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FROM DEPARTURE TO RETURN: THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN MAKOTO SHINKAI'S *SUZUME*

Tri Wulandari[1], Miftahur Roifah[2*], Desi Puspitasari[3]
[123]Universitas Trunodjoyo Madura, Indonesia
**Corresponding Author:* miftahur.roifah@trunojoyo.ac.id

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Abstract. Many contemporary stories reshape traditional hero myths to emphasize psychological growth and moral choice over physical triumph. This study examines how well Joseph Campbell's monomyth explains the protagonist's development in Makoto Shinkai's novel Suzume. Using a qualitative method, Suzume Iwato's untterances, interactions, and key events are analyzed through Campbell's framework to map her journey onto the stages of Departure, Initiation, and Return. Findings indicate that Suzume progresses through most monomyth sub-stages but omits several conventional elements; refusal of the call, woman as temptress, and apotheosis. Her journey emphasizes internal change, trauma healing, moral responsibility, and emotional independence rather than external feats. The study concludes that Suzume represents a quieter, inward form of heroism and recommends that monomyth theory accommodate affective and ethical paths to transformation in contemporary narratives.

Abstrak. Banyak cerita kontemporer mengadaptasi kembali mitos pahlawan tradisional dengan lebih menekankan perkembangan psikologis dan pilihan moral daripada kemenangan fisik. Penelitian ini mengkaji sejauh mana konsep monomyth dari Joseph Campbell dapat menjelaskan perkembangan tokoh utama dalam novel Suzume karya Makoto Shinkai. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, ujaran, interaksi, dan peristiwa-peristiwa penting yang dialami Suzume Iwato dianalisis berdasarkan kerangka Campbell untuk memetakan perjalanannya ke dalam tahap Departure, Initiation, dan Return. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Suzume melewati sebagian besar sub-tahap monomyth, tetapi tidak mengalami beberapa elemen konvensional, yaitu refusal of the call, woman as temptress, dan apotheosis. Perjalanannya lebih menekankan perubahan batin, penyembuhan trauma, tanggung jawab moral, dan kemandirian emosional daripada pencapaian atau kemenangan secara fisik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Suzume merepresentasikan bentuk kepahlawanan yang lebih tenang dan berorientasi pada transformasi internal, serta merekomendasikan agar teori monomyth mampu mengakomodasi jalur transformasi yang bersifat afektif dan etis dalam narasi-narasi kontemporer.

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Correspondence address:
miftahur.roifah@trunojoyo.ac.id

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Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Universitas Trunodjoyo Madura. Jln. Raya Telang, PO Box 2 Telang, Kamal, Bangkalan, Madura.
prosodi@trunojoyo.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Roberts and Jacobs (1997) define literature as works that tell stories, depict human situations, express emotions, and present ideas. Literature includes fiction and nonfiction such as novels, essays, and biographies and offers insights into life through experiences, conflicts, and adventures. Its role is to communicate feelings (joy, sorrow, hope, fear) and to raise social, political,

and philosophical questions. The novel, a major literary form, is a long prose narrative that enables more complex characters, plots, settings, and motives than shorter forms (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). One prominent pattern is the monomyth, or hero's journey, identified by Joseph Campbell, which provides a useful framework for analyzing how protagonists grow and change in modern narratives.

Characters are central to a story's meaning and emotional impact. Abrams and Harpham (2015) define characters as the people depicted in a narrative whose moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities readers infer from their words and actions. The motives behind characters' speech and behaviour shaped by temperament, desires, and values. It explains why they act as they do. Some characters possess extraordinary powers which Campbell (2008) refers to such figures as heroes. In the monomyth tradition, a hero may be celebrated or ignored by society, but typically must endure suffering in a world marked by symbolic lack and is charged with rescuing that world from destruction.

The monomyth is a universal story pattern found across myths, legends, and literature. According to Campbell (2008), the hero's journey follows three broad stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return. Departure begins when the protagonist leaves the familiar world to accept a call to adventure. Initiation covers the hero's trials, encounters with allies, enemies, or mentors, and the gaining of new knowledge or powers. Return is the hero's homecoming, when the protagonist comes back changed and often brings something of value to the community.

