



RESEARCH PAPER

Homer Hickam's Journey as a Modern Hero: A Campbellian Analysis
of the Movie *October Sky*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines *October Sky* (1999), directed by Joe Johnston, through the lens of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, analyzing Homer Hickam's evolution from a coal miner's son to a NASA engineer. Based on Hickam's memoir *Rocket Boys*, the film highlights his pursuit of rocketry against societal and familial expectations. His journey reflects Campbell's archetypal stages, including the call to adventure, atonement with the father, and the return with the elixir. A qualitative analysis mapped Homer's experiences to Campbell's Hero's Journey framework. The study explored mentorship, conflict, and community influence on his development. Key figures such as Miss Riley and Homer's father play significant roles. Homer's progression aligns with the Hero's Journey, underscoring themes of perseverance, education, and societal contribution. His success at NASA symbolizes individual and collective growth. Future research should analyze biographical films to explore how mentorship, resilience, and societal support drive personal transformation, addressing disparities in access to educational opportunities.

Keywords: *Hero's Journey*, Mentorship and Resilience, Personal Growth, Rocketry and Ambition, Societal Expectations

Introduction

The film "*October Sky*", directed by Joe Johnston, rests on a true story and follows the life of an adolescent boy named Homer Hickam, originally from a coal mine town called Coalwood, nestled in West Virginia, USA. The film takes place when Russia put Sputnik in orbit in 1957 in the backdrop of the space race as it depicts Homer's dream of building rockets, which is a farfetched dream owing to the local customs and even the family members. The plot centres around one of Hickam's books, *Rocket Boys*, and shows the boy's evolution from a spoiled youth to a goal-oriented man filled with great ambitions and a thirst for knowledge. Above all, *October Sky* is about life in small towns, nurturing and pursuing aspirations, and the bond and strength that inspires and transforms a person (Space Foundation Editorial Team, 2024).

Along his journey, Homer faces external forces that either provide support or constitute opposition along with internal forces as well: his teacher, Miss Riley, backs up his quest for knowledge and appreciation of science, while his father, who is an assiduous coal miner, tends to steer him off this path as he expects the boy to continue mining like the other men in the family. The film tactically juxtaposes and interweaves subjective and objective ideas, including changing one's cultural beliefs to generational expectations, which also borrows from the changes in the space age (Hickam, 1998; Beggan, 2023). Dealing with science as a tool of constructive emancipation, the film *October Sky* is a story of optimism demonstrating that even the most restrictive surroundings may be escaped through education and hard work (Chase, 2023).

The emotional weight of the film's plot aligns with Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, which illustrates several stages of Odysseus's character and his metamorphosis. In this case, it is the development of a young man who faces and defeats difficulties in the path of his higher cause over the ages existing in myths (Lawson, 2005; Dharejo, 2023). The work not only supplements the historical context of the narrative but has profound meaning for contemporary readership, demonstrating the ideas of endless fight, mentorship, and belief in the unattainable (Gheyas, 2023).

Further sources explain that Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey (also called the monomyth) is the organizational pattern used to describe the evolution of an individual in stages within a plot. Campbell put forward this concept in his work *"The Hero with a Thousand Faces"*, published in 1949. He noted that myths of people worldwide, and not only in the heroic epic, have a similar course — a hero who goes on a trip, undergoes some challenges, and comes back (Campbell, 2008). The framework has three important parts: Departure, which signifies the stage before every quest when the hero has to leave the world he/she is comfortable with; Initiation, which is the stage where the hero has to fight battles and emerge victoriously whilst acquiring new skills; and Return, which is a stage in the hero's journey where he/she returns altered, most times bearing a treasure or knowledge that will serve the community (Lawson, 2005; Beggan, 2023).

The hero's journey, as defined by Campbell, is used in any creative work, be it written, cinematic, or even psychological, as it stresses that every human being cannot avoid some conflict and development. The framework of Campbell does not only touch on myths but also on real-life stories that touch on both individuals and groups. The concept of monomyth, which was centred mainly on literature, has found its way into therapy to view people's problems as challenges to an individual's quest for fulfilment (Rodriguez-Morales, 2019; Dayo et al., 2023). This pattern finds itself in nearly every aspect of modern society, especially in movies like Star Wars or the movie of October Sky, where the hero goes through internal and external conflicts (Space Foundation Editorial Team, 2024).

