through his death. For the ancient Greeks, sacrifice, pain, or death were inconceivable in a champion. Heroes were demigods, whereas sacrifice and pain were experiences appropriate only for unhappy mortal men.

As Tolkien says, fairy tales and any story related to shaping epic heroes are the humanization of mythic stories. Nowadays, a vulnerable hero can suffer and achieve his mission, can protect and serve through pain and death because Christ’s eucatastrophe brought about a revolution in literature. Since the early Middle Ages, a hero is no longer a demigod, a privileged member of an unattainable realm, but a mortal who descends into death and triumphs over evil and gives death a meaning that the ancient world could not conceive. A victory can occur in a symbolic way (Guido Orefice and John Coffey in the climaxes of Life Is Beautiful and The Green Mile, respectively) or be a real fact (Elliott and his alien friend and David Dunne in E.T. and Unbreakable, respectively).

Second Level: Rescue from Hades

A hero’s descent into death can also follow the mythical model of a rescue from Hades. At this level, the hero risks his own life to save victims from death in a real way. This is the truest sense of descent into death because, in the end, almost all of the champions of the ancient world trespassed the threshold guarded by Cerberus. It was a dangerous mission, and they knew that Hades would never let them return to the realm of the living, even though they were demigods.

In Star Wars, Luke crosses the second threshold of his adventure when the Millennium Falcon is attracted by the force field of the Death Star. The protagonist has arrived in the most dangerous place in the whole galaxy. There, he rescues Princess Leia, whose execution has already been decided by imperial authorities. Eventually, the rescue team and the prisoner are trapped in the space station’s trash compactor. Director George Lucas transforms the descent to Hades into a rescue operation. But, at the same time, Luke has his first experience of death when the monster that lives in the compactor draws him under fetid waters. The hero disappears for a while, and death is closer than it was at the cantina in Mos Eisley.

In Aliens, Ripley’s descent into death also occurs during a rescue mission, during which the station’s self-destruction device is activated and Ripley goes back to save Newt. The girl is trapped in front of an alien egg, which begins to open. Ripley burns it with her flamethrower, picks up the girl, and they start on the way back. Unfortunately, Newt and Ripley’s run ends in the worst possible place, a nest crammed with alien eggs, protected by the alien queen. This is how James Cameron pictured the image of inferno:

Ripley retreats, ducking under a glistening cylindrical mass. A PIERCING SHRIEK fills the chamber. She turns. And there it is.

A massive silhouette in the mist, the ALIEN QUEEN glowers over her eggs like a great, glistening black insect-Buddha. What’s bigger and meaner than the Alien? His momma. Her fanged head is an unimaginable horror. Her six limbs, the four arms and two powerful legs are folded grotesquely over her distended abdomen. The egg-filled abdomen swells and swells into a great pulsing tubular sac.

Infernal landscapes can be found in every genre of cinema. In Cold Mountain, Anthony Minghella tells of Inman’s descent into death through his experience as a confederate soldier in the Civil War. At the beginning of the film, the protagonist deserts and starts a journey back to his home. He wants to join Ada, the woman he loves, even though he hardly knows her. Along the way, a journey based on Ulysses’s homecoming to Ithaca, Inman watches the horror of human misery. Death and hatred have caused such damage in his heart that when he meets Ada, Inman realizes that his heart has changed; the deserter looks sad at
the end of his initiation journey, but all his actions and sufferings will come to good. After escaping from the hell of war, Inman gives his life for Ada’s future happiness; he gains the happiness of a child he will never know. In the script of Cold Mountain, the odyssean hero faces death both as a first experience in an initiation journey (the horrors of Civil War), as a rescue (freeing Ada), and as a sacrifice (giving his life).

In a different genre, E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial is another example of descent into death as a rescue and as sacrifice. As usually happens in buddy movies, the two main characters, the boy and the alien, rescue each other in different moments of the film. First, E.T. saves Elliott from death when the scientists who have converted Elliott’s house into a modern hospital try to keep both patients alive. Their wonderful friendship is so intense that they identify with each other, and their electroencephalograms run parallel, tracing the very same curve. Then, when the alien starts losing his pulse, they split, and the boy begins recovering. Minutes later, NASA doctors lose E.T., whose death led to Elliott’s recovery.

Then the alien is put into a cryogen pod, and Elliott is allowed to stay alone and mourn his friend. He starts crying but initiates a miracle when he says these farewell words as if they were an incantation:

**Elliott:** I’m going to think of you every day, all my life. I’m going to believe in you, all my life.

Elliott notices it now. He scrapes away a little more dry ice and E.T.’s chest is revealed. The Heart-light is on. It is growing stronger. (Mathison)

Despite some opinions that E.T.’s resurrection is accepted only by a childish audience (Mott and Saunders 124), the fact is that Elliott rescues E.T. from death because of his childlike faith in prodigies. Director Steven Spielberg takes this idea from James Barrie’s Peter Pan. Tinker Bell dies but is resurrected, thanks to the applause of his young readers. Barrie wrote that every time a child says “I don’t believe in fairies” one fairy dies somewhere; but he also affirmed that it is possible to give life back to a fairy by showing faith in them (by clapping hands). Thus, Elliott’s words “I’m going to believe in you, all my life” are not only a homage paid to children’s faith in fantasies but also the real cause of E.T.’s resurrection. By his achievement, Elliott rises to the category of those heroes who ventured into Hades to take their missing friends back to the realm of the living.

