

The Writer's Journey by Christopher Vogler

Pages: 407

Publisher: Michael Wiese Productions. 1992 + revised edition in 1998

Background information:

Christopher Vogler was working at the renowned USC (University of Southern California) film department as a professor of screenplay when he wrote "The Writer's Journey". He later headed the story development department at Twentieth Century Fox, Fox 2000. When Vogler was appointed to USC in 1975, Aristotle's "Poetics" were taught and Shakespeare's plays were analyzed concerning the structuring of a drama.

"The Writer's Journey" is essentially based on the studies of the ethnologist Joseph A. Campbell. In his book "A Hero with a Thousand Faces", Campbell worked out the universality of narrative structures, based on the theory of archetypes of the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. The "hero's journey" by Vogler after Campbell is supposed to form the basis of all stories. The journey describes in an abstract form the trials, challenges and dangers that the hero encounters during the course of a story. For Vogler these are also the stations on the path of the human soul through life. He had initially summarized his concept in a seven-page script. This was copied so often that he decided to use it to develop a book that became a bestseller.

Vogler insists that "The Journey" should not be seen as a guide to scriptwriting, like Syd Field's books, but that the journey conveys to the viewer or reader the universal stages of development of a character who undergoes change because he/she interacts with something or someone. The twelve stages of the arc of development have a long tradition in Western culture: above all, they touch on the twelve stages of the Passion of Christ but are of course also a reflection of the twelve months on the calendar, divided into seasons, which could be understood as acts.

Vogler uses terms borrowed from Aristotle, such as turning point, climax, as well as Campbell's and Jung's terms. References to classical or modern drama theories are omitted. Vogler sees his work as located on the meta level of a dramatic structure and avoids any impression that it is a manual.

Therefore, he does not go into how the practical creation of a script works. The book can therefore best serve the author who considers in more detail the aspects of a story that deals with the development of a character through external and internal influences.

Definition of drama:

"All stories basically consist of a handful of recurring components that we come across again and again in myths, fairy tales, dreams and films. The generic term for all of these components is: the hero's journey. "

Structure of a drama:

According to Vogler, the hero's journey is divided into 12 stations, which represent the character's development curve within the story. These stations are a "framework" or a guide. The journey (or dramatic movement) must emerge from inner necessity. Therefore, duration or lengths in terms of pages are all relative. The function determines the form. Nor does Vogler insist on keeping the stages in sequence of: "Every element from the hero's journey can appear at any point in the story." The element is used according to the requirements of the story. For example, the figure of the mentor does not necessarily have to appear in the first act, but might appear only in the second or third act.

The 12 Stations of the Hero's Journey

Act I - (30 pages)

1. Familiar world (exposition)
2. Call of Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Mentor
5. First Threshold (first turning point)

Act II - (60 pages)

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
7. Advance to the deepest Cave
8. Ultimate Test (Climax)
9. Reward
10. Return (second turning point)

III. Act - (30 pages)

11. Resurrection
12. Return with the elixir

In summary, the story proceeds as follows: First, the usual world of the hero is shown in order to illustrate the contrast to the upcoming new, strange world of adventure. The call to adventure comes when the hero is faced with a problem or a challenge. Here it is revealed what the reward will be; the hero's goal and the theme of the story are staked out. The first reaction to the call is the hero's refusal, which results from his fear of the unknown. An additional motive is needed, the occurrence of unforeseen circumstances or the encouragement of a mentor until the hero overcomes his fear and prepares himself for the journey. The mentor can be a human being, a tool or an imagination. Their task is to prepare the hero for the encounter with the unknown, to show him the way and to equip him with magical weapons or clever clues. The hero has now overcome his fear and is equipped to cross the first threshold to the unknown world of adventure.

In the new world the hero learns to understand the rules, wins allies, creates enemies and has to pass tests.

Finally, the hero arrives in the immediate vicinity of a dangerous place where the goal of his desires resides, the deepest cave. Here the hero meets his fate. He goes into direct confrontation, a struggle for life and death, with the antagonist. In order to pass the decisive test, he must overcome the opponent and / or resistance within himself (greatest fear). Physically, he has to go through a metaphorical death situation. The old self dies, the hero is ready to take on a new identity. In a sense, until this point, the hero is not yet a hero. He is merely the protagonist of his story. The moment he faces the fight and comes out on top of it, he becomes the true hero of his story.

