

"WHY STUPID,
QUESTION?"

A HERO ARCHETYPE ANALYSIS
OF



PROJECT
HAIL
MARY

[ANDY WEIR, 2021]

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2026.06.18

“Why Stupid, Question?”

A Hero Archetype Analysis of *Project Hail Mary* (2021) by Andy Weir

Due to the common belief that humans are the stewards of Earth, most people would conclude that Dr. Ryland Grace, PhD, is widely accepted as the hero within the science-fiction adventure novel *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir. However, a character comparative analysis of three of the twelve hero's journey steps described in *A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey* by Scott Jeffrey reveals that Rocky, an alien from Erid and co-protagonist in the novel, more readily fits the hero character archetype than Grace; who falters as co-savior of their collective home worlds while working together to solve the complex issue of a micro-organism, Astrophage, dimming their respective suns and threatening their combined extinction. Recognizing that both protagonists follow Campbell's twelve step hero archetype, it is through these three distinct step comparisons that we see Rocky emerge as the hero of Weir's *Project Hail Mary*.

At step five in the journey, where a hero crosses the first threshold, the hero must be resistant to the adventure but decide to embark upon it or otherwise remain in the illusion of security or their ordinary life (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey”). Rocky, we learn within *Project Hail Mary*, reluctantly leaves behind his mate (Weir 158) as a necessary part of being “willing to die“ (Weir 202) in the acceptance of the mission to save his home planet, Erid. Grace on the other hand, has no ties or relationships to

be concerned with (Weir 226), and goes beyond reluctance or resistance to be physically forced onto the mission to save Earth against his will; being rendered unconscious and given amnesia-inducing drugs in reply to refusing to replace the fallen science-officers killed in an explosion during mission preparations (Weir 203-205), even rightly being called a “coward” (Weir 226) in the process. This demonstrates that while both Rocky and Grace were resistant to cross the threshold of accepting the mission, the distinction is Rocky only meets the decisional qualifier.

Within Step nine, where a hero “receives the prize” and “is transformed” (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”), Rocky and Grace are collecting a sample of planet Adrian’s atmosphere after discovering Astrophage’s predator, Taumoeba, exists within it (Weir 168-169). Rocky, both makes the cognitive realization, stating “[s]ome life on Adrian EATS Astrophrage! Population in balance. Natural order. This explains all things!” (Weir 169) and solves the puzzle of how to obtain it by building a collection probe (Weir 179-180) while Grace says he simply “[does]n’t understand” (Weir 169), relying on Rocky to explain. This realization and construction of the probe by Rocky not only enables the collection of the Taumoeba (Weir 180-184), but as a consequence causes the accident or transformation necessary within the ninth step (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”). The collection process almost causes Rocky’s death when he risks his life to save Grace (Weir 188); whereas Grace’s decisions during the ordeal only result in some ammonia burns and arm scarring needing a few hours of intubation (Weir 191). The ordeal “transforms” (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”) them both in “receiv[ing] the prize” (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”); Rocky much more severely. Inadvertently, Grace also almost kills Rocky a second time afterwards by blasting his wounds re-open with compressed ammonia (Weir 197). Even

in the evaluation of severity, neither protagonist “transforms” (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”) without Rocky making his scientific realization (Weir 169) and making his collection probe first (Weir 179-180), enabling both requirements to “reciev[e] the prize” and be “transform[ed]” in step nine of the hero’s journey (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”).

During the twelfth and final step in the hero’s journey, where “the hero return[s] with the prize” (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”) obtained from step nine, Rocky is the only protagonist who returns home with the Astrophage predator, Taumeoba (Weir 271-274). In fact, after Rocky resolves the issue of leaving it up to fate if the four beetle probes that will deliver the necessary samples and information back to Earth by providing Grace with the necessary fuel to return home and save his life (Weir 153), Grace chooses to abandon his mission altogether in favour of rescuing his new interstellar friend Rocky (Weir 262); returning the salvation of Earth back to chance the probes survive the journey back on their own. While it is learned at the end of the novel through observations of Earth’s sun, Sol, returning to pre-dimming luminance made by Erid’s astronomers (Weir 272), Grace never returns home and ultimately never completes the final step necessary of the hero’s journey (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”); whereas Rocky does, with Erid scientists having to create a habitat for Grace.

Through this comparative analysis of these three steps in the hero’s journey (Jeffrey “A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey”) against Grace and Rocky’s interstellar adventure in *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir, it remains that both protagonists are necessary to the other in becoming co-saviours of multiple star systems. However, it is painfully obvious that Grace does not meet the threshold to be considered a hero according to

A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey by Scott Jeffrey; whereas Rocky does, making him the hero of Andy Weir's novel, *Project Hail Mary*.



Fig. 1. The Hero's Journey, *Joseph Campbell Foundation*

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