Kingdom Hearts and the Monomyth of Murdock: Analyzing the Narrative Structure of the Series

The Violet Howler, for the Soriku Ultimania

Part I: A Tale of Two Monomyths

A common assumption about *Kingdom Hearts* is that series creator Tetsuya Nomura has no idea what he's doing and is just making it all up as he goes along. However, this is not actually true. While the details may not be completely mapped out, he actually does plan some things ahead. He had an outline for the conclusion of the Dark Seeker Saga by the time he finished development of *Kingdom Hearts II* [01]. When the original game was first announced, he already had a framework for the story up to the end of KH2 [02]. And he's had some idea of the final scene in the entire series ever since at least 2004 [03].

So while specific developments in the lore or character backstories may be hard to predict, by looking at the storytelling pattern the series so far has been following, fans can construct a pretty straightforward roadmap of where the series is headed.

Over the last two centuries, scholars have been studying the common themes and plot points found in different stories, legends, and myths across multiple different cultures. In 1949, Joseph Campbell published his 17-step monomyth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Over time, this common template became known as The Hero's Journey, and is one of the most well-known archetypes of storytelling.

While not every story follows every single step of Campbell's outline, nor does so in the same order, the broad outline of the sequence matches up to the story beats of a significant number of well known narratives—the original *Star Wars* film, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the biblical story of Jesus…all line up with Joseph Campbell's narrative framework. But although the steps are never explained in ways and places that are accessible to wider audiences, even those with no knowledge of Campbell's monomyth will consume a story in this format and be able to predict by gut instinct where the story is going to go.

But Sora's story, at its core, does not fit into the narrative framework of the Hero's Journey. While the series is still ongoing, the trajectory of the story so far indicates that the saga is entering the final act of a three-act structure. Campbell's outline is generally divided into three acts, but *Kingdom Hearts* is lacking many of the stages typically found at the corresponding point of the three-act narrative which *Kingdom Hearts III* appears to be at. Fitting the story beats of *Kingdom Hearts* into Joseph Campbell's outline is like putting a round peg into a square hole; it could technically be made to fit, but it's not the simple and clean fit that it could be, and some of the holes are going to remain unfilled. The series' departure from one of the most commonly

known storytelling frameworks likely contributes greatly to fans' confusion about the overall direction of the story. But there *is* a narrative framework that fits perfectly with the story of *Kingdom Hearts*.

In the 1970s, Maureen Murdock was a therapist working with women between the ages of thirty and fifty. In the course of her work, she found that many of her patients were feeling dissatisfied and hollow after achieving success in a male-dominated workforce. Seeking to understand how women's experiences related to the Hero's Journey, Murdock began studying Campbell's work in the early 80s. Realizing that Campbell's template did not account for the unique experiences of women, she decided to create her own, and in 1990, she published her book, *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*.

The book is somewhat dated in regards to its views of gender, and focuses exclusively on the experiences of straight, cisgender women. Nevertheless, the literary theory behind Murdock's model still holds up and is still applicable in modern storytelling. This is because while Murdock was only focusing on one perspective in developing her framework, the core idea of a coming-of-age narrative for protagonists who are othered by society in some way makes it applicable to the experiences of many diverse identities.

The core narrative of a Heroine's Journey is that of a young person coming of age in a society which regards them as lesser because of a specific aspect of their identity: either because they have qualities that their society does not value, or because they lack qualities that their society *does* value. Rooted in the psychological theories of Carl Jung, the themes of the Heroine's Journey center around examining and accepting oneself in an un-accepting environment.

What ultimately separates the Hero's Journey from the Heroine's is that in a Hero's Journey, the protagonist seeks to restore order after an external threat throws everything into chaos. After the threat is defeated, they bring back something that will benefit their society, but the society itself remains largely unchanged. In a Heroine's Journey, the society around the protagonist is in some form part of the problem. The external threats they face are a direct result of fundamental flaws in the way their world runs. The Hero's Journey is about restoring the status quo, the Heroine's is about dismantling it.

The story of *Kingdom Hearts* closely adheres to the narrative framework of the Heroine's Journey, as Sora's coming-of-age journey thus far matches the stages in Murdock's outline.

The details regarding the structure of the Heroine's Journey and how the *Kingdom Hearts* series corresponds to it will be discussed below. But first, the key characters' relation to Murdock's outline must be discussed.

Part II: The Central Character Archetypes and How They Relate to Sora and Riku

While there is no limit to the number of characters who can be part of a story that follows the Heroine's Journey, the central narrative of such a story focuses on three core character archetypes: the Heroine, the Animus, and the Evil Sorcerer.

Naturally, the Heroine is the protagonist who drives the central narrative of the story. The story revolves around them coming of age in an environment that underestimates them because of a trait that they do or do not have. By the end of the story, the Heroine learns to trust their instincts and have confidence in themselves, their power, and their decisions. While most protagonists in this story structure are female, they don't necessarily have to be, so long as they do not fit the ideal mold of what society considers a typical male heroic figure to be.

The Animus can often represent the Heroine's Shadow. The term is derived from Jungian psychology, representing the qualities of themselves that a person hides, represses, and projects onto others. The concept was originally described in terms of a male/female binary with the Animus representing a woman's hidden masculine qualities. In the Heroine's Journey, the Animus represents qualities of the Heroine that they are not yet conscious of due to their immaturity.

The Animus represents what the Heroine could have become under different circumstances, and will have a drastically different background compared to them, but they are fundamentally two sides of the same coin. In stories where the Animus is the endgame love interest, a serious romantic relationship can only begin after the Heroine has matured by confronting and acknowledge these qualities within themselves

In Heroine's Journeys where the Animus is the primary love interest, they are presented as the Heroine's physical, intellectual, and spiritual equal. They are the one who drives the protagonist to become stronger, encouraging them to take risks and see the world. Where the Heroine's friends and parental figures cast doubt on their instincts and decisions, the Animus encourages them to trust those instincts and believe in themselves.

The romance in a Heroine's Journey emphasizes the dimorphism between the Heroine and the Animus. Noticeable size differences are common in all mediums, and in visual storytelling, the Heroine and the Animus are nearly always designed to complement each other. They visually fit together like Yin and Yang, and it's common for their attire to emphasize a Light and Dark dichotomy.

Finally, the Evil Witch, or Evil Sorcerer, is usually the ultimate antagonist of the Heroine's Journey, above and beyond any other villains the protagonist may have faced along the way. Note that The Evil Sorcerer does not have to actually have magic themselves. What ultimately

matters is that through the tools at their disposal, they have a significant influence—either direct or indirect—over the Animus's life.