**Third Level: Hell and the Hero’s Purification**

Would-be heroes can experience death even if their visit to Hades is not a rescue mission. This experience can be considered as a means of purification of their souls. This is the third level of interpretation of the descent into Hades.

In Groundhog Day, the egocentric TV speaker is condemned to live again and again the most boring, routine day of his life. This punishment will stop only when the protagonist understands that the only way of attaining happiness is by serving others. Phil experiences one of those cyclic punishments that are common in ancient mythology, such as Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Prometheus.

The Game also provides a good example of a descent into hell as a means of the hero’s purification. Nicholas Van Orton is a modern version of Scrooge, a ruthless businessman and an embittered misanthrope who learns the lesson of his life. Van Orton has agreed to participate in a strange game he knows nothing about, and his adventure shows a dramatic twist when he is forced to play the leading part in a parody of death. In the second act of the film, the game seems to go beyond the agreed boundaries, when Van Orton drinks a narcotic and falls into a deep sleep; while he is fainting, he realizes that he has been the victim of a fraud.

**EXT. MEXICO CEMETERY—MORNING**

Pushing the plywood door of the MAUSOLEUM outward, Nicholas tumbles into dawn light. He’s in a ramshackle GRAVEYARD. Nicholas stumbles for miles. Misty, tropical vegetation. Third World.

Nicholas walks, trying to figure this. He notices the red rose, pulls it off, and throws it. An OLD WOMAN sits at a grave with her rosary. She watches Nicholas, emotionless.

**Nicholas:** Where am I? What is this place? (Brancato, Ferris, and Walker)

Van Orton needs to be reborn a new man; therefore, he must go through a journey of initiation that takes him to the mystery world of the game. He will be reborn only if he has a serious experience of death. He is buried alive and wakes in a grave in Mexico. His awakening becomes a symbol of his revival, which will occur in the climax of the script.

Encountering death usually provokes a healthy shock, something needed to purify characters who are losing faith and withdrawing from their duty to protect and serve, characters who may lose their heroic virtues and condition. Thus, in It’s a Wonderful Life, George Bailey, as a ghostly shadow, visits a world where he does not exist. Up to that moment, he had adopted a knightly behavior, engaged in a personal crusade against usurer Potter: He was the right man for the role, the one who could protect and serve by defending his neighbors. But this young and generous husband and father is overwhelmed when his small business fails. He curses his existence and decides to commit suicide.

At that moment his guardian angel, Clarence, intervenes and shows him what the world would be like if he...
had not existed. In this vision, Bailey is led to his little brother’s grave: Because he never existed, he could not have saved his brother. The scene reflects Scrooge being guided by a supernatural to visit his own tomb. In the end, everyone copies Dante’s inferno, guided by the poet Virgil.

Let us end the illustration of this kind of Hades with a peculiar couple. Sheriff Woody and Space Ranger Buzz Lightyear, protagonists of Toy Story, rescue each other the way Elliott and E.T. did. Their long initiation journey outside of Andy’s room is also a means of purification for Woody. He has to cleanse all the jealousy he feels toward Buzz, which has caused their misfortunes. After losing Andy in a gas station, Buzz and Woody end up in the room of a toy-torturer boy named Sid, the wrong possible place for a toy. The room is a frightening underworld filled with horror devices, a dwelling place for freak toys, a meeting point for those who had suffered Sid’s criminal scientific experiments. In this Hades, Buzz and Woody endure terrible trials, both physical and mental: Sheriff Woody is almost burned by Sid’s magnifying glass, and Buzz Lightyear suffers depression when he finds out that he is no more than a toy.

Both heroes look for a way out, but their attempts to escape are constantly frustrated by Sid’s pit bull that, as a modern Cerberus, guards the door. During a long night’s conversation, both toys recover their truly heroic nature. Woody honestly wishes to rescue Buzz, and the space ranger understands that his most important mission is to protect Andy’s happiness. After their purification, Buzz and Woody escape from that hell of a room just when Sid intends to eliminate them for good.

Death as a Mystery

In short, epic tales have always explored the most important mysteries affecting man: mysteries about origins and nature, about freedom and destiny, about vocation and, most important, about death. It is possible to find a journey to the realm of the dead not only in the oldest accounts of the mythical age or in ancient and medieval literature but also in the plots of scripts written for film heroes. This is an undying mystery that, paradoxically, has become the key to our own existence. Victory over death is the structural mystery that, paradoxically, has become the key to our own existence. Victory over death is the structural and emotional climax of every adventure. It is the touchstone to shape a hero-to-be, for the candidate eventually finds that the solution to his difficult mission and the sense of his existence lie in himself. After all, both in reality and cinema, heroism consists of self-sacrifice: the sacrifice of life and freedom.

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