After surviving the threat of death, or the metaphorical death, the hero takes possession of his reward. Tragic heroes can also die at this point in the story. The doomed hero then experiences the resurrection in a metaphorical sense: he lives on in the memories of the afterworld, the people for whom he gave his life. He, of course, also lives on in the hearts of the audience.

The way back to the familiar world shows the consequences of the fight: the hero has to face a new reality, or reality has to come to terms with a changed hero. Next, the hero faces once again the danger of death. Now he has to prove that he has really renewed himself, that he has become a hero and is not the mere protagonist any more. The opposing powers have not yet been completely defeated, and they strike out again for a powerful counter-attack that leads to a second death of the hero and his final resurrection. Now the hero has been fundamentally transformed and is able to return to a normal life as a reborn being with new insights.

In the familiar world it is now a matter of applying the reward in order to remedy the grievance that caused the trip. The reward was the decisive reason for the trip: it can be real goods (objects, money), as also non-material goods (justice, love, respect, wisdom)

Basic dramatic principles:

Fairy tales and myths have characters with comparable properties and functions. The Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung called these typified characters archetypes. Archetypes have specific properties, Vogler understands the appearance of these characters, or the presence of the corresponding properties, as a fundamental component of universal storytelling. It is not about the rigid assignment of a certain property to a certain character. A character can represent several archetypes throughout the story. Or, several characters can together form a certain archetype. The specific traits can best be seen as a “mask” that a character puts on in order to influence the course of the story using the traits assigned to them.

Vogler lists the following archetypes as relevant:

Hero

Mentor

Threshold guardian

Herald

Shadow

Trickster

The word hero comes from the Greek “heros” and means “to protect and to serve.” A hero is ideally a person who puts his own needs aside for the benefit of the community. This can go as far as self-sacrifice. This trait is yet not always present in a hero. What is though defining a hero is that his goal lies beyond the factual horizon of a story. The hero wants to change the conditions, wants to change himself, challenges the rules of his world, or doubts in the legitimacy of the ruler.

At the beginning of the journey, the protagonist is not yet a hero, but an individual who sets out in search of his or her identity. Since this search has a universal character, the hero-to-be who at this point is still a mere protagonist of the story becomes a figure of identification for the viewer.

With his decision to go on this search, the protagonist also explains or defines his shortcomings. The search is an expression of the awareness of this shortage (e.g. the search for love, confirmation, honor, justice). The initial decision makes the protagonist the most active figure who in the course of the events also changes the most. The uncompromising nature of the hero, his willingness to give everything for his goal, his readiness to die, and the subsequent survival confronting the antagonist, transform the protagonist into a hero.

The hero himself can also embody all archetypes at times. Especially if the main source of resistance or antagonism can be found inside the protagonist himself (as is the case in all stories that deal with character development, i.e. coming-of-age) he will also appear as a trickster and rogue or be his own shadow. However, only the hero himself can take part in the decisive battle with the antagonist and he must do so in his capacity as a hero.

The hero can initiate the entire development as an active character or let the circumstances provoke actions passively. After the central fight (penetration into the deepest cave), the passive hero must also take action in order to carry out the transformation from protagonist to hero. The antihero acts according to the same pattern as the hero, but he hides his heroism for as long as possible behind other masks (often the rogue or the trickster). The antihero can also be a tragic hero; he then as the protagonist does not offer any identification potential to the audience. In the decisive fight he is defeated because he has taken or accepted the role of the hero too late and is consequently beaten by the antagonistic forces and fails.

In short, the hero can have any quality. However, in contrast to all other characters of the story, he must pursue an overarching goal. If the hero survives and returns to his familiar world, he has always replaced negative qualities with positive ones (an antihero becomes always a true hero if he survives). A hero does not always have to be more active compared to the other characters; he also can primarily act as a catalyst: He is the focus of the action, but he brings about changes in other characters or the external world through his behavior. As a rule, however, the hero carries out the most important action in a story himself, he makes the greatest sacrifice, he comes closest to death, he overcomes the greatest fear and thus develops from protagonist to hero during the journey.