The monomyth's pattern appears not only in ancient myths but also in contemporary literature, including Makoto Shinkai's novel Suzume (2022). In this work, the protagonist Suzume Iwato undertakes a journey that mirrors the hero's journey: she leaves her ordinary world, faces trials and transformation, and returns with new insight. This alignment shows the monomyth is still useful for analyzing character growth and narrative form. Accordingly, this study investigates how monomyth elements manifest in Suzume and examines the symbolic meanings embedded into its story.

Suzume centers on a high school girl, Suzume Iwato, who accidentally opens a strange door linking the human world to a realm of disasters. After meeting a young man named Shouta, she joins a mission to close these doors and stop further destruction. Over the course of the story Suzume encounters physical and emotional trials that reshape her understanding of loss, courage, and life. This novel was selected because its plot closely matches Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, making it well suited for a monomyth analysis. Suzume Iwato's growth traces the three main phases: departure, initiation, and return while blending fantasy with psychological realism. The study therefore concentrates on identifying and analyzing the specific monomyth stages present in Suzume's character arc.

Several previous studies have been conducted to identify the gaps that this study addresses. Wu and Wang (2022) apply Campbell's framework to Miyazaki's Spirited Away, showing how cultural and narrative specifics shape a heroine's journey. Noor (2020) analyzes Ezio Auditore in Oliver Bowden's Assassin's Creed novel, illustrating the monomyth's fit for modern heroic struggles. Fakhruddin and Retnaningdyah (2019) map Katniss Everdeen's arc in The Hunger Games onto the monomyth, highlighting its adaptation to themes of survival and identity in a dystopia. Kurniawan (2023) examines psychological and physical transformation in Alexandra Olivia's The Last One, showing the monomyth's flexibility in post-apocalyptic settings. Together these studies support using Campbell's model to analyze contemporary protagonists, including female leads, across varied narrative contexts.

Finally, this study applies Campbell's monomyth to a recent, emotionally focused female protagonist. By analyzing Suzume Iwato's untterances, interactions, and key events, the research will map the novel onto the stages of Departure, Initiation, and Return, noting which sub-stages appear or are missing and how they relate to trauma healing, moral responsibility, and emotional independence. Emphasizing inner change rather than physical heroics, the analysis aims to show

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how the monomyth can include quieter, emotional forms of heroism in modern fiction.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to analyze Makoto Shinkai's novel *Suzume* (2022) through Joseph Campbell's monomyth. The data consist of the novel's narration and the main character Suzume Iwato's utterances, dialogues, and key events that illustrate stages of the hero's journey; no interviews or fieldwork were conducted, and data collection was limited to document (textual) analysis. The researcher served as the primary instrument, conducting repeated close readings to identify significant incidents, challenges, and transformations corresponding to Departure, Initiation, and Return, and noting themes such as trauma healing, moral responsibility, and emotional independence. Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model. Relevant text excerpts were selected and condensed, the material was organized and displayed by mapping Suzume's journey onto Campbell's framework, and conclusions were drawn and verified by checking the consistency of interpretations against the source text. Findings are presented qualitatively, highlighting which monomyth sub-stages appear or are absent in *Suzume* and explaining how the novel's supernatural and psychological elements shape the protagonist's development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion links Suzume Iwato's story in Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume* to Joseph Campbell's monomyth (the Hero's Journey), which frames narratives around Departure, Initiation, and Return. Shinkai follows this classic structure but grounds it in everyday feelings and inner struggles, showing that the journey is as much psychological as it is physical. Suzume's path involves not only confronting supernatural threats but also facing guilt, loneliness, and the need to heal. The elements shaped by the memory of national trauma such as the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. By centering emotional vulnerability and recovery, Shinkai adapts Campbell's model for contemporary storytelling: he preserves the monomyth's shape while expanding it to emphasize personal growth, connection, and compassionate resolution rather than solely external triumph.

Departure Stage

This section examines how Suzume Iwato's opening movement into the novel aligns with the Departure phase of Campbell's monomyth, focusing on the sub-stages call to adventure, supernatural aid, crossing the first threshold, and belly of the whale. The analysis draws on narrative passages and character utterances to show how these moments initiate Suzume's psychological and narrative transformation.

