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'The Dude is not in': How the Coen Bros.' slacker detective upends Joseph Campbell's hero's arc

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Abstract

Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (1998) simultaneously engages with and subverts Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as articulated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008 edition). While Campbell's monomyth outlines a transformative cycle in which the hero confronts trials, attains wisdom and returns from his journey to spread knowledge unto others, the Dude—cast as a bumbling, slacker-detective—fails to achieve enlightenment or growth, effectively stumbling into partial solutions despite his lack of acumen. Through dream sequences, noir conventions and the figure of the extra-natural Stranger, the film teases the structural signposts of the Campbellian arc only to undermine them, positioning the Dude as both clown and unwitting hero who "abides" without transformation. Although the Dude could be said to be like Buddha in his come-what-may attitude, he never grows nor shares what he has learned with any acolytes—yet, paradoxically, his lack of development has produced a mythic afterlife in the real world through the rise of "Dudeism," a secular, ironic mythos for non-diegetic consumers practiced by fans. Dudeism does not in fact become a diegetic religion in the same fashion as, say, Jedi-ism in the galaxy of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977). Accordingly, the Coens craft a narrative that resists classical mythic resolution while nonetheless generating a cultural mythology, revealing how postmodern storytelling both dismantles and perpetuates the heroic paradigm.

Keywords: hero's arc; Joseph Campbell; The Big Lebowski; Coen Brothers; dudeism

'The Dude is not in': How the Coen Bros.' slacker detective upends Joseph Campbell's hero's arc[1]

Eric Althoff

Introduction

Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski spends a not-insignificant portion of his journey through *The Big Lebowski* in a fugue state, wherein his subconscious synthesizes elements of his arc previously encountered in the diegesis during both drug- and trauma-induced (in the form of a vicious punch to the head) surrealist elements that, though not necessarily illuminating for the ultimate needs of his quest, provide what could be termed a type of revelation notwithstanding. Indeed, the notion that fugue or dissociative states can function in service of "deeper" storytelling is bolstered by Fischman's observation (2024), wherein "one's sense of meaningfulness is related to one's felt sense of connectedness with the attachment object" (2). Those objects could be quite literal (bowling pins, giant shears seen during the fantasies) or a fantastical amalgam of the Dude's previously encountered story elements (Maude flying away on the Dude's carpet). Prochaska et al. observed that "deep story" is typically "built on people's perceptions of their lived experiences" (2024). This concords with the idea that the overarching narrative of the Dude's unconscious hallucinations includes people, places and motifs from his waking life being thrust into a noir-ish plot in which the Dude is cast unwittingly

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as bumbling detective. Knowledge obtained from a fugue state, theoretically at least, should be helpful to the Dude in solving his Campbellian quest to uncover the whereabouts of both the missing Bunny Lebowski and the $1 million ransom fee. However, while the Dude does ostensibly succeed in figuring out that Bunny was never kidnapped at all and the suitcase of $1 million entrusted to him for her ransom was empty the entire time (effectively stolen by the Big Lebowski himself from the family fortune), the Dude does not properly undertake to achieve true wisdom or enlightenment from the subconsciousness of his punch- and drug-induced fever dreams, what with their trippy bowling metaphors and Busby Berkeley dance numbers. "If you undergo a spiritual transformation and have not had preparation for it, you do not know how to evaluate what has happened to you," Joseph Campbell told Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth*, "and you get the terrible experience of a bad trip. … If you know where you are going, you don't have a bad trip" (18). The idea of the "punch" comes up again in Miller's work somewhat, with Miller writing of "an emotional punch" leading to a catharsis that "Joseph Campbell said occurred when people took part in a reenactment of a powerful myth" (78). Crucial to this monomyth, as per Campbell, is the hero's arc: "This person…takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and returning" (152). And sharing those stories, as per Yam, generates empathy, whether or not the protagonist is fictional or real.

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"One's self-narrative and emotional perceptions of the world are more salient to public discourse than traditional argumentation theory has given them credit for" (2018), writes Yam.