Through the lens of Jungian psychology, the Evil Sorcerer in a romantic Heroine's Journey is symbolic of sexual interference, attempting to keep the two lovers apart either physically or psychologically. They represent society attempting to dictate who the protagonist is allowed to have a relationship with. No matter how intense the romantic tension between the two leads may be, the relationship between the Heroine and the Animus cannot take the final step into an endgame romance until the Evil Sorcerer's influence over the Animus has been broken.

As Testuya Nomura has said, Sora is the main character of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, and is going to be the main character of the series to the very end. While Riku is the deuteragonist of the series, Sora has been the primary playable character for almost every game in the series. The exceptions are *Birth by Sleep*, *0.2*, *358/2 Days*, and the *χ* saga. At Tokyo Game Show 2018 Nomura stated that *Kingdom Hearts III* was "most definitely not the end of Kingdom Hearts" and that he would "like to continue Sora's story" [04]. If Sora's story were to continue while still following the structure of the Heroine's Journey, the pursuit of a romance between himself as the Heroine and the character filling the role of the Animus would be one of the most logical directions to go in.

Riku's status as an Animus figure is spelled out textually in the very first game. He and Sora grow and evolve because of how they challenge each other. In the first game's *Ultimania* Tetsuya Nomura stated that he had specifically designed Riku to balance with Sora [05]. And in a 2013 interview, series producer Shinji Hashimoto said that "the main focus of the series is Sora and Riku and how they grow up" [06]. These examples both in-universe and out align with the fact that the Heroine and the Animus are the most important characters in the narrative. The central axis of the plot revolves around how the two opposing but complementary forces push and pull against each other and challenge each other to grow.

Regardless of how prominent a role the Evil Sorcerer has in the overall narrative, the audience should be made aware of their existence and their impact on the story in the first act of the narrative. Katniss, the protagonist of the *Hunger Games* trilogy didn't meet the main antagonist President Snow one-on-one until the beginning of the second book, *Catching Fire*, but he was still referenced by name in *The Hunger Games* to establish him to readers as the head of the dystopian government under which Katniss lived. The enchantress who cursed Beast's castle never once appears during the entirety of the original *Beauty and the Beast*, but her impact on the story and the existence of the curse is explained to the audience before the first song has even begun.

So, despite the *Kingdom Hearts III* Secret Reports revealing that the entire series thus far has been orchestrated by the Master of Masters, he is not the true Evil Sorcerer figure. Though her lack of presence or apparent threat following the original game has been a source of ridicule for many in the fandom, Maleficent is the only one who meets all the qualifications of the Evil

Sorcerer figure. Within the context of the Heroine's Journey, the two most common forms of the Evil Sorcerer are the evil mother and the wicked witch (and sometimes those are both the same character). In addition to her status as Disney's most iconic wicked witch archetype, Maleficent can be likened to a mother figure for Riku, especially during his darkest hour. Moreover, she claimed all the way back in the first *Kingdom Hearts* title that Riku was like a son to her, and there are indications elsewhere that this wasn't just to get on his good side. In other words, Maleficent reflects both those forms of the Evil Sorcerer, and fills the position perfectly.

What made her a significant threat in the first *Kingdom Hearts* game was that she had information which Sora, Donald, and Goofy didn't, and used it strategically to her advantage. She knew, or at least suspected, that the Kingdom Key was originally meant to be Riku's rather than Sora's, but she didn't tell Riku this until shortly before he took it from Sora in Hollow Bastion. Maleficent's words to Riku in Traverse Town indicate that while she and her accomplices were tracking Sora, she allowed Riku to blindly search in hopes of finding him, and she even reflected in her *Kingdom Hearts Character Files* entry about lying to Riku to manipulate him. Given Ansem's words to Sora about how "one who knows nothing can understand nothing," it makes sense that the biggest threats Sora faced in that title were those which knew more about the world than he did.

By the time she returned in *Kingdom Hearts II*, Maleficent was no longer a threat because now the audience and the heroes knew more about what was going on than she did. So, she faded into the background and began to focus on playing the long game. Her appearances in every game since have had her focused on gathering information, with a particular focus on the Book of Prophecies, the Age of Fairy Tales, and the datascape of Jiminy's Journal. And in the epilogue of *Kingdom Hearts III*, her perseverance paid off, with Maleficent and her accomplice Pete the sole witnesses to the return of the Foretellers, the reveal of Xigbar's true identity, and the appearance of the mysterious Black Box hinted to be of integral importance to the future story. With this new knowledge, Maleficent has once again gained an upper hand on Sora and friends.

In the context of the previously mentioned sexual interference that the Evil Sorcerer figure represents, Maleficent has been aware of Sora's importance to Riku from the very beginning. When Riku attempts to dismiss how much he cares about Sora when Maleficent confronts him in Monstro, she looks at Riku with the knowing expression of someone who can tell that the other person is lying and wants them to know that they know. Moreover, her actions in *Birth by Sleep* and *Re:coded* demonstrate that when psychological manipulation fails, she is capable of using magic and other means to take control of people against their will. Her and Pete's use of bugs to control Data-Riku in *Re:coded* sets up a potential parallel for her to use similar methods to reassert control in the future. So even though she's remained in the background with little importance for some time, there are signs that Maleficent will be making an imminent return to prominence as one of the major villains of the series' third act.