According to Vogler, types of heroes are: the innocent, the orphan, the martyr, the restless, warrior, seeker, lover, destroyer, creator, ruler, the wise, the twisted.

The original type of the mentor is the "wise old man," (or woman). Mostly, this is a figure with positive connotations, often a role model or predecessor of the hero (a former hero who has retired), one who trains and supports the hero. Just as learning is a key quality of the hero, teaching is a central quality of the mentor. He can also give the hero things to prepare him for his adventure. That can be a magic weapon or smart advice that the hero will use in the conflict with the antagonist. The gift also has the function of a first reward after passing a test, because the hero should only receive it when he has made the decision to cross the first threshold. The mentor helps the hero to overcome his fear. The mentor can himself be a threshold that the hero must overcome in order to begin his journey. Dark mentors can hide behind the mask of a good mentor. Their advice or help endangers the hero but he will only learn that in the further course of his journey.

The role of mentor can be assumed by several characters who also fulfill other functions. The mentor can also be immaterial (code of honor, memory, inheritance, obligation).

The threshold keeper is an obstacle on the hero's journey. At first it should look terrifying, but on closer inspection it can be defeated, bypassed or made an ally. The threshold keeper does not act as an opponent. The dramaturgical function of the threshold keeper is to test the hero: is he ready and experienced enough for the next step of the journey? Can he continue the struggle on a higher level? The guardian of the threshold can be a locked door, a riddle, the protagonist's own inner demons, such as dependencies or negative behavior patterns. Instead of going head-on against the guardian of the threshold, the hero must learn to adapt his means to the task, perhaps he must also say goodbye here, give up a piece of himself. In doing so, he again gains strength.

The Herald brings the call to adventure by announcing the need for change. He has a motivating effect, presents the hero with a challenge and thus gets the story going. The sign of a necessary change can also be a natural event, a dream, or a blatant change in the environment. Usually this request occurs in the second half of the first act of the story.

By definition, the shapeshifter always takes on new traits and puzzles the hero. Often it is a love interest or some other close or intimate relationship. The shapeshifter can have a positive or negative effect: it can help or become dangerous. The shapeshifter is characterized by a very flexible morality. At first he seems to be superior to the hero (who has a set code of values). Only in the further course does it become clear that only the hero, because of his stable worldview, will be able to face the antagonist.

Another function of the shapeshifter is to act as a sparring partner to prepare the hero for upcoming obstacles. In order to be prepared for the further challenges of the journey, the hero has to find further, previously unknown sources of energy: A masculine hero can discover his gentleness and vulnerability, or a soft character shows determination and aggressiveness in order to mature into a more complete personality. Dramaturgically, shapeshifters have the function of arousing doubts about the protagonist's suitability and thus increasing the tension of the story. The shapeshifter teaches the hero to look behind the facade and recognize the core of the personality of the antagonist.

The archetype of the shadow represents the dark forces. These can be suppressed characteristics of the person. The hero fears these negative aspects of the self and often sees them in other people first instead of himself. If the psychological aspect of a story is in the foreground and the hero's struggle is one against his own dark side or weakness, the shadow can represent the first encounter with this inner antagonist. The shadow does not stand, like the guardian of the threshold, for neuroses that hinder the hero but that can be overcome. The shadow stands for tangible psychoses that threaten to destroy the hero.

The function of the shadow is to enter into conflict with the hero and to bring him into a life-threatening situation from which he rises as a grown personality. This antagonist does not have to be identifiable as evil. On the contrary, like a real shadow, it must be difficult to read and may even appear to have good properties at first.

Behind the archetype of the trickster, or rogue, hides the energy of anarchy, and with it the desire for change.

This energy is chaotic, however, and thus the change is arbitrary, which can create strange moments of relaxation. The trickster's intervention often has beneficial effects. The trickster can alert the hero to an obsession that is preventing him from making any progress. The hero can initially appear as a trickster. This type of hero hardly undergoes any change, but acts as a catalyst that influences the development of the other characters. The typical example is the wise fool type.