In placing the Dude into a noir-ish mystery, and even with his creators providing the Dude helpers in the form of the Stranger and the aforementioned fever dreams to guide him, Joel and Ethan Coen effectively subvert the expectations of the detective story in that the brothers made the Dude, who typically would be cast as a clownish sidekick, the hero—yet one who is bumbling and effectively incapable of resolving the case, even with the supernatural guidance of the Stranger. The Coens, attentive students of noir, as evidenced by their earlier works including *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Miller's Crossing* (1990), in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) accomplished a legerdemain of narrative logic by playing havoc not only with the conventions of the genre but also playing fast and loose with Campbell's hero's journey, in which the protagonist typically not only emerges triumphant but imparts his newfound knowledge to others. *Lebowski* deliberately undermines the hero's journey by making its protagonist both clown and hero in a shaggy-dog detective plot. While the film indeed borrows the structural signposts of Campbell's "deep storytelling"—a call to adventure, supernatural helper, trials and return—it subverts them at every stage, leaving the Dude unchanged and unenlightened. Yet, paradoxically, while the Dude succeeds in solving the case almost despite himself, this failed hero has achieved a mythic status outside the film's diegesis through the rise of "Dudeism,"

making him a modern, ironic example of how mythic archetypes can persist in postmodern culture, even when stripped of transformation or triumph.

Unwitting hero

In *The Big Lebowski* the Coens not only crafted a new paradigm in which the clown figure and the hero are one and the same, they accomplished this within the detective narrative. This experiment both subverts the well-trodden expectations of the detective story, while simultaneously crafting an end run around the necessary enlightenment typically achieved in the Campbellian arc. The bumps in the road that the Dude faces could be read as Fortune's "failing to reward…great men" (46) for their righteous labors, as noted by Rawson and Brissenden in their work "The Hero as Clown." Alternately, the modern clown-hero succeeding almost despite himself has been employed in popular culture around the same time as *The Big Lebowski*—notably Homer Simpson infamously foiling a nuclear meltdown by sheer chance—leading to the diegetic term "pulling a Homer,"[1] meaning to succeed despite a lack of acumen. Much in the same model as Homer (Simpson), whose antics have featured on 35-plus years of *The Simpsons*, the Dude too is a well-meaning clown who succeeds despite himself (effectively, "pulling a Dude") (see The Simpsons S3 E5 "Homer Defined").

Of the many analyses that have been applied to *The Big Lebowski* (1998), including not only from scholars but also via the actor Jeff Bridges himself—as we shall investigate—what

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the literature heretofore has not taken into account is that the Dude, as detective and protagonist both, fails many of the precepts that Joseph Campbell's *The Hero of a Thousand Faces* (2008 edition) determines as being necessary conditions for even being called a "hero" in the classical sense.

Carolyn Handler Miller has described the reenactment of ancient myths in new guises as "a form of participatory drama," extrapolating that "Campbell noted…participants who took part in myth-based rituals often found the experience so intense that they would undergo a catharsis, a profound sense of emotional relief" (6). She also noted that rites of passage typically entailed a "terrifying ordeal, during which they would 'die' as a child and be reborn as an adult" (10). "Dying," at least in this sense, is not the literal cessation of the body but rather the discarding of a previous iteration of the spirit or identity to the past.

Along with Campbell's notions of the protagonist's growth and change, other elements of his theories are evident in the Dude's progression—often referred to as "deep storytelling"—including the aforementioned hero's journey and growth (be it Theseus, Frodo Baggins or Luke Skywalker), as well as supernatural aids (Pirithous, Gandalf, Obi-wan Kenobi). Even so, the Dude does not in fact attain enlightenment.

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The Coen brothers are hardly the first storytellers to mock and play with the conventions of either the hero's journey or the detective genre. The hard-boiled detective's adventure had earlier been sent up in such instances as *The Long Goodbye* (Altman 1973), the filmed version of Raymond Chandler's book of the same name, starring Elliott Gould as private investigator Philip Marlowe. In addition to transposing the time from 1940s to 1970s Los Angeles, Altman's film made "no serious effort to reproduce the…novel it's based on," as Roger Ebert noted at the time of release. Rather, in Ebert's view, this rendering of *The Long Goodbye* "just takes all the characters out of that novel and lets them stew together in something that *feels* like a private-eye movie" (emphasis added). More explicit parodies of the detective film came later, including the Steve Martin-starring *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Reiner 1982) and the later *Fatal Instinct* (Reiner 1993).