Part III: Murdock's Ten Stages and How They Apply to Sora's Journey

Now that the background has been established, let's break down how the structure for Murdock's outline of the Heroine's Journey differs from Campbell's monomyth, and how her formula applies to the story of *Kingdom Hearts*.
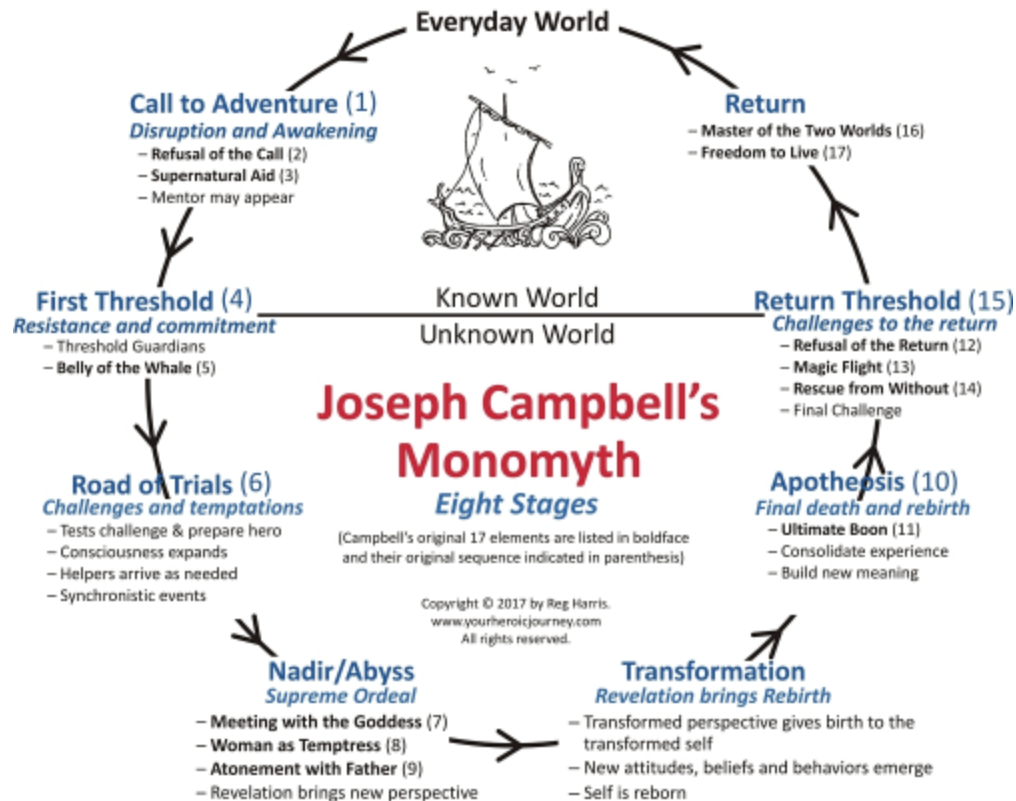
Outline of Joseph Campbells' 17-step outline of the Hero's Journey with accompanying subsections (yourheroicjourney.com)
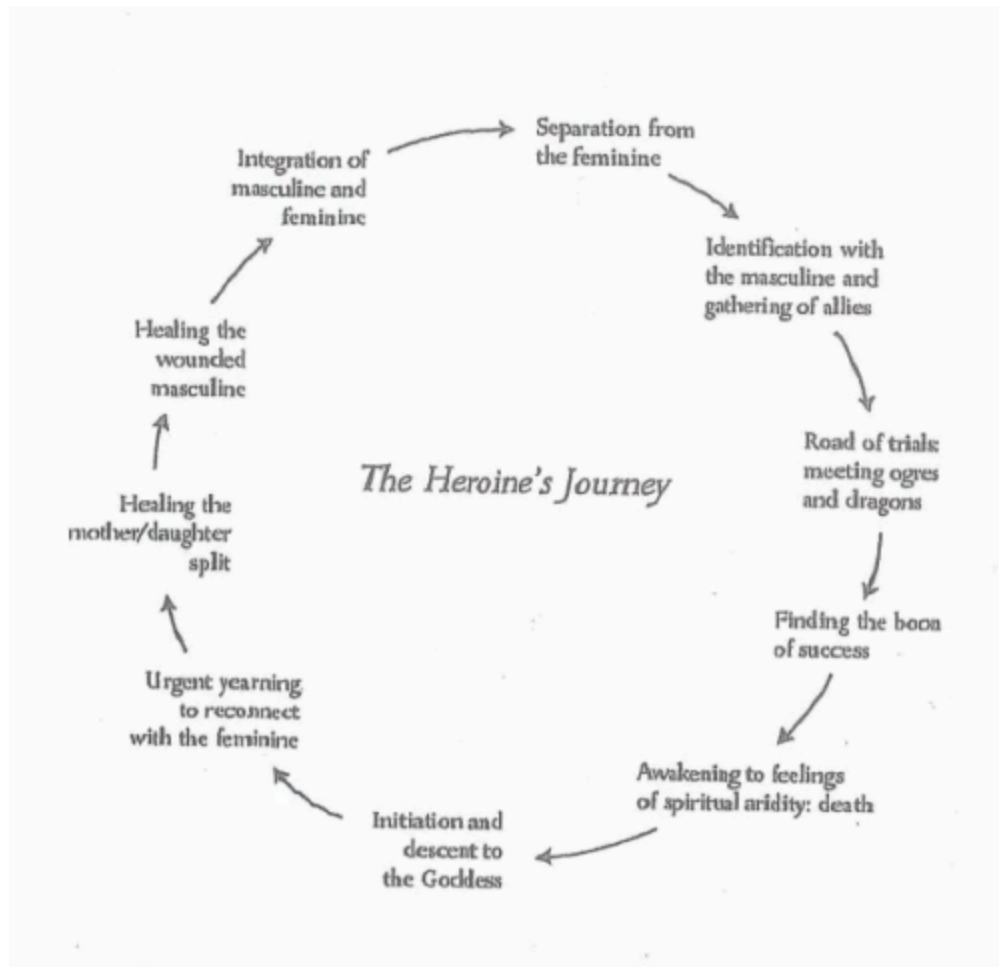
Diagram of the Heroine's Journey ("The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness," M. Murdock)

While the beginning of Sora's story does appear to resemble the Call to Adventure of a traditional Hero's Journey, this is primarily because the first half of a Murdock Heroine's Journey mimics the opening stages of Campbell's model on a surface level in order to deconstruct it on a deeper level in the second half.

The protagonist of a Hero's Journey lives a fairly mundane existence before an external force, the Call to Adventure, spurs them to take up a quest. In contrast, Murdock's outline of the Heroine's Journey begins when the protagonist consciously or unconsciously chooses to suppress vital parts of who they are in pursuit of external validation. This serves to hinder them because cutting themselves off from an important part of themselves blocks them from achieving their full potential. The pressures of society force them into a box that prevents them from utilizing their greatest assets.

The gendered labelling of Murdock's outline stems from the fact that in most Heroine's Journey stories, the traits that the protagonist must discard in order to fit into the metaphorical box are

most often those that are associated with femininity, and the ones that they are encouraged to embrace instead are those associated with masculinity.

The box that Sora finds himself confined in is the idea that a person's internal skills do not matter compared to external ones. His reactions to being regarded as a Junior Hero in Olympus Coliseum suggest a significant attachment to the idea of being a hero in the traditional sense of fighting evil and rescuing people from physical danger, and for most of the first game he had attached his identity to being the sole hero of the Keyblade, the Chosen One who will save the world. This desire to be a hero in the physical sense carries over into *Chain of Memories* when he becomes increasingly desperate to protect Naminé when the veracity of his memories are questioned, and he is taunted over his alleged failure to protect her.