This paper aims to examine Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey in October Sky and narrate its universal themes: ambition, conflict, and growth. In October Sky, enormous change is charted as Homer becomes infatuated with the idea of rockets in direct opposition to the coal mining society he is expected to conform to and the family responsibilities he has. This tension mirrors a larger reality for most of humanity where personal desires conflict with social constructs, making Homer's journey progressive, packed with growth, endurance, resolution, and worth analyzing. Campbell's framework provides a deeper understanding of those issues and depicts the processes of fighting difficulties, getting help, and returning to a different person.

This analysis is important because it goes beyond the common myths and reveals how the Hero's Journey can be used in real life. The story of Homer transcends his and pitch highlights the values of wisdom, perseverance, and ambition in the face of challenges. With this monomyth in focus, rather than just exploring how such a character develops over the ages, this paper will see how Homer's accomplishments affected society and individuals. His experience is one of how empowerment from smart education and aspirations enables one to break even the highest glass ceilings to the extent that pursuing one's dreams inspires society. Because of that, this essay seeks to shed more light on how the Hero's Journey can still be told within the present-day narrative and real-life processes of growth and transformation.

Literature Review

The application of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework has been extensively explored in literary and cinematic analysis. Campbell's seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008), outlines the monomyth structure, demonstrating its

recurrence across cultures and storytelling traditions. This framework has become a cornerstone in analyzing the transformative journeys of protagonists in both classical and contemporary narratives. Scholars such as Vogler (2007) adapted Campbell's theories specifically for screenwriting and film analysis, emphasizing the universality of the hero's arc in movies ranging from *Star Wars* to *The Matrix*.

Existing research on Campbell's Hero's Journey highlights its adaptability across various forms of media, including film, literature, and video games. Moreover, the application of Hero's Journey has also been adapted in different disciplines, like business, medicine, education, etc. Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (2007) expands on Campbell's concepts, tailoring them for modern screenwriters and emphasizing the psychological resonance of the monomyth with audiences. Additionally, Segal (2010) critiques the framework's overgeneralization but acknowledges its utility in structuring narratives that reflect personal and collective transformation. The Hero's Journey can be applied to fictional tales and biographical films, providing insights into real-life struggles and triumphs. This work reinforces the Hero's Journey as a valuable analytical tool for understanding character development and thematic progression.

In biographical and inspirational films, Campbell's Hero's Journey provides a robust structure for understanding character development and thematic depth. Films like *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Good Will Hunting* have been dissected using Campbell's stages, highlighting how real-life figures and fictional characters navigate personal growth, mentorship, and societal challenges (Lawson, 2005). Similarly, some researchers discuss how biopics often draw heavily on the hero's narrative, portraying the protagonist's triumph over adversity as reflecting universal human struggles.

The film *October Sky* has received significant attention in educational and psychological studies. Gheyas (2023) notes how *October Sky* embodies key elements of Campbell's Hero's Journey, including the call to adventure, trials, and ultimate reconciliation. Miss Riley's mentorship aligns with the archetypal "mentor" role, while Homer's conflict with his father mirrors Campbell's "atonement with the father" stage.

Moreover, educational scholars have examined *October Sky* as a motivational tool in STEM education, illustrating how narrative and real-life stories inspire student engagement in science and engineering (Goll et al., 2009). The film's emphasis on perseverance, innovation, and the role of community underscores broader societal themes relevant to educational development.

While Campbell's framework has been widely praised, some critics argue that the monomyth can oversimplify complex narratives or impose a rigid structure on fluid, non-linear stories. Nonetheless, its applicability to films like *October Sky* reveals its enduring relevance in understanding personal ambition and societal contribution through storytelling.

This literature review establishes the foundation for analyzing Homer Hickam's journey within the context of Campbell's Hero's Journey, drawing from existing film analyses, educational studies, and Campbell's theoretical framework.