While the Coen brothers have resisted out-and-out sendup parody in the Zucker brothers/Jim Abrahams model (*Airplane!*, etc.), several films in their corpus could be read as playful "pastiche" of genres as diverse as the screwball comedy in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) and, notably, a "retelling" of Homer's Odyssey with *O Brother, Where Are Thou?* (2000)—or, more accurately, this film could be labeled a "smirking hijack" (Leigh 2001) of the epic poem. Though the latter does in fact feature a main character called Ulysses (George Clooney) as well

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as characters named the Siren and the Cyclops, this adaptation of the *Odyssey* is loose at best, taking place in the American South of the 1930s. The film's name itself is a joke, alluding to the fictional movie being made about the Depression-era South within the diegesis of *Sullivan's Travels* (Sturges 1941).

The Coens therefore fall into a tradition of storytellers upending genre convention and timbre while simultaneously respecting their forebears. What makes *The Big Lebowski* particularly unique is that the film is neither pastiche or parody, but rather places an unwitting, unqualified person into the role of investigator. So while the conventions of the genre are present seemingly everywhere in the film except in the character of the hard-boiled PI himself, the Coens place the Dude into a situation where, even if he does in fact crack the case, he does not grow and change in the Campbellian sense.

'Deep' history

Long before the postmodern era, story creators had toyed with upending or outright mocking the hero's journey, as evidenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses* and, in the cinematic era, such "anti-Westerns" as *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah 1969) and *Unforgiven* (Eastwood 1992). However, as the Coens specifically took to transmute the detective noir in *The Big Lebowski*, it is instructive to peer back to the war-era noir mold. Park (2011) traces the genre's roots back specifically to the work of Dashiell Hammett and his ur-protagonist Sam Spade. That hard-

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boiled private detective is a cynic "who himself is morally flawed amidst a cast of scoundrels and a fallen world" (35). The idea of the broken, "fallen" world for the detective protagonist is crucial, as are the necessary elements inclusive of "tragic and ironic plots" (33), per Park. This immoral, unchaste universe is certainly present in the Coens' earlier noir efforts such as *Miller's Crossing*, and this tableau is also part of the playground for the Dude set up among 1990s Los Angeles.

Elements of noir abound in *The Big Lebowski*, including sexy women of unclear motives, the Hollywood underworld of pimps and prostitutes and even the detective-hero being rendered unconscious once or several times. All of this occurs in the Dude's travels. However, a key difference between Sam Spade and the Dude is that not only does the Dude not possess the skills at the outset to become involved, he has not achieved Campbellian enlightenment by denouement. *The Big Lebowski* places at center stage a figure who has no business investigating anything, and due to his inability to "learn" from his experience, the film bucks the hero arc while upending the noir detective's journey in which the already-cynical gumshoe bathes in trauma that will affect his bearing moving forward.

Unlike Phillip Marlowe, Sam Spade or other private investigators of their ilk, the Dude, while he "abides" his lumps at the hands of the bad guys, is in no better position at journey's

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end to solve another later mystery, should one come his way. More than likely, he'd make the same mistakes yet again—and again after that.

Detective Dude

The schematic detective genre of fiction had been established by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett amending iterations of the investigator hero, as exemplified by Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Twentieth-century writers placed the detective or "private eye" into the uncertain murk of post-World War II America. These detectives usually worked in California, particularly Southern California in Chandler's case, as seen in *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953), thus informing the then-nascent film noir genre. In addition to the detective needing to solve the case, he (for it was typically a he) descends into the underbelly of Los Angeles, encountering all manner of grotesque characters, suffering many a scrape at the hand of toughs, and typically getting involved with a woman of questionable motivation—all of which befalls the Dude. Yet underneath this familiar plot schematic lurked macrocosmic anxiety about a changing United States in post-war years, with the White male no longer seemingly "on top"—a macro social anxiety that Jensen has labeled "not harmless" (2021) in its repercussions and reactionary politics—and the detective's physical woundings representing an external manifestation of said angst. In her essay "The Dream Abides: The Big Lebowski, Film Noir, and the American

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Dream" (2012), ShaunAnne Tangney posited that Los Angeles at the end of the 20th century, when *The Big Lebowski* screenplay takes place, was experiencing this crisis in extremis. Tangney pointed to this logical extension of post-war noirs such as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, in which literal divisions between light and shadows of the mise en scene stood in for the "conflict" between Anglo Americans and people of color (189).