While Sora has an unparalleled ability to connect with others, he and the people around him don't recognize this as a strength because it doesn't manifest in an obvious way. In the first *Kingdom Hearts* game, Riku is built up as the strong and capable one between the two of them, with Sora constantly trying to prove that he can be as good as Riku. His self-doubt isn't as obvious in the beginning of the story because at the start of *KH1*, the only one he was trying to be better than was Riku. At their first reunion in Traverse Town, Sora even makes a confident effort to show off in front of Riku because he believed the Keyblade made him unique, and he'd already defeated quite a few monsters by that point. But as more Keyblade wielders are introduced with several years' more training and experience than Sora, his doubts become harder to ignore, and the walls of the metaphorical box start to press in.

In a Hero's Journey, the external threat itself is enough to motivate the hero into action. In a Heroine's Journey, the protagonist is motivated by an internal force: regret, frustration, or wanting to avoid feeling helpless, for example. In Sora's case, his dependence on his friends as a source of strength hints at underlying feelings of inadequacy on Sora's part, which later games bring to the surface. His desire to find his friends is the main driving force that compels him to travel through the Disney worlds, more so than the threat posed by the Heartless.

In Campbell's outline, the hero's initial response is a Refusal of the Call, being reluctant to leave the comfort of their ordinary world. They will usually then meet a mentor figure who will guide them on their quest, before they finally commit to the journey by Crossing the First Threshold from known to unknown. But in Murdock's outline, going back is never an option, because the threshold is already crossed with the disruption of the protagonist's ordinary life. The protagonist then finds allies as they begin a journey to become stronger, whether they realise that's their underlying motivation or not. After he gets the Keyblade and loses his home world, Sora agrees to set out with Donald and Goofy once he feels reassured that he might find Riku and Kairi by doing so.

From there, the Heroine undergoes the Road of Trials, as they and their allies face challenges and enemies on their quest. Sora, Donald, and Goofy battle the Heartless scourge while the evil witch Maleficent manipulates Riku into serving her. She has him aid her in gathering the seven

Princesses of Heart by preying on his fear that he has no value if Sora does not need him to be his protector.

After thwarting first Maleficent and then Xehanort's Heartless, Sora, Donald, and Goofy are separated from their friends. Kairi is stranded on the Destiny Islands as they form anew out of the Realm of Darkness, while Riku and King Mickey remain trapped inside the dark realm after helping Sora and friends cut off the threat of the Heartless.

As Sora, Donald, and Goofy set off to search for a way to bring Riku and King Mickey home, they end up in Castle Oblivion, where the sinister Organization XIII attempts to rewrite their memories in order to brainwash them. As the distortion of his memories cuts Sora off from his other friends, he becomes increasingly angry, willing to abandon Donald and Goofy when he feels they are questioning the legitimacy of his memories. After Naminé betrays the Organization to help them, Sora, Donald, and Goofy must spend the next year in a coma so that Naminé can restore their memories.

After awakening from slumber with their memories restored, the trio continues their search for Riku and the King while combating the machinations of Organization XIII. King Mickey keeps the heroes apprised of his own investigation into Organization XIII's activities, but refuses to tell Sora where Riku is. During Sora's quest, the Organization abducts Kairi in order to further manipulate him into aiding their master plan.

Once they've faced their challenges, the protagonist achieves the Boon of Success. In a Hero's Journey, this is the climactic victory at the end of the story. In a Heroine's Journey, this is only the middle of the adventure. The Animus is usually introduced around this time, and if they have already been introduced, then it will be around this point that the protagonist begins to exhibit signs of romantic attraction to their Animus. For example, though their star-crossed lovers routine in the first book of *The Hunger Games* trilogy was a show for the Capitol audience, Katnis begins to develop genuine romantic feelings for Peeta over the course of their victory tour in the second book. In *Kingdom Hearts II*, Sora reunites with Riku and Kairi in The World That Never Was. While Sora is awkward around Kairi, he falls to his knees in tears when he sees Riku again. The writing from that moment to the end of the game also concentrates the most on Sora's bond with Riku. After the defeat of Xemnas, the three friends at last find themselves home again on Destiny Islands.

While the protagonist of a Hero's Journey goes home to live happily ever after once they've achieved the initial goal of their quest, in a Heroine's Journey, the main character's success is only temporary. The way of doing things that they have relied on so far results in a victory which, in the long run, is hollow and incomplete, and the protagonist begins to Awaken To Feelings Of Spiritual Aridity.

Sora and Riku are summoned to Yen Sid's tower to be examined for the Mark of Mastery and be formally recognized as Keyblade Masters. With Master Xehanort's return imminent, they must

prepare themselves to rescue Terra, Aqua, and Ventus from their tragic fates in order to help combat Master Xehanort. Sora sees the test as a formality after everything he and Riku have accomplished, but his habit of charging through without fully understanding what's going on leads to him being captured by Young Xehanort and the new Organization XIII. After nearly being made into a vessel for Xehanort's heart, Sora's powers are drastically weakened and he fails the exam. Though outwardly he tells his friends he isn't bothered by it, failing the exam is a major blow to Sora's self-confidence.

Next in Murdock's outline is the point where the protagonist falls into despair when their current way of doing things fails them. Xigbar's taunting in *Dream Drop Distance* calls attention to the self doubts that Sora has been continually pushing down: that since his friends are his power, he has none without them. His belief in himself is rattled by his failure of the exam, and when his friends are all swept up by the Demon Tide at the Keyblade Graveyard in *KH3*, he breaks down in despair, declaring that without his friends' strength, he is worthless.

After this type of low point is when the protagonist is ready to throw in the towel and go home, back to how things used to be before their journey began. But returning to how things were was never an option. Even if physically returning to their old life is possible—which in most cases it is not—the protagonist has grown too much to ever go back to the way things were. When physically going back is not possible, the protagonist will instead attempt to cling to an object, location, or person that acts as a symbol representing that happier time.

Throughout the series thus far, Kairi's defining character trait has been her fear of change and her desire for everything to stay the way it was. This is supported by Tetsuya Nomura calling attention to Kairi's anxiety about growing apart from Sora and Riku as they get older in a 2006 book titled *Character's Report Vol. 1* [07], a theme he brings up again in a 2018 interview where he mentions *Kingdom Hearts III* reflecting how childhood friendships change as one gets older [08]. *Kingdom Hearts III* overtly acknowledges this theme during Sora's visit to the 100 Acre Wood when he realizes his connection to Pooh has weakened, and afterward when Merlin talks to Sora about how one can always make new connections even though an old one has faded.

After defeating Xehanort, Sora sets out almost immediately to restore Kairi who had disappeared. Despite Chirithy warning him of the specific consequences of doing so in *Re:Mind*, Sora is resolved to help Kairi return home, and upon saving her he makes an effort to reestablish their distanced friendship. With all of these details taken together, Sora's effort to hold on to his existing connection with Kairi, who herself tends to take comfort in things staying the same, becomes an attempt to symbolically cling to the past. But this effort is ultimately in vain—as much as Sora wanted to return to the simple home he knew, he must yield to the consequences of his actions and fade away.