Material and Methods

This paper employs the qualitative method of narrative analysis to consider the story of Homer Hickam, the protagonist of the memoir *October Sky* by using Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey as a reference. The main stages are presented, namely the "call to adventure," "atonement with the father," and "return with the elixir", along with the illustrations given. The analysis will explain Homer's character development based on

conflict, his growth within mentorship and the community, and, most importantly, his relationships with his father, supporter Miss Riley, and the people around him.

The paper focuses on the movie and identifies scenes related to ambition, compromise, and family reconciliation. The paper offers interesting insights into Homer's emotional development, shown through the internal self-doubt and external forces that he counteracts. Resiliency and opportunities for help are emphasized in demonstrating how individuals overcome difficulties while pursuing their interests in improving society.

Results and Discussion

Stage 1 Departure

The Ordinary World

Homer Hickam was born and raised in a coal mining town – Coalwood, West Virginia. The town of Coalwood was wholly dependent on coal mining since the company provided jobs, controlled housing, healthcare, and almost everything else (Bell & York, 2010). The coal production reign fostered both strategies and challenges. There was a wage rise with employment, but because of technological advancements, employment was scarce, increasing poverty in the area (Anderson, 2014). Homer's biography encapsulates everything that is not easy about the social setting of that time and place, which, due to the development of labour relations and ecology, ceased to bind people together within a reasonable time frame (Bell, 2009). The melee of opportunities and challenges was central to Homer's desire to transcend the limitations imposed by the collier life towards the pursuit of education and self-will.

At the beginning of Homer Hickam's life, the environment in Coalwood, West Virginia, was dominated by sociocultural standards, and the principles his father, who was highly appreciated in the household, had something to do with the mining and football careers chiefly. Standing at the Center of this small mining town, Coalwood, was generally, straitened circumstances if there were any, save, of course, the more margins offered by the entertainment of the game of football that local boys respected and who went on to play – mining being the central activity (Surber, 2021). Generally, Homer's father, a devoted miner, was a 'mine darling' who advocated Nicolai's values of hard work and dedication and wanted his son to enter the mining business. This created an internal struggle for Homer, as he initially felt constrained by these narrow expectations before discovering his passion for science and rocketry.

Such societal practices are consistent with the overarching trends in towns that rely on resources, where the youth are often socialized into specific roles deemed necessary for preserving both cultural and economic aspects of society; hence, there are narrow views of possible careers (Feng, 2020).

The Call to Adventure

The first manmade satellite propelled into orbit by the Soviet Union in 1957 by the name of Sputnik was to be the cornerstone of Homer Hickam's thirst for space. The launch of Sputnik was more than the beginning of the space era. It invited mischievous young boys such as Homer to imagine going beyond what was possible on Earth (Bureaud, 2021). The event resulted in a radical change in the public's view of the horizon and individual goals, especially for young men active in sciences or just simply fans (Dora, 2023). Homer was among the youths who someone could say answered the call intending to use scientific knowledge to advance people's way of doing things as advised by the great Sputnik technological advancement (Price, 2020). As a turning point in Homer's life, this event

opened endless vistas within him, turning him from the narrow corridors of mine and sport into the magnificent orbit of space science.

It fascinated the nation and ignited Homer Hickam's ambition to make rockets when he saw that space was not so far away from him. This is because after bursting into the earth's orbit in the age of the very first satellites, Homer understood that science was the way out of the dead-end created by the lovely game of football and unexciting mining. This made him yearn to try his hand at this invention of rocketry, and this course of learning and exploration was further enhanced by his teacher, Miss Riley (Goll et al., 2009). The launch reasoned out scientific investigation and its effectiveness, making Homer and other young dreamers turn their eyes to the heavens.

Refusal of the Call

Homer Hickam's path towards constructing rockets was not devoid of uncertainty. He faced resentment from his father and Coalwood society at large. When it came to Homer's obsession with rockets, his father, a die-hard miner, thought that it was prohibitively expensive for a boy to pursue making rockets and insisted instead that he seek a more reliable career in the mines. As a result of this paternal discouragement, Homer found himself contemplating the validity of his aspirations. Additionally, his attitude was influenced by the community that only allowed such activities as mining or football.