Call to Adventure

Suzume's entry into the quest is triggered by a deliberate prompt that awakens her curiosity and agency. Souta's question *"You know of any ruins around here? … I'm looking for a door"* (Shinkai, 2022:5) functions as the narrative trigger. Unlike passive calls in some myths, this exchange prompts Suzume to choose to act either she follows the lead rather than being swept in by others' actions. The dialogue shows an active decision to investigate ruins and doors, signaling the shift from ordinary life toward the unknown and establishing the story's emotional stakes (memory, loss, and curiosity).

Supernatural Aid

Supernatural assistance in Suzume appears in multiple, shifting forms rather than as a single, authoritative mentor. Textual evidence includes the talking kitten *"Suzume nice, I like her*" (Shinkai, 2022:19) which introduces a guiding, sympathetic presence; Souta's promise *"I'll catch Daijin and turn it back into the Keystone"* (Shinkai, 2022:61) which signals support tied to mystical objects and the revelation of the Keystones. Those are Keystone, the Western Pillar and the Eastern

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Pillar, which exposes sacred instruments that shape the quest. Daijin's warning *"If you don't, the worm will fall. The earth will shake*" (Shinkai, 2022:93). It functions as crucial supernatural counsel, and later scenes in which Sadaijin/Daijin intervene physically (e.g., protecting Suzume during a fall) show supernatural aid operating protectively and sacrificially. Together, these utterances and events demonstrate that mystical forces in Suzume actively guide, warn, and enable the heroine's forward movement.

Crossing the First Threshold

Suzume's commitment to the adventure is made concrete through actions that mark a point of no return. The narrator records explicit threshold-crossing behavior*: "I leave my bike in the weeds and climb over the DO NOT ENTER barricade, then jog up the narrow, dark path…"* (Shinkai, 2022:7). Likewise, opening the ruin's door and entering the courtyard *"On the other side of the door is the courtyard in midday"* (Shinkai, 2022:9) enacts a literal and symbolic passage from the familiar world into the special world of the quest. These moments function as threshold events that both test resolve and signal Suzume's full engagement with the journey.

Belly of the Whale

Suzume's initial descent into the liminal space produces experiences of isolation, transformation, and symbolic rebirth consistent with the belly of the whale motif. Moments of emergent life from inanimate matter provide strong textual evidence: *"Suddenly, the stone statue feels as warm as flesh. I look down and discover I'm holding a furry animal"* (Shinkai, 2022:9), and *"The face carved in the stone wasn't a fox's, it was a cat's. I remember how it felt when it transformed into an animal in my hands*" (Shinkai, 2022:25). These passages depict a dissolution of the old order and the awakening of new emotional capacity; they act as a psychological crucible in which Suzume confronts grief and awakens responsibility. The embodied, intimate images underline that her transformation is as much inward, accepting memory and loss as outwardly adventurous.

Furthermore, the cited dialogue and narrative actions show that the Departure stage in Suzume follows Campbell's monomythal pattern while emphasizing internal motivation and affective meaning. The call is answered deliberately, supernatural aid is plural and ambivalent yet protective, the threshold is crossed by purposeful acts, and the belly of the whale sequences produce a symbolic death/rebirth that prepares Suzume for deeper trials. These elements establish the emotional logic of the journey: adventure and mythic structure are reframed here as catalysts for psychological healing and moral responsibility rather than solely for heroic spectacle.

Initiation Stage

This section analyzes how Suzume Iwato's middle journey corresponds to the Initiation phase of Campbell's monomyth, focusing on the road of trials, meeting with the goddess, atonement with the father, and the ultimate boon. The discussion uses narrative passages and character utterances as evidence to show how external dangers and internal reckonings together produce Suzume's transformation.