As the protagonist becomes aware that attempting to go back to how things were isn't possible, they reach a point where they must examine the cause of their inner sadness and take responsibility for their own healing.

This is followed by a Descent into the Underworld, a key thematic component of the Heroine's Journey narrative. This underworld is either a dream world or a physical location that is closed off and forbidden, like the West Wing of the Beast's castle in *Beauty and the Beast*. In Jungian psychology it represents the protagonist's unconscious mind, and after returning from this metaphorical journey, they emerge with a better understanding of themselves and their Animus.

Limit Cut and *Melody of Memory* establish that the Shibuya-lookalike city we now know as Quadratum fulfills both requirements of an underworld location for a Heroine's Journey. Limit Cut reveals that the secret ending of *Kingdom Hearts III* is a dream that Riku has been having, and Sora's meeting with Yozora in the Secret Episode is framed as happening within the latter's own dreams. *Melody of Memory* takes things further: the city, revealed to be called "Quadratum," is postulated to be outside the main cast's very reality. The connection between dreams and Quadratum is also strengthened musically through the ambiance of *Kingdom Hearts III*'s secret ending track, "Secrets of the Night," which opens with ethereal female voices, an unhurried piano with an aimless melody, and eerie high-pitched strings, along with its reference in the ending to the *Final Fantasy XV* song "Somnus," named for the Roman god of sleep. With the next game to focus on Sora narratively confirmed to be his Descent, this means—according to the framework of the Heroine's Journey—by the time Sora returns to his reality he should have a clearer understanding of not just his own feelings, but also those of his Animus, Riku.

Following the completion of their descent, the protagonist embraces the aspects of themselves that they had previously rejected. Their experience teaches them to value themselves as a person outside of the role that they are expected to fulfill. From there, the next major milestone focuses on the protagonist reclaiming some of their initial values but viewing them in a new light. While the story of *Kingdom Hearts* hasn't reached this point yet, the setup for it has already been laid out in prior games.

"My friends are my power" originated as Sora's defiant assertion that, even when stripped of his physical weapon and admitting to himself that his heart may be weak, the bonds he shared with his friends were the true source of his power. However, in *Dream Drop Distance*, the feelings of inadequacy Sora showed signs of since the original game are spotlighted for the first time when Xigbar brings attention to Sora's perceived weakness of heart. He points out that if Sora's strength comes from the connections he shares with others, that means he doesn't have any strength of his own. Sora concedes to Xigbar's taunts, recognizing that on his own the Keyblade would not have chosen him, and it's clear from his breakdown in *KH3* that Xigbar's taunting served to reinforce his own self-doubts after he failed his exam and found his powers were gone.

Since Sora still believes that without his connections he has no strength of his own, this next stage of the Heroine's Journey should reverse his viewpoint around his connections. Sora should come to realize that his belief in drawing strength from his connections with the people
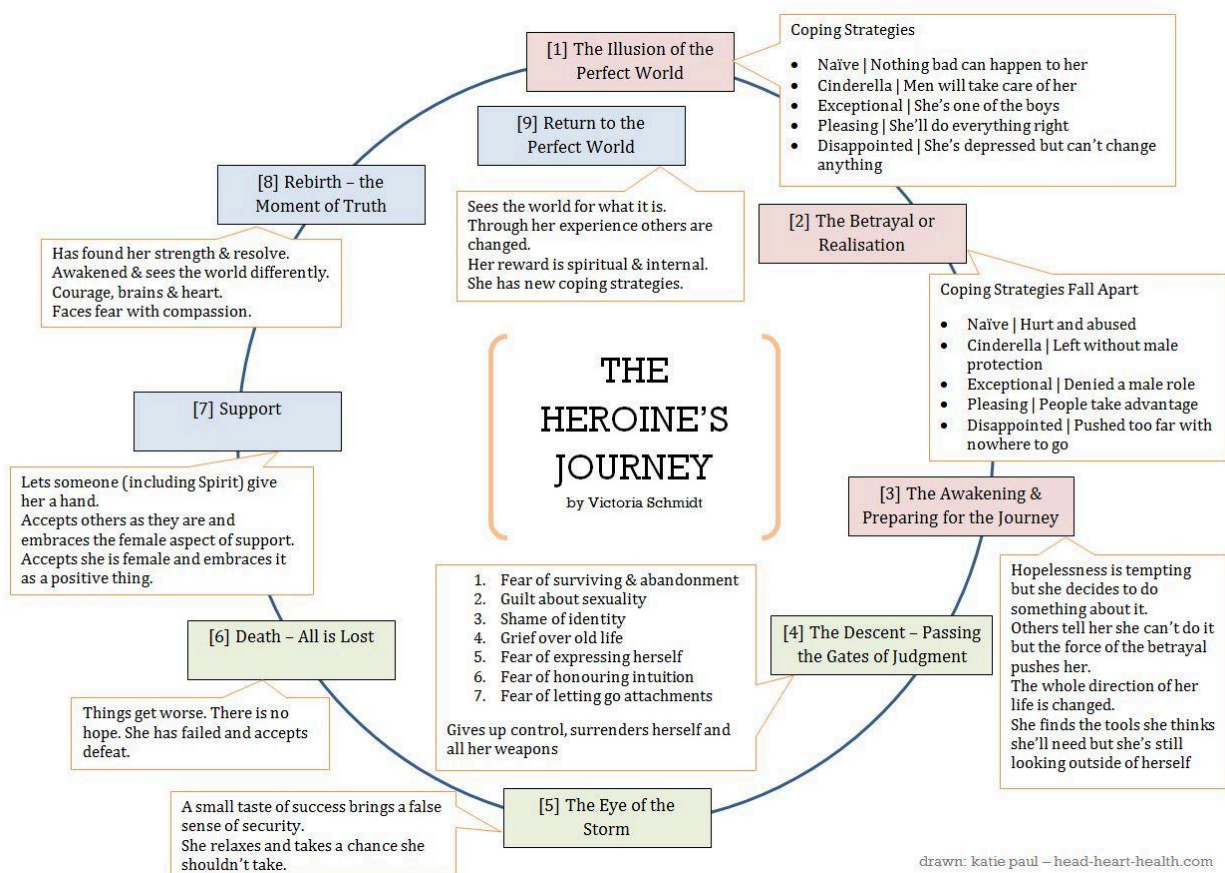
he cares about is a two-way street. That his friends draw strength from him just as much he draws strength from them, thus coming to recognize that even if he wasn't chosen to be a Keyblade wielder like many of his comrades, he is still strong, powerful, and worthy on his own. *KH3* helps lay the groundwork for this, with Riku at multiple points encouraging Sora to believe in his own strength.