There were setbacks, such as the first few rockets not firing correctly, which dampened his confidence even more, prompting Homer to ask himself whether it was worth the effort. At these low moments, there was also the feeling of fraud—how out of place he felt in pursuing anything more than possible in his environment (Fagell, 2022). Each adversity constituted a new internal 'battle' in which he fought against the paradigm of 'this dream is too big, nay, even ridiculous, to pursue in the eyes of others. The disposition of his peers, especially the boys who ridiculed his rocket tinkering, also inclined him towards these thoughts, almost to the extent of his quitting (Shchedrina & Pruzhinin, 2020).

Though excruciating, such friction and self-reproach eventually became turning points for Homer. They had him improve more than just mechanics and engineering. Through thought and hard work, he slowly learned how to trust himself and his abilities, as he understood that it was fine to fail, which did not mean losing but learning (Stohr, 2020). This contrast between the temptation to yield to the naysayers and the courage to hope was the narrative of Homer's life, more so when it came to his making the distance of "refusal of the call" and diving gleefully into the dream of constructing rockets.

Meeting the Mentor

Perhaps the most significant influence on Homer Hickam's life was the teacher, Miss Riley, who encouraged Homer to follow his love for science. She was a mentor who made him believe that he could transcend the narrow boundaries of Coalwood's mining way of life and helped him most, especially when she sensed that he needed help most when he did not believe in himself. She was a perfect example of how a teacher can improve a child's life, arouse his interest in science and make him envision a career in it (Goll et al., 2009).

Apart from Miss Riley, other significant characters helped Homer realise his vision. Quebec, nicknamed the "brain" of the Rocket Boys, offered vital information on the technical side. He was also quite important in helping Homer understand the principles of rocketry, the science and algebra of constructing a rocket. This allowed the group to conduct experiments in an orderly while finding solutions to complicated engineering problems. In this way, Miss Riley's support and Quentin's knowledge equipped Homer with more than just the motivation to fight the challenges he faced but also the means to do so.

Stage 2: Initiation

Crossing the Threshold

Homer's drive to construct rockets despite the impossibility of such an endeavour indicates his passion for knowledge and tenacity in pushing forward. This step represents a personal 'crossing the threshold' in Joseph Campbell's terms, as he accepts the challenge, knowing fully well that the test will go further than his expertise and steer. The history of rocketry resonates similarly to the works of individuals. For example, the very first attempts at building rockets by Robert Goddard himself. At such times and on these courageous goals, most people or organizations expect to face some ambiguity and risk. In overcoming these challenges, Homer's journey mirrors the level of significance that any risk-taking element incursion brings to its creator.

The first successful launch of Homer's rocket is well-acclaimed in the film and serves fantastic purposes as a symbol of success: it represents not only success in technology but also dreams and dreams shaping hard work. Just as NASA attempted to restore support after confidence enforcing failures, every separate cosmonaut outing is one such occasion, removing the illusion that success is achieved without failure after some controlled learning (Guikema & Paté-Cornell, 2005). The reason for such a moment being so significant is that it marks a shift of gears from hope to the actual formation, and the upward movement of the missile represents mankind's quest to break all the existing barriers and constraints. While it is true that Yuri Gagarin's first flight into space was much more than an achievement of engineering and technology, Homer achieved a journey avoiding all the odds.

Tests, Allies, and Enemies

Several tribulations punctuate Homer's journey, with technical setbacks, ridicule from his peers, and the disapproval of his father forming a mesh that wears down his resolve. Engineering setbacks, especially considering the initial phases where there are bound to be questions and multiple attempts, as evident in Guikema & Paté-Cornell (2005) regarding the many rockets developed and tested, are characteristic of engineering practice. Apart from that, some personal turmoil can be aggravated by ridicule and social disapproval or acceptance, especially for people whose ambitions or behaviours do not conform to the existing patterns and structures. Additionally, Homer has a father who is also against him. These issues present several challenges. Instead, they break Homer's spirit and commitment as one would expect, demonstrating that there are always barriers, internal and external, and overcoming them to achieve transformation is quite often the reality.

