A STUDY OF RETURNING HOME NARRATIVES ACROSS FILM AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN LIGHT YEARS

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Everyone can understand the sensation of returning home after being away. It can be as simple as coming home after spending a few hours at a party or as complicated as returning to a broken home after years away at war. It is no surprise that storytellers from vastly different cultures and time periods have used the returning home narrative to create drama for their characters. This universal appeal and the use of the returning home narrative in many great films is what initially attracted me to craft my thesis film *Light Years (2015)* around the subject. In this essay I intend to analyze the returning home narrative across different films, discuss how they inspired *Light Years* as it was developed, and demonstrate how my film builds on what has come before while also pushing this traditional narrative forward in new ways.

Before diving into the examination of the returning home narrative in film and my advancement of those techniques in *Light Years*, I would like to establish a foundation for what the return narrative truly is through classic mythology and the work of Joseph Campbell. In his seminal book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* Campbell describes the general narrative path of the monomyth as, “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 23). He broke this structure down into three distinct segments: Departure, Initiation, and Return.

Campbell wrote *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as a commentary and analysis on common themes he discovered in myths and stories across cultures. It is not, as some have deemed it, a blueprint or formula to proper storytelling. Slavish devotion to the structure laid out by Campbell “can be boring and predictable. But if writers absorb its ideas and re-create them with fresh insights and surprising combinations, they can make amazing new forms and original
designs from the ancient, immutable parts.” (Vogler xv). In order to judge how unique or stale modern interpretations of the monomythic Return are it must first be broken down into the six stages Campbell defined.

Much like how the hero at first refuses the earlier Call to Adventure, sometimes the hero struggles to make the journey back to whence he came. This Refusal of the Return may be because the extraordinary world has enamored him or perhaps he doubts his ability to solve the crisis at home. After all, “even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated” (Campbell 193). The Magic Flight is dependent on if the hero has found his boon in the extraordinary world and left in favor with the supernatural forces he’s encountered or if he’s in conflict with them and pursued on the way back. Or in some cases the hero is so in need that he requires a Rescue From Without. Someone or some force from either the ordinary or extraordinary world arrives to help the hero either through physical assistance or a reconstruction of the ego.

Next is one of the most crucial points in the whole journey, the “paradoxical, supremely difficult threshold-crossing of the hero’s return from the mystic realm into the land of common day” (Campbell 216). The Crossing of the Return Threshold is the point at which the hero must re-enter the ordinary world and decide how he should move forward. Shall he attempt to spread what he has discovered in the extraordinary world to his community, conform to the everyday once again, or discover that he cannot live in the ordinary world any longer and return to the extraordinary? Different myths offer different answers to those questions but universally it is a conflict the hero must face and decide his own path. If the hero is able to achieve a balance between both the ordinary and extraordinary worlds - “not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other” – he
has become The Master of the Two Worlds (Campbell 229). Sometimes it is not the hero who achieves this but rather someone he meets along the journey. They often appear in unsuspecting forms such as a disguised god or a humble beggar whose exterior belies his great wisdom. Finally there is Freedom to Live. The hero has now returned to the ordinary world and moved beyond his previous self-righteousness to an acceptance of the divine and an absence of self. He can now live the rest of his days as a more enlightened individual free from anxious concerns due to his trust in god.

Campbell’s stages of the Return set a baseline for some consistent narrative beats within these types of stories. That is not to say every returning home narrative contains these all these beats or that returning home stories require even one of these beats, though Crossing the Threshold can be found in a majority of them. Examples of the returning home narrative can be seen in countless ancient tales from Odysseus’ journey back to Ithaca to Moses returning to Egypt after his encounter with the burning bush. Many of the examples Campbell lists in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* involve a literal physical journey but the same storytelling principles can be applied when the quest for change is internal and more mundane. This version of the journey is seen more often as time passes and storytelling branches off from the religious epics of the past.