The archetypes can appear at all twelve stations of the hero's journey. Vogler refrains from a fixed assignment, but he indicates where their occurrence is obvious and favorable in order to define the function of the respective station of the journey.

According to Vogler, certain principles must be observed when designing each station.

At the beginning of the journey, it is important to arouse the viewer's interest and reveal the tone of the story. This can be done through an allusion to a myth, a powerful title or a strong opening image that already suggests the "strange world" of the second act. However, the strange world can only be perceived as such if the everyday world of the hero has been made tangible as a comparison. The introduction of the everyday world and the hero must be accompanied by a clear indication of the relevant problem, the possible danger and the reward. In his first appearance, the future hero should reflect the coming conflicts and his own most outstanding qualities. In order to enable the viewer to identify with the hero, universal goals, wishes or problems must be made tangible here. Often this moment also shows a deficiency, or what has thrown the everyday world out of balance. The hero can also indicate here that he has made a serious mistake or suffered a defeat in the past and what he has irrevocably lost in the process.

At the beginning the audience has to learn what the hero can win or lose. In order to create tension and / or to generate identification it has to be a high and understandable cost.

The background of the main character, her biography and the familiar world should be conveyed through action rather than dialogue or monologue. The exposition can also raise questions, only provide fragments. The theme of the story should be named in the familiar world and must remain consistent. The call of adventure can be a message delivered by a messenger. The call must point to a fundamental disorder in the familiar world. Something threatens the stability. The call can be a loss or a challenge. At first, the hero should refuse the call to indicate the danger associated with it. The hero may have failed in a similar task in the past. Before accepting the call, a threshold guard generates doubts and fears. With the appearance and support of a mentor, the hero is sent on an adventure. Negative mentors seduce (tragic) heroes into potentially destructive actions that will destroy the hero. Crossing the first threshold equates with the first turning point of a three-act structure. Something or someone has to give the hero the motivation for the adventure. The transition from one world

to the other should be made visually tangible. The strange, new world into which the hero enters should differ greatly from the everyday world through other laws, other characteristics, and as many unknown elements as possible. The conditions for survival should be defined, as well as the price for failure. The trials prepare the hero for the great central task (what awaits him in the lion's den). It doesn't yet have to be a matter of life and death here. Learning the rules of the new world has to be quick and easy to understand, no matter how complex the new world may be. This world has traps, obstacles built for the hero. It is dominated by one or more antagonists. Allies the hero will find in this world can have any shape and character. The shadow and his servants should also meet the hero here. Making use of allies and recognizing the shadows as such is part of the learning process. The hero is between the first threshold and the center of his search (lion's den). Tests become more difficult and dangerous. Threshold guards are becoming more threatening. Before tackling the central conflict, the hero must know the mechanisms of the alien world. Now the allies leave him, for example in order not to endanger themselves, or they perish in trials. The hero can succumb to errors here, for example accept the supposed help of evil. Serious setbacks are possible, "dramatic complications" occur.

The hero gets to know the antagonist better and better. The audience must be reminded regularly of the importance of the mission. There may be references to the fact that the familiar world depends on the outcome of the coming struggle. This is the last chance for a love scene or for comic relief" before the storm. The ultimate test of the hero takes place in the lion's den. This moment is to be equated with the climax of the second act, the mid point, roughly the middle of the film. The focus of the story is the confrontation with the antagonist, the shadow. The hero lives through the death of his past self. This distinguishes him as a hero and makes him god-like for a moment. The result should be delayed as long as possible. The tension should be also defined by the fact that the hero's death can appear factual or final. This increases the feeling of triumph over the rebirth of the "new hero". The mentor's death can also take place here, because the mentor helped the "old self" of the hero. The conflict with the antagonist, the shadow, can be an external fight or an internal conflict. Killing the enemy should only be possible for the hero when he has stepped into his new form. It should be associated with emotion (such as sadness, memory). The hero must stand by the consequences of his deed. The antagonist is not finally beaten here. The antagonist benefits from knowing the hero in his new guise. He reappears in the third act for the final battle. In the event of an internal conflict, it changes its shape decisively and surprisingly. The mentor can prepare the hero for the next fight. At this point there is often a point of rest, the audience should recapitulate the story. This can be connected with messengers from the old, familiar world. The hero now receives his reward: the elixir, a means to bring the everyday world back into balance. Recognition and respect from former opponents are also possible here. However, the hero has not yet brought the solution to its destination. With the return to the normal world, the tension increases again. The return to the old world is initiated by the struggle with the strengthened shadow.