Quentin, along with Homer's friends and Miss Riley, is an important asset and ally who helps expedite his rocket-building activity. This proves how active input from others can help sustain healthy, progressive creative tendencies and achievements in a young, completed project. These allies are crucial as their support helps the youth overcome challenges and toughen up in complex endeavours. Miss Riley is an example of a mentor who helps, encourages, and motivates Homer.

On the other hand, Homer's father's refusal and the residents' doubt serve as a remarkable social challenge that echoes the wider social challenges faced by young people who partake in unorthodox activities. Also, the attitude of the surrounding residents serves as an example of how young people's projects normally oppose the existing order and need to struggle and help realize them.

The Abyss (Ordeal)

This turning point, where Homer's father exerted pressure on him to take part in the mining activities due to the failure of the rockets several times, marks a key struggle

concerning Homer's dreams and loyalty to his family. This moment is like the challenges that most young people go through when there are demands from the family, and they are trying to achieve their objectives because often, the family does bring the lowest points in their growth. Family feuds, especially related to raising children, can worsen the situation since they compel young people to decide what they want to do with their lives and what they are obligated to do as family members (Rabinowitz et al., 2016).

This crisis represents a nadir in Homer's ambition; at this point in the story, his love for rockets sharply contrasts with the duty that society imposes upon him towards his family. Many young people find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of conflict with the family over aspects of their life goals and responsibilities, causing them periods of ennui and agonizing self-reflection (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009). Resolving such situations demands re-inventing the self and alleviating the conflict between societal demands and personal objectives. Homer's internal struggle is a case in point of this important growth stage, as it shows that in real life, people must overcome obstacles to achieve their core ambitions.

Revelation and Transformation

The phase in his life, when he returns to the rocket building after Miss Riley falls sick, shows a fundamental change in him, as it illustrates the development of his character from vacillation to tenacity. Miss Riley's mentorship inspires Homer to return to his former passion, a pursuit that helps him appreciate the ideals of resilience and self-respect despite personal disappointments.

With this event, Homer also acquires an appreciation for the multifaceted nature of his father as he manages tensions of loyalty to the family and ambition. Young people sometimes struggle with family responsibilities and personal goals, which creates a dichotomy that may be frustrating to a mentee who seeks direction on addressing these dilemmas and not deviating from their development trajectory. In reuniting with the dream of building rockets, Homer demonstrates how limitations can be navigated in search of growth, which does not come at the cost of one's personal goals and aspirations. However, he must first deal with his ambition and family duties to develop his character.

Stage 3: Return

The Road Back

Success at the school science fair, notwithstanding the allegations of plagiarism, signifies Homer's turning point in life, exhibiting both his technological adroitness and persistence. Science fairs and contests are very appropriate since they allow all participants to acquire skills based on inquiry and challenges that promote their academic and academic growth.

The original work that he successfully defended shows that he is committed to the cause and capable of maintaining his academic integrity, which is very much required in any scientific work in the future. Such situations are consistent with the research that activity-based, purposeful and intense communication and interactions and even competitions during students' problem-solving activities place students at the centre of their learning and make them respect their projects. Overall, the unpleasantness only bolsters Homer's change, as he discovers that he can overcome challenges, and one can also be applauded through hard work and principles.

Atonement with the father

Firstly, let's admit that this can be interpreted as one of the crucial emotionally mature moments in Homer's mission, which is necessary to overcome the hurdles of the

family situation. Emotional maturity does tend to embrace growing up, which is the process of making peace with important adults. This involves resolving tension and reciprocity between people (Larson, 2007). This moment speaks to Homer navigating the competing demands of professional dreams and family. He earned his father's respect by showing responsibility and maturity. Reconciliation positively affects individuals' development as they understand the nature of human relationships and mature in the process.