After these realizations, the protagonist must rescue their Animus from the physical or mental captivity of the Evil Sorcerer figure. Despite *KH3* and *Re:Mind* setting up the Master of Masters as the ultimate manipulator behind Xehanort's rise to power, Maleficent is the one keeping Sora and Riku apart even though she no longer has an direct influence over Riku's actions, as the two of them have yet to acknowledge and move past her manipulation of Riku in the original game. *Birth by Sleep* and *Re:coded* have shown that she is willing to directly puppet people she wants to use if verbal manipulation fails, so how this will play out—and whether Sora or Riku will fall under her spell the next time around —remains to be seen.

The final stage is where the protagonist and their Animus manage to at last achieve a sense of balance within themselves. Now free of the Evil Sorcerer's influence, they are finally ready to confront the story's ultimate antagonist together. In a romantic Heroine's Journey, this or the previous stage is where the two leads take the last step into a romantic relationship together.

Part IV: Schmidt's Nine Stages and How They Apply to Sora's and Riku's Journeys

Just as later scholars crafted their own interpretations of the Hero's Journey, there were also other authors who created their own takes on Murdock's model. In 2001, author Victoria Lynn Schmidt published her book *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters.* In it, she discussed the difference between the two types of story models. Like Murdock, her take on the pattern was crafted in terms of women learning to balance their masculine and feminine qualities. However, Schmidt's model more consistently uses gender-neutral language, which makes the formula's applicability to diverse experiences more apparent. She also geared her model specifically towards storytelling, as opposed to Murdock's focus on the individual self-reflection of her patients. This allows Schdmit's model to be more malleable for wider use in different types of stories, and it is highly applicable to discussing Sora's journey as well as Riku's.

THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY
by Victoria Schmidt

[1] The Illusion of the Perfect World

Coping Strategies
- Naïve | Nothing bad can happen to her
- Cinderella | Men will take care of her
- Exceptional | She's one of the boys
- Pleasing | She'll do everything right
- Disappointed | She's depressed but can't change anything

[2] The Betrayal or Realisation

Coping Strategies Fall Apart
- Naïve | Hurt and abused
- Cinderella | Left without male protection
- Exceptional | Denied a male role
- Pleasing | People take advantage
- Disappointed | Pushed too far with nowhere to go

[3] The Awakening & Preparing for the Journey

Hopelessness is tempting but she decides to do something about it.
Others tell her she can't do it but the force of the betrayal pushes her.
The whole direction of her life is changed.
She finds the tools she thinks she'll need but she's still looking outside of herself.

[4] The Descent – Passing the Gates of Judgment

1. Fear of surviving & abandonment
2. Guilt about sexuality
3. Shame of identity
4. Grief over old life
5. Fear of expressing herself
6. Fear of honouring intuition
7. Fear of letting go attachments

Gives up control, surrenders herself and all her weapons

[5] The Eye of the Storm

A small taste of success brings a false sense of security.
She relaxes and takes a chance she shouldn't take.

[6] Death – All is Lost

Things get worse. There is no hope. She has failed and accepts defeat.

[7] Support

Lets someone (including Spirit) give her a hand.
Accepts others as they are and embraces the female aspect of support.
Accepts she is female and embraces it as a positive thing.

[8] Rebirth – the Moment of Truth

Has found her strength & resolve.
Awakened & sees the world differently.
Courage, brains & heart.
Faces fear with compassion.

[9] Return to the Perfect World

Sees the world for what it is.
Through her experience others are changed.
Her reward is spiritual & internal.
She has new coping strategies.

drawn: katie paul – head-heart-health.com

Victoria Schmidt's outline of the Heroine's Journey (head-heart-health.com)

Instead of a "Separation from the Feminine," Schmidt's opening stage is known as the Illusion of a Perfect World, where the protagonist is convinced that everything is or will be fine, believing regardless of any challenges they face that they are invincible.

Meanwhile the Integration of Masculine and Feminine at the end of the story is simply known as the Full Circle or the Return to the Perfect World, where the main character knows themselves better and uses their experience to change their world for the better, whether they receive recognition for it or not.

Schmidt's version is designed to be flexible so that while the Illusion of the Perfect World and the Return to the Perfect World function as fixed beginning and end points, all the other components of her framework can be arranged in whatever combination the storyteller desires.

The hollow victory where the lead accomplishes their external goals but fails to address their own inner conflicts is known in Schmidt's version as the Eye of the Storm.

Some of the early stages like "Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine" and "Healing the Mother/Daughter Split" are combined into one step, such as what Schmidt refers to as the Rebirth or the Moment of Truth, where the main character finds their inner strength and learns to see the world differently.

Others like Murdock's "Awaken to Feelings of Spiritual Aridity" are broken up into separate steps, in this case Schmidt using the "All is Lost" or the "Betrayal" stage to represent different aspects of the same concept.

The Betrayal, also called the Realization or Disillusionment, is the point at which the main character realizes that the world is not as they thought it was, either because of a dramatic betrayal, or through realizing that their coping strategies are ineffective or toxic.

The All is Lost stage, also referred to as the Death, is where the protagonist realizes that their newfound tools and skills cannot sustain them, and they begin to lose hope until they fail and proclaim defeat out of despair.

The "Initiation and Descent to the Goddess" is one more step of Murdock's outline that has been split into two in Schmidt's. The bulk of the main character's descent into the underworld is of course known as the Descent or Passing the Gates of Judgement, where they give up control and all of their defenses in order to face their fears and insecurities so that they can move forward.

Meanwhile the part where the protagonist prepares for their overall journey is known as the Awakening and Preparing for the Journey, where the protagonist is tempted by hopelessness but chooses to get up and keep going, even in the face of discouragement from the people

around them. In their Awakening, the protagonist has found the tools they need, but they are still looking outside themselves for strength and validation.

In the large scale arc of the entire *Kingdom Hearts* series, the beginning of the first game with Sora, Riku, and Kairi preparing to build a raft and explore the worlds beyond Destiny Islands functions as the Illusion of a Perfect World. Sora accepting his role as Keyblade wielder and setting off with Donald and Goofy to look for his friends functions as one iteration of Awakening and Preparing for the Journey. His victory over Xemnas and Organization XIII at the end of *Kingdom Hearts II* represents the Eye of the Storm. The loss of his powers during the Mark of Mastery exam serves as one iteration of the Betrayal or Realization.