This is the transition from the second to the third act (or Plot Point II). For the last time the hero crosses a threshold. A final turning point has been reached. The course of the story is set to change fundamentally once again. The hero may want to seek revenge, he recognizes the scope of the enemy's plans, the enemy may have taken over the familiar world, or the rules in the "old" world may have fundamentally changed. The hero may have to make another great sacrifice here. The final battle of life and death shows that the "new hero" has learned his lesson and accepts his new role. In the event of an internal conflict, he is tempted to succumb to his old weaknesses again. At this point the tragic hero finds death, albeit as a "new person," that is, purified what posterity recognizes and why it pays him tribute. The return to the old world can result in a synthesis of the old personality and the new one. In any case, the hero has to prove that the old ego has been overcome and the new ego is viable. The return only satisfies the audience if, in the end, an overriding justice prevails: the punishment of the antagonist must be proportionate to his offenses. The hero's reward must be in proportion to his sacrifice, his performance. The reward is either recognition as a hero, or it can be material in nature, symbolized by the elixir, which can also be material or symbolic.

A bracket that ties beginning and end together (comparable situation but completely new conditions) can show the development of the hero: a situation that he did not master at the beginning is now easy for him. A temptation he could not withstand is no challenge any more.

The topic must have remained consistent: in the end, it should appear from a new perspective.

Vogler equates the hero's twelve stations with the character development of a hero:

Limited insight into problem	-	familiar world
Increased Insight	-	call of adventure
Defense against change	-	refusal of call
Overcoming defenses	-	meeting the mentor
Willingness to Change	-	first threshold
Try the change	-	trials, allies, enemies
Approaching the Big Change	-	approaching the danger
Making the Big Change	-	in the lion's den
Effects of Change	-	reward
Insight into constant change	-	the way back

Last effort	-	resurrection
Mastery of the Problem	-	the teaching / the elixir

Creation of a script:

Vogler advises laying out the hero's twelve stations on twelve index cards first. Since the 12 stations do not necessarily have to run in a specified order, the index card system is recommended because it makes it easier to swap the order. Parallel to the hero's journey, the archetypes of all characters are to be checked.

Vogler emphasizes that the journey is a guide, not a formula. It may not even apply to every story: "To force a story into the corset of a scheme would be to put the cart before the horse."

Vogler recommends breaking rules when the story demands it: "The audience loves it when well-known conventions and expectations are violated in a creative way." A story can break all the rules and still appeal to universal human feelings.

Chinatown according to the rules of Christopher Vogler:

The hero's journey is accomplished in its entirety by two characters in the film Chinatown who support and also hinder each other, JJ Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray. Other characters, such as Lieutenant Escobar and the antagonist, Noah Cross, go through partial journeys, most of which take place off-screen.

The first hero to be featured is JJ Gittes. First, the hero, a private detective, is introduced in his everyday world.

The world is ostensibly in a balance. However, Gittes himself is an unbalanced character. He fluctuates between overt empathy (for the customer, to whom he has to show the photos of his wife's betrayal) and cynicism (in dealing with his acquaintances - he has no friends) and when he talks about those in power (the rich).

The background to this is a previous serious injury that Gittes sustained while fighting injustice. He was a police officer in Chinatown and had to choose between love for a woman and his zeal for justice. Gittes opted for justice, messing with those in power. It cost his wife her life.

So the world is in serious disorder. Those in power prevent justice and even go so far as to kill the innocent. Gittes knows about it. He has spent the past years to forget but of course that is not an option.