Every journey of Homer also reflects the understanding that it is possible to resolve internal issues through correct communication with the family. This is when we discover the father's acceptance, which changes everything about them. It is a stage in the evolution of their bond when both can appreciate the worth of the other. In the classic hero's tale, a dynamic shift is observed in the protagonist within the act of returning home, where resolution and reconciliation with the important people are necessary for the growth and development of the character (Monteiro & Mustaro, 2012). It is interesting that at this point, thanks to persistence, empathy and emotional maturity, all of which are beneficial aspects in any relationship, all obstacles can be overcome.

Return with the Elixir

For Homer, winning the school science fair is a dream come true. To the orthodox cut at which Homer had blindly been used in the science and technology industrial sector, this singular accomplishment provides a prism through which society can appreciate the enormity of hard work even in the face of difficulty. It is so because people often find meaning and purpose in seeking achievements, particularly in STEM when they see their people succeeding in science, technology, and such. In the town's case, for instance, Homer's achievement indicates the possibility that conventional pathways can be circumvented and that, with determination, anything can be achieved.

Homer's aspirations, particularly his dreams of working with NASA, are finally realized, and it is all thanks to how far in life he has been able to transform the society around him. Work at NASA was not just personal elevation; it was space exploration for the advancement of mankind (Yue, 2004). His trajectory reflects how availing mentorship encourages science career aspirations in young people and how education and ambition can be driven.

Discussion

The analysis presented in the paper illustrates how the story of Homer Hickam in *October Sky* is very similar to Joseph Campbell's monomythic Hero's Journey, and its narratives, even today, are applicable in almost all if not all, forms of communication. Dissecting Homer's experiences, his childlike wonder with rocketry, coming to terms with people, and reconciling with the father in the end show varied stages of individuation/overcoming the Self. Thus, it weighs on the fact that internal growth processes and outside conflict, which can manifest as ambition and desire at war with social and family status, are often inextricably intertwined, which echoes further than the movie's narrative.

Resilience and mentorship are also key aspects of Homer's character development in coping with challenges. His interaction with Miss Riley shows the effect of support in helping individuals chase what they want even when many are doubtful, while his changing perception of his father is about growing up and balancing cultures with aspirations. Also, the story conveys the importance of the community in the success of an individual where, for example, in the case of homework, a small victory for Homer can bring the community, people's pride, and advancement into focus.

This paper also admits that narrative analysis is interpretative and can change depending on the user, which is a subjective aspect. While Campbell's Hero's Journey provides a suitable blueprint, the different stages of Homer's journey cannot all fit into the boxes as some external factors come into play. Future work in this area could explore similar questions in other films or real-life stories, such as how development and ambitions face social structures in different settings.

In this regard, *October Sky* illustrates that individual achievements could contribute to society. Education, hard work, and the influence of people who believe in you can change lives. It adds to the comprehension of Homer's quest and draws attention to the need for community self-improvement.

Conclusion

In *October Sky*, several stages of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey can be traced in the narrative arc of Homer Hickam's character experiences, which makes his story a contemporary instance of a monomyth. A boy from the mining town of Coalwood who later wins a science fair and much more, Homer undergoes an astonishing metamorphosis involving challenges, a mentor, and growth. The boy's experience, which comprises such aspects as disappointment from his relatives, technological glitches, and lack of faith in himself, corresponds to the stages of the hero's journey — departure, initiation, and return. Most importantly, what he achieves satisfies his ambitions and those around him, indicating that all places, regardless of how limited, can be reached, provided there is will, education, and ambition given time.

Homer's journey perfectly illustrates Campbell's Hero's Journey, which is adapted to the realities of a person's growth and aspirations in a storyline. His predicament speaks to all who have the challenge of encouraging themselves to pursue personal dreams while facing societal or familial pressures. Just as Homer had to deal with the challenges posed by his father and the people of the town, so too do individuals in many professions today face circumstances that challenge their resolve. The story in the film *October Sky* encourages you to fight for your dreams, have a mentor, and believe in yourself, for those ingredients can change a person and society. The trouble is that Homer does not seek individual glory at the team's expense, which knows that if they work hard enough, share an idea and a vision, and most importantly, dare to dream, dreams come true.

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