And because sleuthing is in fact a profession, Tangney ties this said into American White ennui, not just of lost status but also of money in an only-too-familiar echo of "they're taking our jobs":

> *The Big Lebowski*, like those classic films noir, also offers a similar critique, but because the film is set in a late-twentieth-century, a late-capitalist America, the alienation is amplified and focused on the widening gap between rich and poor, and on an intolerant multiculturalism, and prompts a reevaluation of the American Dream itself (176).

In a similar vein, Alberto Zambenedetti (2020) discussed how the melting pot of America was the perfect setting for noir—and *Lebowski*—in "Means streets and bloody shores: toward a spatial theory of the Mediterranean noir." He wrote that the detective noir was a "repudiation of consumer culture" (205) in that the detective, who eschews the 9-to-5 working ethos, stands outside the norm. The detective is typically single, a prodigious drinker, and were it not for his job, might be on the wrong side of the law. Zambenedetti appears to argue that detectives can't help themselves and might even take a case even without payment. It is a vocation certainly,

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but the Dude, as a nonprofessional detective, in the end sees no money from taking on the case of the missing Bunny and her toe.

Zambenedetti echoes Tagney's examination of the importance of space—and how it is running out—in the noir genre, and wrote that the noir has a "Mediterranean" antecedent. Given the climate of the ancient world's Mediterranean Sea, it provided the optimal place for peoples of different cultures to encounter one another. They may have spoken different languages and had different creeds, but economics was then—as now—the ultimate leveler of dissimilarities. This notion can be translated to modern Los Angeles with its similar Mediterranean climate; the city not only lives and breathes the film industry but does so in a multicultural milieu that somehow, to parse Rodney King, "gets along" despite the uneasiness of so many ethnic and social groups living side by side. (This premise could be extrapolated to the overall browning of the United States in the 21st century, but that is beyond this discussion.) This also rhymes with Tangney's notion of White anxiety when contemplating a changing ethnic landscape, a fear that the noir genre palpably exploits. Notably, when it comes to *The Big Lebowski*, she noted that "when people of color do appear in the film in speaking roles, they are always associated with crime," (190) be it the pedophile Jesus Quintana (John Turturro, who in real life is not Hispanic) or Jackie Treehorn's Asian henchman Woo (Philip Moon). Even the Mexican cop who hands over the Dude's car from the impound lot, portrayed by Michael

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Gomez, speaks "ethnically" and is a figure of ridicule—until he turns the tables on the Dude and mocks him for inquiring as to any "promising, uh, leads" as to who stole his ride.

Campbell, in *Hero*, said the traps set before the hero are well-trodden, thus why we respond so much to the similarity of stories the world over. Accordingly, "...the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known" (18), whether it be the literal labyrinth Theseus navigates with the help of Ariadne's yarn, or the modern maze that is contemporary Los Angeles, what with its villains, ne'er-do-wells, hangers-on, pornographers, nihilists and "video artists"—modern Minotaurs all, and each of whom the Dude shall face down and, if not vanquish, then "abide" after his own unique fashion.

'They, uh, gave the Dude a beeper'

Unlike the professional detectives, the Dude was just a guy on his way home from Ralph's with cream for his White Russians (paid for via check in the so-obviously humorous amount of 69 cents) when Jackie Treehorn's goons paid a call. He has no business solving a case of any kind, let alone one brought about by his cherished rug being "micturated upon." But off he goes.

Jakub Kazecki (2008) discussed such complications as far as the Dude's journey concording with that of the hero-detective. For one, there is no monster or brute the Dude must vanquish—if anything, such a task falls to Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) in physically

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overcoming the trio of nihilists. “The plot of *The Big Lebowski* does not reflect the narrative structure typical of American motion pictures,” Kazecki said, “where the male hero, through his own actions, successfully overcomes the unbalance of the narrative caused by the initial atrocious deeds of a villain” (149-150).