Sora's despair at the Keyblade Graveyard in *Kingdom Hearts III* is one instance of the All is Lost phase, while getting up afterwards to keep going and save everyone, accepting that when he goes back again to save Kairi in *Re:Mind* he'll fade from this reality, serves as a second Awakening and Preparing for the Journey. The upcoming game focused on Sora and Riku in Quadratum is being set up as Sora's Descent and checks all the boxes for common tropes associated with this step in the narrative framework. Sora learning to recognize his own inner strength by realizing that his friends draw strength from him just as much as he does from them would be his Moment of Truth, while he and Riku coming together to find that perfect balance between light and darkness would be the Return to the Perfect World.

In addition, Sora's journey after *Kingdom Hearts II* contains a smaller iteration of the Heroine's Journey cycle within the macrocosm of the overall narrative. At the start of *Dream Drop Distance*, Sora is living in the Illusion of a Perfect World, thinking that his successes in the previous games make him invincible. He experiences a Realization between failing the exam and his meltdown at the Keyblade Graveyard. Despite his despair, Riku's words inspire Sora to keep going, and the remaining stages are the same as previously outlined for the overarching narrative.

As for how Schdmit's outline pertains to Riku's journey, his fall to darkness in the first game represents his Illusion of a Perfect World, that everything will be fine and nothing can hurt him as long as he sticks to the path he's chosen. His scene in the Realm of Darkness in *Kingdom Hearts Final Mix* after Ansem possesses him, where he expresses regret at how he had acted up to that point, is his Realization that the things he was doing to cope with his inner turmoil were harmful to the people around him. His time in Castle Oblivion Basement 12 at the beginning of *Reverse/Rebirth* represents him Preparing For The Journey to face his darkness. His journey over the course of *Chain of Memories* corresponds to Riku's Descent.

Riku's first All is Lost moment is when Zexion appears disguised as Sora and attacks Riku with blinding light, making Riku believe that Sora thinks he is beyond saving. Demoralized by this, Riku prepares to give up and fade into the light, until Naminé arrives to offer Support and give him the perspective needed to embrace his darkness as something positive. His victory over Ansem at the end of *Reverse/Rebirth* is the Eye of the Storm, and his decision to hide from Sora in *Kingdom Hearts II* after taking on Ansem's form as a result of his battle with Roxas in *358/2*

Days represents a second All is Lost stage. Riku taking the Mark of Mastery exam to test his own worthiness of the Keyblade, and ultimately earning the title of Keyblade Master in *Dream Drop Distance*, is an instance of the Moment of Truth phase.

From here, things are a bit more theoretical for Riku in terms of what comes next in Schmidt's outline, but it is likely that his journey to Quadratum would serve as a second Descent where he acknowledges and confronts the misery and despair he admits he still has in his heart. Addressing those hidden emotions would most likely be another Moment of Truth. In the end, Riku's journey would converge with Sora's at the Return to the Perfect World: Riku would help Sora accept his own darkness so that they both can come together to find the perfect balance between light and dark.

Part V: Themes and Messages

While its initial creation was focused specifically on the experience of cisgender, heterosexual women, Murdock's framework has over time been adopted to explore the themes and experiences of coming-of-age narratives from perspectives other than that of the straight white male, which Western society still considers the default, "universal" experience. The framework of the Heroine's Journey can apply to diverse protagonists because its central theme of a protagonist othered by their society can be relatable to many different identities.

Riku's character arc over the course of the *Kingdom Hearts* series—learning to accept the darkness in his heart and shed the idea that it is something inherently wrong and destructive—can be seen as analogous to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people overcoming the shame and stigma imposed by society so that they can accept and embrace the part of themselves that they've been told all their lives is bad. This comparison is most prominent in Riku's side of La Cité Des Cloches in *DDD* [09]. Riku relates to Quasimodo's lines about imprisoning one's own heart, saying he spoke from personal experience, and admits that he's still struggling with it himself. Phoebus comments that Riku seems like he still keeps a lot hidden, and Esmeralda adds that it's alright to take the time we need to work things out and find the answer inside ourselves.

Mickey's line in *Re:CoM* about how spending time with Riku has positively changed his opinion about darkness can be read as an analogy for cisgender straight people who are initially unsure of or hostile to LGBTQ+ identities changing their minds with education and first-hand interaction to become staunch allies. Over the course of the series, Riku comes to make peace with his own Darkness—a force typically viewed by the characters in his universe as something negative—realizing that it can be used as a force for good, while also helping those around him learn that Darkness is a natural part of the world rather than something to be hated.

Sora's journey also is analogous to LGBTQ+ experiences. In *Kingdom Hearts III* he says in response to Davy Jones' comments about the relationship between Will and Elizabeth that he still has a lot to learn about love. This indicates that he is confused about his own feelings in regards to romance, something which the *Kingdom Hearts Character Files* book that Square published in February 2020 reinforces. For example, there are stories in the book from Sora's POV which depict him as actively questioning what love is [10] or being unsure over how to define his relationship with Riku [11].

A common experience for LGBTQ+ youth is to be confused about romantic feelings for same-gender peers because the media and conversations about romance that they experience growing up were exclusively heterosexual, leaving them unaware that liking someone of the same gender was ever an option. In addition, it often leads LGBTQ+ youth to assume that their feelings towards someone of a different gender *must* be romantic in nature because of how

entertainment and society talk about romantic interest between a boy and a girl. This assumption of one's own romantic interest toward the opposite sex due to ingrained social convention is often known as compulsory heterosexuality [12].

In various instances, we see other characters talk about how important Kairi is to Sora, but we hear very little from Sora himself. The novel adaptations, which otherwise don't shy away from elaborating on what Sora thinks at any given moment, portray Sora as having no or relatively few sentimental thoughts about Kairi herself, even during important moments in the series involving her. When combined with Sora's awkward reaction to her hug in *Kingdom Hearts II* and his uncomfortable body language during the paopu scene in *Kingdom Hearts III*, this indicates that any feelings for Kairi he is assumed to have at the start of the series are the result of compulsory heterotexuality.

This is supported by the fact that the novel adaptation of the first game frames Sora's thought process while adding the paopu fruit to the drawing of him and Kairi in the Secret Place as him wanting to find something to beat Riku at, rather than him making a gesture for Kairi herself. This novel-exclusive detail ties in with a string of in-game events. For example, during the playthrough of *KH1*'s Destiny Islands, Sora's investment in his rivalry with Riku is made clear, Selphie talks to Sora about the paopu fruit as something romantic, and Tidus suggests that not only can Sora not win against Riku, but that Kairi can rely on the older teen, framing her as something for the two boys to compete over. Riku himself contributes to the overall push toward Sora's action in the Secret Place by teasing him about Kairi.