As I was looking into ideas for my thesis film, I found it interesting how many films do not delve into the Return step of the Hero’s Journey or at least do not do it to the extent many of the classic myths did. Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) ends with Brody and Hooper paddling with the wreckage of their boat back towards shore just a minute after the defeat of the terrifying shark. No screen time is devoted to how Brody’s perception of the ordinary world has been altered by his journey into the fantastic world. This structure makes sense for *Jaws* as the journey
is more a physical conflict in which Brody defends his home rather than a deep personal journey that alters his worldview. Many films end in this manner with the Return stage being confined to the last few minutes before the credits. Compare that to the *Argonautica* where the return of Jason with the Golden Fleece takes up a much larger portion of the overall story. Christopher Vogler took note of this when he wrote *The Writer’s Journey*, a book that lays out the beats of Campbell’s monomyth and reconstructs it in a structure with the intent of being helpful to writers. It is no coincidence that Vogler condensed the Return into three steps: The Road Back, Resurrection, and Return with the Elixir. This order fits more comfortably into the three-act structure many books and movies adopt. Many filmmakers would prefer the hero to discover the boon he has been searching for at the climatic endpoint of the story rather than having an entire act of the movie devoted to the Return.

Of course not all films circumvent the traditional steps of the Return. Some focus on the return journey heavily or even make it the entire purpose of the whole story. One such movie is William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)*. The film focuses on three men returning to America after World War II and how they integrate back into society after going through such a life changing experience. Wyler takes an interesting approach to this concept and depicts each of the men’s stories with equal importance, each of them having their own unique struggles with their return home. Al Stephenson, the oldest of the trio, has a wife and two children waiting for him at home as well as a promotion at his bank. He faces the least external conflict of the three, but still struggles with how much his children have grown without him. At his bank he’s put in charge of issuing loans to servicemen under the GI Bill and is sympathetic to the plights of the soldiers, giving a loan to a young Naval veteran despite his lack of collateral. After being told
not to make a habit of it by his boss, he responds with a conviction he has gained from his years away from home.

You see, Mr. Milton, in the Army I've had to be with men when they were stripped of everything in the way of property except what they carried around with them and inside them. … I tell you this man Novak is okay. His collateral is in his hands, in his heart and his guts. It's in his right as a citizen. (The Best Years of Our Lives)

Al understands what soldiers like Novak have had to go through and the amount of trust it takes for comrades in arms to fight for their lives together. This is his boon from the extraordinary world that his boss, focused on the company’s bottom line above all else, cannot understand. But the journey is not without its consequences and Al turns to alcohol to help him cope with his slow reintegration into his family. His relationship with his daughter Peggy becomes significant in the story of one of the other soldiers, Fred Derry.

Fred’s story receives the most screen time and makes him arguably the primary protagonist of the film. He was promoted to captain over the course of his service in the war but his lack of marketable skills back home force him to return to his previous job, a drugstore soda jerk. This strains his relationship with his wife Marie who was unable to find for his first few days upon returning home due to her becoming a nightclub waitress. His financial difficulties lead him getting drunk one night with Al and being brought back to Al’s home by Peggy. The two strike it off well and begin talking more often, even after Peggy has to calm Fred down from a PTSD nightmare. Al is not pleased with his daughter’s intention to break up Fred’s marriage so he tells Fred to stay away from her.

From here Fred’s life begins to spiral out of control, losing his job at the drugstore when he gets involved in a fight between his veteran friend Homer and a man questioning the morality
of the war. Not long afterwards he comes home and finds his wife sleeping with another veteran. They break up then and there as she yells at him about how she gave up “the best years of my life” for him (The Best Years of Our Lives). Disillusioned, Fred buys a ticket for the next flight out of the airport and wanders around a nearby field filled with old planes waiting to be scrapped, useless remnants of the war like him. This is one of the most poignant scenes in the film due to the great filmmaking techniques used by Wyler and his crew.

Cinematographer Gregg Toland’s use of deep focus and strong wide shot compositions lends symmetry to the rows of plane noses behind Fred in the first shot of the scene. It is not straight on Fred as he walks to the right but slightly behind him letting the audience see more of the rows of planes, stretching back like headstones in a graveyard. The deep brass and percussion of the score dominates the mix throughout, going into overdrive once Fred has climbed into the nose of one of the planes. A blast of trumpets simulate the start of each of the plane’s now-removed propellers and the camera dollies forward at a low angle, suggesting that the plane is taking off as the roar of a plane engine soars into the sound mix. The camera lingers on Fred in close-ups as the foreboding dangerous music continues to build until he is broken out of his memories by a man yelling at him. Tension dissipates as the music fades right when Fred opens his eyes and leaves the plane. This scene stood out to me when I first watched the film for its masterful combination of filmmaking techniques and would serve as an inspiration to me later on when I made Light Years.