In his conversations with Moyers captured in *The Power of Myth* (1991), Campbell might at first seem to concur that the kickoff of the Dude’s story adheres to the “call to adventure” Campbell often identified as necessary to the hero’s arc. “The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken,” Campbell said. “This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It’s usually a cycle, a going and returning” (152).

The Dude may solve the mystery of the “kidnapped” Bunny, but he returns to his home away from home, the bowling alley, with no fiscal reward, but without the rug. Were he to be roped into another mystery down the line, it’s likely he would make the same mistakes and again trust the wrong people. (Also, although the Dude realizes that the Big Lebowski misappropriated the ransom money for himself, he does *not* at that point figure out that Bunny simply drove off to Palm Springs; he would only learn this when he and Walter confront the Big Lebowski at his mansion. So he only really half-solves the case anyway.)

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And yet the Dude does indeed have a path, and a task, to undertake, despite the shortcomings of his acumen and the underwhelming conclusion of his story. Campbell wrote that even more than treasure or a mate, what a hero—or a detective-hero—seeks is *answers*. He points to one of the oldest of the world's stories, the Buddha's path: Gautama Shakyamuni journeyed from prince to wanderer and beggar, until he "collapsed in seeming death, but presently recovered" (24), only to move on to his place of enlightenment, the Bodhi tree. As a Western analog he cites the trials of Moses after leading the Israelites out of Egypt, only to receive "enlightenment" on Mount Sinai from G-d in the form of the Ten Commandments. Thus Buddha and Moses could be said to be mythology's first proto-detectives in that what they seek is an answer to the ultimate questions.

But rather than enlightenment, the detective-hero seeks to solve a modern riddle, be it who killed Mr. Body, who absconded with the Maltese Falcon, or why two lowlifes, mistaking him for a Pasadena millionaire, came and peed on the Dude's rug. Campbell: "A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (42). It is these very forces that manifest in the film's second scene—no matter that the Dude isn't up to the challenge, nor, by journey's end, will he be any better prepared for next time.

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Because the Dude isn't a true detective, he lacks the tools and temperament to find Bunny, and indeed comes to the realization of her whereabouts more or less by accident—and added by revelations attained during his various fugue states. A more "proper" hero, as Campbell envisioned, was "eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn" (14-15). While the Dude, despite his unusual vocabulary, isn't precisely eloquent, his living outside the societal mainstream does concord with the detective schematic of being a stranger in a strange land.

Fortunately, the Dude has to assist him the *actual* Stranger, Sam Elliott's narrator, who functions as both Greek chorus and the audience's guide. The Stranger accords with Campbell's formulation of the supernatural helper as "some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears, to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require" (59), but the Stranger hardly imparts any real help or wisdom to the Dude in his quest to track down the Big Lebowski's million bucks (or "bones or clams, or whatever you call them"). In the two scenes wherein the Stranger and the Dude interact—at midpoint and the final scene—the Stranger does not so much guide the Dude as parlay with him. If the Stranger has precognition about how the story will end, he shares none of it with the Dude during their first interaction; rather, the Stranger does little more than admire the Dude's "style" and ask politely that he perhaps tone down those oh-so-frequent four-letter words. It's an amusing but awkward interchange—ever

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the more so when the Stranger starts to walk out of frame at stage left, only to come about swiftly to walk off stage right, almost as if the Coen brothers were purposely making the Stranger appear ridiculous as an inept supernatural guide blessed with special powers. This too rhymes with earlier ideas of how the brothers upend or even parody the genre's conventions as well as the notion that Campbellian spiritual helpers are wise and sure of foot.

Yet the Stranger himself could also be said to be alienated. As Tangney wrote, "Los Angeles does not make sense to the Stranger, a cowboy, because it is not the wide-open space of the frontier" (180). The frontier by the early-'90s of the film's setting had long since been tamed, and thus further alienated the Stranger as he nursed that Sioux City sarsaparilla at the bowling alley bar. (Interestingly, Sam Elliott recently played Shea, a Civil War veteran and wagon train guide, in the Paramount+ series *1883*, which takes place in that very frontier milieu that Elliott's Stranger character likely misses.)