The call to adventure is the appearance of the fake Mrs. Mulwray, who wants Gittes to catch her unfaithful husband in the act.

Gittes initially refuses the call: "Let sleeping dogs lie."

The false Ms. Mulwray is also the first appearance of the antagonist, because she is only a tool of Noah Cross. Cross knows how to get Gittes to accept the call, he uses Gittes' greed, and offers him a lot of money.

Gittes has not yet qualified for being Cross' opponent, he is too insignificant for that. Cross' attention to Gittes is drawn by his daughter. (This is Cross call to the adventure if one wants so). Evelyn, in cooperation with her husband, wants to take a "possession" away from Cross (his daughter with Evelyn, who is also his daughter), which Cross cannot allow.

Gittes discovers that he was duped after completing the job. Enter the real Mrs. Mulwray, Evelyn. Evelyn here functions as a mentor, because she prompts Gittes to cross the threshold into the adventure, she gives him a target (her father) and also the tools (the emotional connection between them that follows)

Gittes enters the realm of Noah Cross without knowing anything about him. Here, Evelyn develops into a second protagonist who accomplishes her hero's journey. She makes choices, at this point her choice is to not reveal that she is Noah Cross' daughter, as well as she also does not reveal that she knows what her father is after.

Evelyn Mulwray has fled (Gittes is not yet aware of that either) from her overpowering father in Gittes' world.

Noah Cross has left his "Olympus" at this point, from which he has ruled the world up to now. He moves into reality, so to speak, which has to suffer from his deeds (the artificial scarcity of water). Here he has to fight a real fight with Gittes, because his daughter chooses Gittes to fight on her behalf.

Cross (without the audience being yet aware of it or him for that matter) has all the advantages here: While Gittes needs still to learn the rules of the world he now enters, make allies (Hollis Mulwray, the Chinese gardener) Cross already knows everything and controls everybody (Hollis, the wrong Ms Mulwray, Escobar)

Gittes believes that he can determine or influence the rules of the world he enters. Someone broke the code of honor. This person needs to know that he will find out who placed the fake order and punish that person for defamation.

Evelyn Mulwray offers to pay him his fee (she acts now as a conflicted mentor) and to refrain from filing a lawsuit. She tries to tie in with Gittes' old behavior patterns (greed), but that no longer works because Gittes is already on the transformative path to the central battle with the antagonist. He senses that the same people who inflicted the past wound on him are behind this. Nothing will stop him now.

Evelyn herself is drawn into the adventure by Gittes fatal decision to take up the fight, instead of going into it herself. For her (as a protagonist), Gittes is now the mentor. His virility lets her hope that he can defeat her mighty father.

In his search for Mr. Mulwray and his lover, Gittes soon comes across an old friend: his superior from his unfortunate time in Chinatown: Lt. Escobar. Gittes should recognize Escobar as a trickster, but he makes the fatal mistake of misinterpreting him as a shadow, which prevents him from recognizing the real shadow, Cross.

Escobar himself makes a choice here. He could help and save Gittes, but he doesn't. It is his move across the first threshold, into a world without morale, in which he will be taken care of as a pawn of Cross but has lost entirely the meaning of his existence.

When the body of Mr. Mulwray is discovered, Gittes meets again with Evelyn Mulwray, who is now a shapeshifter: She was a mentor, one who provided him with crucial information, but also lied.

Evelyn finally gives Gittes the order to find the murderer of her husband and supports him in the search, with a reference to the upcoming test. This is Evelyn's entry into the Lion's Den. She now wants to trigger Gittes to challenge and fight her father. Here, however, it turns out that she is not the real protagonist, because she allows Gittes to lead the fight on her behalf.

During his further research, Gittes comes across numerous clues from the true shadow, Cross: Escobar's men, the guards of the waterworks who slit his nose, and also the clerk of the property office. They are all in Cross' service. Gittes still believes he has an advantage, as he has the moral concern to restore justice and, more importantly for him, his honor.

Gittes acts here like a romantic, medieval knight who believes that fighting for the just cause gives him extra strengths. This stance becomes more and more absurd as he ventures deeper into Cross' world that is profoundly amoral.