Road of Trials

The novel stages a sequence of escalating tests that compel Suzume to develop courage, responsibility, and practical skill. The earliest manifestation of this pressure is the giant worm overhead*: "It looks like a huge, translucent serpent… It swirls lackadaisically toward the sky"* (Shinkai, 2022:12). The worm functions as a recurring external threat that repeatedly forces Suzume to act. Responsibility for gatekeeping is transferred to her when Souta asks for help *"Suzume, it seems I have no choice. I would like your assistance until we find Daijin"* (Shinkai, 2022:31) placing the burden of preventing catastrophe squarely on her. Moments of urgent peril

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underline the trials' intensity: *"Suzume, can the worm erupt anywhere?! ... If I don't close it fast"* (Shinkai, 2022:35) frames the mission as morally and practically fraught. Suzume's exclusion from ordinary perception "Nobody notices". They don't notice the abnormal shimmer isolates her and marks the special world of trial. Physical tests culminate in scenes such as clinging to Sadaijin's whisker during chaotic upheaval *"Sadaijin below me pushing the worm back to the ground. I'm holding one of its whiskers"* (Shinkai, 2022:140) which combine danger, endurance, and reliance on allies. Collectively, these exchanges and images evidence a road of trials that forges Suzume's practical competence and moral resolve.

Meeting with the Goddess

Moments of compassionate refuge and care function as the initiation's emotional aid, enabling Suzume to continue amid hardship. Rumi's intervention *"You can sit there all day, but no bus is gonna come." The car "smells like grown-up perfume…like cookies*" (Shinkai, 2022:49) provides warmth, safety, and a temporary home that rescues Suzume from despondency. Similarly, Tamaki's recollection *"When I finally found her, she was crouched in a snowy field, hugging this little chair that her mother had made for her. ... When I saw her, it broke my heart"* (Shinkai, 2022:115) inscribes familial tenderness and recognition. These utterances present caring figures whose presence restores Suzume's hope and models compassion; they operate as the "goddess" function by supplying emotional sustenance that permits further growth.

Atonement with the Father

Suzume's initiation involves confronting the emotional legacy of parental absence and trauma and arriving at a reconciliatory acceptance. Scenes in the Ever-After present Suzume with visions that externalize this inner work: *"Someone is standing on the far side of the meadow. Her white dress blows in the wind. ... Beyond this figure, a child crouches. Me*" (Shinkai, 2022:63) stages an encounter with projected parental longings and the child-self. The handcrafted three-legged chair *"What is it? ... It's a chair. A little handmade chair with three legs… I can almost remember"* (Shinkai, 2022:64) functions as a tactile link to familial care and sacrifice, prompting memory and emotional restitution. Later, Suzume's admission *"It wasn't a dream...! ... I wandered through a Gate into Ever-After and found my mother there"* (Shinkai, 2022:136) signals a turning point of acceptance: the past is recognized as real and integrated rather than repressed. These moments show that Suzume's confrontation is not with a literal father but with the authority of loss and abandonment; resolving this atonement grants her the inner freedom to act responsibly in the world.

The Ultimate Boon

The narrative's climax yields both a practical and symbolic boon, an achieved capacity to restore balance. Souta's transformation into a keystone *"He's growing colder and colder. A thin film of frost covers the chair's seat. 'Now I am a Keystone"* (Shinkai, 2022:92) and Suzume's decisive act *"With all the strength left in my body, I thrust the Keystone into the worm"* (Shinkai, 2022:94) constitute the successful attainment of the quest-object and the application of hard-won agency. These utterances mark the moment when knowledge, sacrifice, and responsibility coalesce into effective action: the worm is stopped, and Suzume's role as protector is vindicated. The boon is thus both external (closure of the Gate, saving lives) and internal (acceptance, courage, and ethical resolve).

When considered collectively, the initiation episodes in Suzume demonstrate how Campbell's road of trials and associated motifs operate in a modern, affective register. Dialogue and narrated images show that trials are not only physical confrontations with monsters but also ethical choices and memory-work; compassionate figures provide sustaining love rather than miraculous directives; and atonement occurs through embodied remembrance rather than didactic reconciliation. The ultimate boon emerges through cooperative sacrifice and personal

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responsibility, aligning mythic form with psychological healing. In this way, the Initiation stage in Suzume preserves the monomythal architecture while deepening it with emotional realism and moral nuance.

Return Stage

This section analyzes how Suzume Iwato's concluding arc maps onto Campbell's Return stage of the monomyth, focusing on the magic flight, rescue from without, crossing the return threshold, mastery of two worlds, and freedom to live. Evidence is drawn from narrative descriptions and character utterances to show how Suzume integrates her gains into ordinary life and completes her transformational cycle.