Los Angeles is the end of the landmass colloquially called America, and those who are there chasing the dream can go no farther geographically without swimming. Because "America has run out of space," Tangney said, "any reevaluation of the American Dream is going to happen here, on the edge of the continent, where we literally and metaphorically run out of space" (ibid). Even the Stranger, with his extra-natural abilities and speaking directly to the

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extra-textual observer—us—is still lost in this sense. Perhaps it is little wonder the Coens had him unsure which way to walk after parting from the Dude.

Kazecki posits that, if anything, it might be the Dude himself who represents the Western gunslinger in retirement, not the Stranger, as a "successor of the pioneers, a hero of westerns who has found his quiet place after a troubled life in the West," but will he "be bothered by evildoers and forced to fight them again?" (150). The answer is yes, as trouble finds the Dude in the form of his call to adventure, even if "he is being acted upon. He is always one step behind his counterparts. And the audience laughs at his belief that he keeps up with them" (151).

Kazecki went on to expound that this duality of the pioneer man (the Stranger) and the detective (the Dude) represented two sides of a single coin of masculinity—not so much in confrontation with one another as in apposition to their estrangement from modern Los Angeles, in which they are both relics.

> The two masculinity models presented in the opening scenes of the movie, the cowboy who gave up his bloody work and the private investigator in the urban jungle, typical for the American western and film noir, despite audience's expectations, are just not the measure of the Dude's actions (151).

The detective and the cowboy are known archetypes. So even as the Coens provide schematics of such well-worn characters, they simultaneously undermine them by making the Dude an incompetent detective and the Stranger a confused narrator who "lost my train of thought" even in his omniscient narration. Kazecki appears to argue that these personas were

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never, *ever* meant to be taken literally; they were placeholders into which audiences could direct their empathy for the adventure at hand.

The Stranger is no more a "guide" to the Dude when they encounter one another for the second and final time. There is no congratulating the Dude on a job well done, nor of the Stranger endowing the Dude with magical abilities in the fashion that Obi-wan Kenobi gifted Luke Skywalker the ability to use the Force. (Campbell and Moyers spoke passionately of their respect and admiration for George Lucas's refashioning of the hero's journey in a new manner— indeed several of their conversations captured in *The Power of Myth* occurred at Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in Northern California.) "The last act in the biography of the hero is that of the death or departure" (306), Campbell wrote, but this is not the case for the Dude.

The clown as hero

Some of the criticism that has emerged since Campbell's lifetime has focused on the fact he perhaps invested too deeply in Freudian and Jungian interpretations of dreams; while modern psychological practice has largely eschewed t dream interpretation, it can still be useful for analysis of film imagery, which so often relies upon visions that are not possible in the real world, as is true for *The Big Lebowski*—and which also buttresses the idea of knowledge obtained from a fugue state, as occurs in the film. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell observed that "In our dreams the ageless perils, gargoyles, trials, secret helpers, and

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instructive figures are nightly still encountered" (84), but the hero, upon awakening, often has "nothing to show for the experience but [his] whiskers…so the poet and the prophet can discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes" (189).

While on the surface it may seem that, in terms of fugue state understanding, the Dude hews closer to Campbell's ideas, the Dude isn't the hero but the jester who was never meant for such an adventure—Falstaff put center stage in lieu of King Henry. Returning to Campbell's conversations with Moyers, the former said of fools such as the Dude that "we can have the hero who fails, but he's usually represented as a kind of clown, someone pretending to more than he can *achieve*" (155, emphasis mine). It is well known that Ethan Coen studied philosophy at Princeton, but it's impossible to know if the notoriously press-shy brothers purposely co-opted Campbell's use of "achieve," which has of course become a buzzword in all things Lebowski ("Little Lebowski Urban Achievers" being one such diegetic instance and film fans often being referred to extra-textually as "Achievers").

Campbell discussed with Moyers that there are two kinds of heroes, those who accept the call of the journey and those who do not, at the terminus of which "you've undergone a death and resurrection…and you're another creature" (158). Certain of their recorded conversations took place in the aftermath of John Lennon's 1980 murder, and Campbell even allowed that the

former Beatle "definitely" qualified as a modern hero—but unlike the Dude, Lennon was a living, breathing person. Also unlike Lennon, the Dude qualifies as a fool in the classic sense of commenting wryly upon the action as he takes it anything but seriously—and often while drinking, in line with his PI brethren. Yet even the court jester is capable of dispensing wisdom, with Campbell sharing with Moyers that "clowns and clown religions are helpful. … This makes the point, I am not the ultimate image, I am transparent to something. Look *through me*, through my funny form" (275, emphasis added).