With this in mind, Sora's awkward reaction to Kairi offering him a paopu fruit in *KH3*—combined with his lack of initiation to do so even after seeing his drawing reciprocated at *KH2*'s end, and how he specifically compares their bond to Ventus and Chirithy at the end of *Re:Mind*—points to him having realized near the end of *Kingdom Hearts II* that his feelings about Kairi were not romantic in nature. With the Heroine's Journey framework being built around challenging cultural biases and the status quo of society, it makes perfect sense for a story that follows Murdock's formula and that has two lead characters of the same gender to emphasize LGBTQ+ themes and experiences in order to comment on how society and individuals make assumptions about people's feelings based on an assumption of heterosexuality.

While the standard version of the Heroine's Journey revolves around a character's emotional conflict between their masculine and feminine attributes, the central conflict of the narrative is ultimately about the two leads learning to balance conflicting traits within themselves in order to achieve a sense of completeness. Considering the amount of focus the *Kingdom Hearts* games place on the importance of keeping balance between light and darkness, it's fitting that these be the conflicting elements which Sora and Riku must work together to harmonize, particularly because the series has coded light to represent connection, and darkness to represent the absence of connection, or solitude [13].

The emphasis on Light as connection and Darkness being its absence is best exemplified through the contrast between Sora and Xehanort. Both were young men from Destiny Islands who grew up outside the chain of masters and apprenticeships from the Dandelions to the present, but who ultimately left home and became successful Keyblade wielders regardless. Much like Riku at the beginning of *KH1*, after leaving Destiny Islands and then his training ground of Scala ad Caelum, Xehanort is closed off from the people around him, even his underlings, whom he regards as disposable tools of his will. In contrast, Sora connects with everyone he meets, treating each of his allies as a friend and an equal.

Sora and Riku have had a strong visual dichotomy of Light and Darkness from the very beginning. Riku relies on dark powers but has a strong inner light, while Sora relies on the light created by his bonds with his friends, but has an inner darkness resulting from suppressed pain and negativity that lurks beneath the surface (which we occasionally see as Rage Form, Anti Form, or the Darkside that forms out of Sora's shadow, for example in *KH1*'s Dive to the Heart or Data-Sora's Heartless from *Re:coded*). This matches with the way that light and darkness are depicted throughout the series: how there will always be a light even in the deepest darkness, and how, aside from special cases like Ven and the Princesses of Heart, there will always be seeds of darkness in a heart of light.

The contrast between Light and Darkness, exemplified through Sora and Riku, represents the contrast of connectivity and self-acceptance versus solitude and self-introspection. Sora and Riku, respectively, serve as a counterweight for the other, keeping one another from falling into either extreme. Relying on the solitude of Darkness results in insecurity and detachment, while relying exclusively on the light of one's connections with others leads to one becoming overburdened by those connections. A complete absence of connectivity results in the likes of Xehanort, who pursues his goals without thought or care for the people he hurts and discards along the way. Too much emphasis on connection and you get Master Eraqus, who prioritizes the collective good and has no tolerance for secrets hiding in the shadows, seeing Darkness as nothing but a representation of negative impulses that threaten to damage people's connections.

These themes and messages are consistently reinforced by parallels between the events of the main story and the plotlines of individual Disney worlds. As an example, *KH3* compares Hercules diving into the River Styx to rescue Megara's soul with Riku's sacrifice for Sora at the Keyblade Graveyard later in the game. Parallels with Belle and the Beast, Ariel and Eric, and Simba and Nala are used to foreshadow Sora and Riku's reunion at The World That Never Was in *KH2*. And the entire plot of *Dream Drop Distance* is essentially an adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* with Sora cast in the role of Princess Aurora, and Riku as his Prince Phillip.

Kingdom Hearts adheres to the framework of the Heroine's Journey on so many different layers. It lines up with two different formulas for the framework in multiple ways. The emphasis on balance between light and darkness matches how the Heroine's Journey stresses the importance of balancing conflicting traits. And the individual experiences of Sora and Riku

resonate perfectly with common LGBTQ+ experiences, aligning perfectly with how the Heroine's Journey functions as commentary on the culture around it. All of which is heavily reinforced by visual, narrative, and thematic parallels with canon Disney romances.

Part VI: Closing Thoughts

The long-term narrative of the *Kingdom Hearts* saga is following the narrative framework of the Heroine's Journey in plot structure, character arcs, themes, and social messages. The entire series so far has followed the steps of Murdock's outline perfectly from both Sora's and Riku's perspectives, and everything that is being set up by Limit Cut and *Melody of Memory* matches with the stages of the journey yet to come. Understanding how the story aligns with the Heroine's Journey makes all the puzzle pieces of future foreshadowing for Sora and Riku's journey incredibly straightforward to predict, and serves to clarify the direction of the series in regards to the identity of Sora's endgame love interest.

The series fits within a storytelling formula that explores the life experiences of people who do not see themselves in the shoes of a straight male protagonist. It is a narrative framework used to tell coming-of-age stories about people who do not conform to what society tells them a person with their identity should be. While the formula's creator was focused on straight, cisgender women, its premise of giving a voice to people with experiences not commonly portrayed in fiction means the concepts and formula can be applied to the experiences of many different identities.

It makes perfect sense then why Sora and Kairi still haven't gotten together despite being assumed as the intended endgame of the series, and why the writers continue to produce titles that focus specifically on Sora and Riku. Because from the meta standpoint of the Heroine's Journey's core design, a relationship between Sora and Kairi would not challenge the audience's preconceptions and biases the way that Heroine's Journey narratives are designed to do. Meanwhile, placing Riku in the role most commonly filled by the main love interest challenges fans to rethink their first impressions from the beginning of the series as the story moves along. It forces people to question the assumptions they've made about romance and attraction and hopefully reflect on how they see the world.

Although the story appears convoluted and hard to follow when approached from the more easily recognized Hero's Journey structure, the core plot of *Kingdom Hearts* has always been fairly straightforward when viewed through an alternative lens. When the series is analyzed through the Heroine's Journey framework, the narrative pattern becomes significantly easier to understand and predict, as do the themes and story direction. The repeated use of Disney parallels in combination with a narrative framework built around questioning biases and defying the status quo point towards *Kingdom Hearts* following the path of a romantic Heroine's Journey. And the series' themes, visuals, and story structure leave Sora and Riku as the most fulfilling option for that central romance, as the ones who can achieve the ideal balance between light and darkness in the world around them by achieving balance between themselves.

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Additional essays about Kingdom Hearts and the Heroine's Journey, including a 10-part series
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AO3 profile.