Magic Flight

The text presents several swift, liminal departures that embody the perilous return journey. The rising gondola *"Suddenly, I remember where I am inside a rising gondola. The meadow is gone, and so are the two figures"* (Shinkai, 2022:64) signals abrupt disengagement from the special world and the urgency of transit. Similarly, surreal movement *"I've fallen through the moon from the earthly realm to Ever-After, I think. My sensations are strangely clear, like I'm in a waking dream"* (Shinkai, 2022:139) emphasizes the enchanted, disorienting quality of the magic flight. These passages evidence a return that is both fast and precarious, reinforcing the narrative tension before final reintegration.

Rescue from Without

The narrative shows that Suzume still depends on external aid even after her transformation. The physical assistance of another *"He reaches out to pull me up onto the fishing boat. With the Keystone in one arm, I take his hand with the other and somehow manage to get onto the boat"* (Shinkai, 2022:148) demonstrates that allies remain integral to completing the journey. This dialogue/action confirms Campbell's claim that heroes often require outside help to cross the last obstacles and preserve the boon.

Crossing the Return Threshold

Suzume's crossing back into ordinary reality is marked by symbolic recognition and decisive acts. Her revelation *"The Imperial Palace.' I finally realize what has been above me this whole time"* (Shinkai, 2022:102) functions as cognitive integration, identifying the link between the magical events and the ordinary landscape. Sensory familiarity *"The wind has a familiar smell, and the stars look so real I think I could touch them. I can go in"* (Shinkai, 2022:137) signals readiness to re-enter and contain the extraordinary within everyday perception. The literal opening and shutting of doors "*There's a door in front of the little girl. Holding the chair under one arm, she uses the other to turn the knob and open the door"* (Shinkai, 2022:154–155) and *"She returns to the ashen world. Then she shuts the door firmly with her small hand"* (Shinkai, 2022:155) serve as clear metaphors of crossing and sealing the threshold, underscoring successful passage and conscious delimitation between worlds.

Master of Two Worlds

Evidence indicates that Suzume attains a practical balance between her inner, mythic experiences and ordinary relationships. Returning to the site of her former home *"After I close the door, Souta and I go back to the place where my house used to be"* (Shinkai, 2022:156) shows physical reintegration. The shift in interpersonal dynamics *"Tamaki and I have been arguing more than before, but rather than fighting, it feels like a comfortable exchange of ideas"* (Shinkai, 2022:158) demonstrates emotional maturity and an ability to hold conflicting perspectives without

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reverting to destructive patterns. Together, these moments show Suzume negotiating daily life with the perspective and skills gained from her ordeal, exemplifying mastery of both realms.

Freedom to Live

The narrative closes with Suzume's liberation from paralyzing fear and an embrace of ongoing life. Her reflection *"She and I are different. I'm still weak, but at the very least, I've lived twelve years since that day. I've lived. Suzume is all alone, but I'm not alone anymore"* (Shinkai, 2022:153) expresses acceptance of vulnerability and the decision to act on behalf of her younger self, indicating moral courage and existential affirmation. The reassurance to the child-self "*Morning will come, and night will come again, over and over. You will grow into an adult in the light. No matter what happens in the future, no one can stop you"* (Shinkai, 2022:154) functions as both consolation and empowerment, reflecting inner peace and forward-looking freedom. Finally, the recognition that life continues without a tidy epilogue *"My life is still going on, busy as ever, without the sort of clear dividing line you'd need to call it an epilogue"* (Shinkai, 2022:156) captures a mature acceptance of flux and ongoing responsibility.

These return-stage episodes show Suzume's successful reintegration of the boon into ordinary life. The magic flight and rescue episodes preserve narrative tension and acknowledge continued vulnerability; the threshold crossings and door metaphors mark conscious re-entry and boundary-setting; evidence of altered relationships and daily routines demonstrates concrete mastery of two worlds; and the closing reflections articulate the freedom to live with acceptance and purpose. Dialogues and narrated images both function as proof points: action-oriented utterances (helping hands, the Keystone, opening doors) verify pragmatic reintegration, while reflective sentences (reassurances to the self, acceptance of ongoing life) mark psychological reconciliation. Together, they confirm that Suzume's Return is transformative not only for her personally but also in its implication of caring responsibility toward others, fulfilling Campbell's cyclical model in a way that emphasizes emotional repair and communal benefit.