The deity, and his or her message, comes in many forms and vessels. Campbell wrote in *Hero* how a mythical figure touched by the divine typically returns with a message from beyond of a better way to live, how to treat one's fellow human, and a vision of a more perfect world, saying that "the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (23) and "brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole" (30). Accordingly, the Dude *does* have something to teach, and arguably he has done so in a meta fashion given that, although the Dude does not in the end instruct "little Dudes" in the ways of Lebowski, his lessons have leaped beyond the fictional realm and into the real world. Campbell says that the hero wins something from the land of the divine, but "the two kingdoms are actually one" (188). Yet the Dude returns

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essentially with nothing, no prize, no wisdom—perhaps only a partial claim to legend based on the folklore he has spawned, and which we have continued to nourish in the real world.

Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad were not only founders of religions but prophets of a higher truth, and Campbell noted similarities not only in their stories but in all of the world's mythic figures. However, the issue with the newly illuminated being is "either of staying with [enlightenment] and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again" (157-58), as he explained to Moyers. Whatever the Dude may have learned in the course of his adventure, he never elects not to remain among the pantheon of higher beings. To reiterate, "The last act in the biography of the hero is that of the death or departure," Campbell wrote in *Hero* (306), but this does not hold true for the Dude. He eschews the mythological path of death and resurrection wherein the entity exits this world but leaves behind laws and guidance—or, in the case of Buddha, reincarnated in a new earthly form.

The Dude is also not enlightened like Buddha; the Stranger says at the journey's end that the Dude may be "takin' 'er easy for all of us sinners," which isn't so much blasphemous as an expression of hope. The Dude may have learned nothing, but it is likely he will try and probably fail again—seeking nor finding perfection or nirvana, with the Stranger observing how "the

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whole dern human comedy keeps on perpetuating itself." But maybe, upon another iteration or reincarnation, illumination could come for the Dude. Campbell: "What all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another. You have been thinking one way, you now have to think a different way" (155). "Trials and revelations" transform consciousness, yes, but the Dude is the same at the end, even if he has faced down said trials. Perhaps it wasn't to be in this lifetime—or the next.

"You are not the Hobbit you were," (302) Gandalf informs Bilbo at the conclusion of T*he Hobbit*. However, the Stranger says no such thing to the Dude, thus providing further evidence—even if that evidence is in absence—of the failure of the Dude to fulfil the hero's journey.

'The Dude abides'

The hero's cycle ends with an entreaty to be kind to others. This is almost Dude-like. Campbell: "The aim is not to see, but to realize that one is" (333).

Even though the Dude fails to either bring enlightenment to the people in his world or to generate followers, he has become a mythic figure in *our world*—generating a secular religion of devotees that communes via bowling and festivals and revisiting the film. Ergo, the Dude, though not a historical figure, has become *real* thanks to his fans' devotion in a way that is as

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valid to them as the acolytes of Jesus, Buddha or any of the world's other great spiritual leaders may view their world-saviors. And this is the key to unlocking the Campbellian precept of something that is both is-and-not, along the lines of Schrödinger's cat.

"Dudeism" is now as real in our world as Christianity or any other belief system in that it has followers, a creed, rituals and even "Dude priests." Dudeism doesn't take root within the diegetic context of the film *The Big Lebowski* in the same way that Jedi-ism is followed by Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* universe. However, Dudeism has become an extratextual creed "practiced" by people in the real world. Campbell to Moyers: "When a person becomes a model for other people's lives, he has moved into the sphere of being mythologized" (20). The Coens' deep storytelling techniques within their fiction has essentially made the Dude real.

So perhaps, then, the Dude *does* conform to the Campbellian hero arc as the mythology expert shared with Moyers that "a legendary hero is usually the founder of something—the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion…the founder of a new way of life" (166-67). The Dude did not seek to found a system of beliefs, and yet his disciples in *our world* attest that the Dude, even if unknowingly and unwillingly, became the basis for a cult not just of film-viewing but of a creed for nonfictional people—and all while subverting the conventional detective schematic. (Is it coincidence that the Dude's favorite band has the word "Creedence"

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in its name?)