With the death of the wrong Mrs. Mulwray and the death of Hollis Mulwray discovered by Gittes later, Cross sets precisely these conditions for the upcoming fight. Cross knows no morals, he uses land, water, and people and throws them away when he no longer needs them. Gittes is not yet aware of this.

Gittes now penetrates the lion's den: he visits Noah Cross without suspecting (since Evelyn refuses him this support) that he is the shadow:

Ultimately, Cross takes action: he instructs Gittes to find Hollis Mulwray's mistress (in reality, his daughter with Evelyn); with that he has Gittes in his hand. And he makes Gittes believe that he still controls the game, because Cross has not challenged him to fight, but instead gives him an assignment and even pays for it.

Cross makes the fight even more difficult for himself, that is how sure he is at this point to win. He gives Gittes the barely hidden hint: "You think you know, what you're dealing with, but you don't." Gittes who sees himself close to the ultimate win, doesn't heed the advice.

As years ago, in Chinatown, Gittes again does not accept the warning. Gittes has lost the fight in the lion's den and he doesn't even know it.

Cross himself sent Gittes over the second threshold, into the world in which there is only one result for Gittes: (symbolic) death.

But first, there is a fake reward: Evelyn and Gittes have a love scene in which he suggests his painful experience in Chinatown. Before Gittes leaves the house to follow Evelyn, the Chinese gardener acts as an additional mentor: he gives Gittes the crucial information that the garden pond is filled with salt water and fishes out his glasses, another hint that Gittes does not read. The glasses stand to mean: See if you can and do not blindly run into your demise.

But it is too late for Gittes.

Gittes follows Evelyn into the house of the supposed lover of Mulwray. He believes he is penetrating the lion's den and suspects Evelyn of coping with the shadow. Now that it is too late, Evelyn shows Gittes the true extent of Cross' amorality and ruthlessness. The 'lover' is her sister AND her daughter. Gittes recognizes the real shadow: Noah Cross. But the realization comes too late. He's in Cross's service.

Gittes could have convicted Cross for the murder of Hollis Mulwray, but Cross has long since set the course. By evoking the danger of destroying Evelyn and her daughter, Cross forces Gittes back to Chinatown (Gittes' true familiar world, because he never left Chinatown in his head), where Evelyn and her daughter are hidden. There, Gittes now experiences the same defeat again: the woman he loves has to die, just as she did years ago. His elixirs: the prospect of satisfaction and salvation of his honor have been snatched from him.

Gittes experiences a fate that is more terrible than death: He is now condemned to live this defeat over and over again, for all eternity. That Escobar "graciously" grants him his freedom in the end is irrelevant or better, even part of this terrible punishment.

Evelyn Mulwray's heroic journey ends in her death.

The photos that Gittes took of Hollis Mulwray and her daughter as a alleged lover reached the newspaper via dark paths (Cross' doing, of course) and became her call to adventure:

Evelyn's threshold is the risk that her father Noah Cross learns of the whereabouts of her sister / daughter. When her previous ally and protector, her husband Hollis Mulwray, is dead, she gives in to the call for adventure, takes the risk and trusts Gittes with the task of finding her husband's murderer, which amounts to taking her father out of circulation so that she is no longer in danger.

Gittes' topic is self-respect, Evelyn's topic is trust. She trusts Gittes too late and he has to force her to open up to him again and again and finally tell the truth. Evelyn's big mistake is that she does not trust Gittes enough to take up the fight against her father herself and to count on Gittes' support. Gittes even has to beat the unbelievable, ultimate truth out of her: her incestuous relationship with her father.

Evelyn does receive her elixir: Gittes' support in the fight with her father. But for him this realization comes too late. If Gittes had known earlier how amoral and unscrupulous Cross is, he would have been warned, would have acted more carefully and thus stood a fair chance in the fight.

In Chinatown, Evelyn flees in panic from her father, who thanks to her inaction caused by her lack of trust, has become immortal and almighty (she can't even shoot him). In the absence of the necessary trust to open up and let the world know about her ordeal, she is punished with death as a tragic heroine and takes her truth with her to the grave.