Previous studies show that Campbell's monomyth is still useful for studying hero stories across different media and cultures. Wu and Wang (2022) show how Chihiro's journey in *Spirited Away* reflects Japanese culture. Fakhruddin and Retnaningdyah (2019) read Katniss in *The Hunger Games* as growing personally while resisting political forces. Noor (2020) applies the model to Ezio Auditore in a video-game novel, showing it works for action-focused male heroes. Kurniawan (2023) uses it for a post-apocalyptic story, highlighting psychological resilience. Noviana (2024) is the most relevant to this paper: she looks at *Suzume* (2022) from a gender and empowerment angle, portraying Suzume Iwato as an active, emotionally strong female lead, though Noviana does not map the monomyth stages in detail.

This study adds to that work by clearly applying Campbell's three main stages: departure, initiation, and return to the novel version of *Suzume* (2022). It finds that Suzume's story follows key parts of the hero's journey: the call to adventure, crossing the threshold, facing trials, and returning with new understanding. Some typical sub-stages, like refusing the call, the temptress figure, and apotheosis, are missing. That aligns with modern retellings that focus more on emotional truth and thematic clarity than strict structural rules (Wu & Wang, 2022; Kurniawan, 2023). Overall, Suzume's story is a modern, culturally grounded take on the hero's arc where bravery shows up as care, responsibility, and healing rather than conquest. This supports the idea that Campbell's framework remains useful but flexible for studying female protagonists in contemporary Japanese stories..

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined how Makoto Shinkai's novel *Suzume* (2022) applies Joseph Campbell's monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008). The goal was to track Suzume Iwato's

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journey through Campbell's three main stages: departure, initiation, and return to identify how the novel updates the hero's journey to reflect modern storytelling and cultural concerns. Using Campbell's framework, the study shows that Suzume's arc follows the basic monomyth structure while introducing notable narrative changes.

Findings indicate that Suzume completes nearly all major monomyth stages: she receives the call when she discovers a mysterious door, crosses the threshold into the supernatural, endures trials across Japan, confronts and heals childhood trauma, and returns with the elixir by closing the final door and mending her emotional wounds. Some traditional sub-stages, such as refusal of the call, the temptress motif, and apotheosis are missing. Rather than being swayed by external temptation or divine revelation, Suzume's growth stems from inner strength, moral responsibility, and quiet courage. She largely saves herself, supported but not dependent on mentors, an important shift from classical hero tropes. This reflects a contemporary, gender-aware reading of the monomyth in which heroism is shown through emotional healing and autonomy rather than physical triumph. The results align with Campbell's idea that mythic forms change across cultures and time, and they reinforce recent scholarship.

In sum, *Suzume* retains the core monomyth framework while offering a culturally specific, psychologically rich reinterpretation emphasizing female agency and trauma recovery. The novel illustrates how mythic patterns endure by adapting new meanings, broadening the hero's journey beyond traditional Western, male-centered models into more inclusive and emotionally resonant storytelling.

Future studies should look at *Suzume* (2022) more broadly by examining characters beyond Suzume Iwato. While this study centers on Suzume's hero's journey using Campbell's (2008) monomyth, the novel also contains complex supporting figures: Shouta, Tamaki, and Daijin who embody themes like loss, duty, generational trauma, and spiritual guardianship. These characters add emotional and symbolic richness but are not fully explored in mythic or psychological terms here. Later researchers could apply other theoretical approaches like Jungian archetypes, feminist narrative theory, or Japanese folklore studies to clarify how these secondary characters operate within the story's mythic structure and cultural setting.

Moreover, *Suzume* reshapes the classic hero's journey by foregrounding trauma healing, environmental concerns, and female autonomy topics that speak to contemporary global issues. Future work could use Maureen Murdock's (1990) Heroine's Journey to examine how Suzume's path departs from Campbell's male-centered model and instead highlights reconciliation, care, and inner recovery. Researchers might also investigate how the novel engages with post-disaster Japanese identity, using cultural studies or trauma theory to read "doors" and earthquakes as metaphors for collective memory and recovery. Combining myth analysis with culturally specific frameworks will help explain how modern Japanese stories like Suzume adapt ancient narrative patterns into meaningful commentaries on present social and emotional realities.

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