Dudeism may lack formality and structure, but, to paraphrase Walter, "at least it's an ethos." People in our world may also be devotees of the Jedi and their heroic deeds, but the Jedi's Force powers are unavailable to fans in our universe according to the rules of physics as we currently understand them; being a disciple of the Dude, on the other hand, requires no leaps above the laws of nature.

To this we can even look to the musings of the man who brought the Dude to life, Jeff Bridges. A 2012 book called *The Dude and the Zen Master* recorded lengthy conversations Bridges engaged in with Bernie Glassman, a Jew by birth but who also became a Zen Buddhism "roshi" teacher. Bridges and Glassman sat for lengthy chats at Bridges's ranch in Montana, where the two came to a modicum of understanding that the Dude is an enlightened figure, somewhat in the mold of the Buddha, and one who, as Campbell decreed in *Hero*, "is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (15)—even if the Dude does no such thing upon adventure's end. (On the same page, Campbell quotes Toynbee, who sought to examine myth strictly through a Judeo-Christian lens to the exclusion of Buddhist teaching, with Campbell surmising Toynbee could only interpret via this paradigm, "the salvation of the present world-situation might lie in a return to the arms of the Roman Catholic

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church"—and thus runs smack into Glassman and Bridges's examination of the Dude through, ironically, far more catholic optics.)

Perhaps only attachment to ego produces the need or desire to consciously impart such wisdom. "The Dude abides nowhere, which is the same as saying the Dude abides everywhere," Glassman told Bridges during their chats. "The Dude is not attached to some self-image, identity, or a life narrative. Since he abides nowhere, he is free to abide everywhere" (75). The Dude, then, is a vessel for enlightenment—and one into which we can pour our own desires for understanding, providing you start at zero. "If you can't get back to emptiness, you're just saying words instead of doing the work," Bridges said. "You're just repeating instead of discovering it anew each time" (19).

Furthermore, Glassman praised the Dude's lack of attachment, especially to the pain of his misfortunes, be it Jackie Treehorn's goons tossing over his apartment, getting knocked out by Maude's hired toughs, being drugged by Treehorn, rolled by the sheriff of Malibu, tossed out of the cab by the Eagles devotee, watching his precious car torched by the nihilists and getting Donny's (Steve Buscemi) ashes blown into his face on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific…the Dude somehow abides what Campbell termed "the absolutely intolerable" (89).

Yet even after suffering all of this, he isn't bitter or angry—and somehow he's still friends

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with Walter, who not only differs from the Dude's political stances about as measurably as is possible but has been the cause of much of the Dude's misfortunes and suffering. "It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy," wrote Campbell in *Hero* (21). Accordingly, we laugh at the Dude's humiliation, even as we know that as zen as he can be, losing his car (and his temper), having his apartment trashed and his buddy Donny dying of a heart attack are far from desirable outcomes. Yes, laugh we can, because we must—because there, but for the grace of Lebowski, go we all.

How and why the film attained cult status, launching Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski into the pop culture pantheon, has been debated at length, and will continue to be so as long as new Duders find it—either on their own or via the temple of shared experience thanks to previous acolytes seeking still more converts. An entire subculture now exists, entailing rituals such as shared public viewings and bowling at in-person festivals that function as a secular mecca for Dudes and Dudettes of all stripes.

The Dude has abided all of his trials, even if he has learned nothing.

The Dude is not in.

And maybe that's the point. Glassman observed: "For me it's about not-knowing and

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bearing witness. *The Dude is not in* refers to a pure state of no attachment whatever, nothing there" (94). Onto the Dude we project our insecurities and failings and channel them through this flawed man, who may not be a hero in the Campbellian sense, nor a detective in the classical schematic, but is nonetheless, somehow, someone people can, and do, emulate.

The Dude may not be "in," but he is in us.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's Note]: Three years ago we had a call for papers for a special issue of *CINEJ* to celebrate 25 years of *The Big Lebowski*. Though the issue was not completed in time, we received several high-quality articles that went to get published in CINEJ such as Britt (2025) and Jones, Williams, Martin (2025). Althoff's contribution is also another great contribution to the analysis of 'dudeism' to a growing list of academic studies like Fosl (2024).