Fred convinces the boss of the work crew there to give him a job tearing down the planes to use their aluminum for building houses. He returns home and later serves as the best man in his friend Homer’s wedding. There he sees Peggy and kisses her. Even though they both admit that there will hard times ahead, they commit to their love of each other and their desire to
establish a new life together. Overall, Fred’s story portrays quite a different message from Al’s. He returns home to find his wife more distant from him, his military skills undervalued by the job market, and his mind still stuck in Europe and unable to forget the war. Yet he perseveres through all the adversity and finds in Peggy someone who is willing to stick with him through the hard times and pursue the American dream.

Homer Parrish rounds out the trio of protagonists as the man with the most obvious external conflict of them all. He lost his hands in a bombing run and now struggles to adapt to his two crude claw replacements. The film in unflinching in portraying how everyone from strangers to his own family treat him differently. They want to help but Homer can not see these gestures as anything other than pity for a cripple. Simple tasks such as picking up a glass of beer are small challenges for Homer and he wallows in depression as a result, pushing away his fiancé Wilma so that she can find better happiness with someone else. He takes solace in his friendship with Fred and Al and its Fred who urges him to marry Wilma anyways.

This leads to another poignant scene where Wilma is being pressured by her family to leave town in order to forget about Homer. When she insists that she still loves him, Homer has her follow him up to his bedroom to watch as preps for bed. A sad string theme plays as Wyler holds on a medium-wide shot of Homer and Wilma as Homer slowly shrugs off his coat and removes his artificial hands, able to put on his pajamas but not button them up. Confronted by this reality, Wilma still buttons up his shirt and reassures him that she will stick with him no matter what. Finally confident again, Homer marries Wilma in the final scene of the film.

Homer’s story is that of the wounded hero who returns home victorious but forever scarred and changed. Some characters of this type are consumed by their wounds and are never able to integrate into normal society again. However, much like Fred, Homer is able to conquer his fear
through love and move forward even if society never accepts him in the same way again. We see another interesting take on this kind of character in the third act of the war film *The Hurt Locker*(2008).

*The Hurt Locker* focuses on Sergeant William James, the leader of a US Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) unit in the Iraq War. James goes through hell during his tour, his maverick tactics frequently getting his team into tough situations. He witnesses the loss of innocent lives to suicide bombers numerous times and gets blamed by Eldridge, one of his subordinates, for Eldridge’s bad leg injury during a mission. This builds to a scene near the end of his tour where he and his comrade Sanbourn are riding in a Humvee after failing to disarm a bomb forcibly planted on an Iraqi citizen. There is a smash cut from Iraqi children pelting the Humvee with rocks to a grocery store freezer section, James pushing a shopping cart as calming piano plays over the speakers. The camera is pointed to the left outside the window of the vehicle in the first shot which is matched perfectly by the backwards dolly in the grocery store, the camera pointed left at the freezer items and moving at a similar speed to the Humvee shot. These techniques help the transition remain jarring but still flow together in a logical manner rather than being a totally nonsensical shift.

No dialogue is necessary to communicate the contrast. It is obvious to the audience through the mundane fluorescent lighting and the quiet piano music mixed with the clang of grocery carts. Low angle extreme wide shots frame James as dwarfed by the walls of cereal, American commercialism completely unaware and uncaring of what he has been going through. After cleaning wet leaves out of his home’s drainage spout, he tells his wife that a man giving out candy detonated in an Iraqi marketplace. When he suggests that the US need more explosive experts she responds by asking him to chop up some mushrooms for dinner. Through just a few
lines, simple shots and sound design choices, director Kathryn Bigelow communicates the isolation James is feeling.

This is capped off by a scene between James and his baby son where he talks about running out of special things you really care about as you grow older until you only have one or two. “With me I think it’s one,” he says right before the sounds of choppers fade in and invade the quiet bedroom (The Hurt Locker). It cuts to James arriving in Iraq for another tour, unable to return to the ordinary world because his journey to the extraordinary world has transformed him. The nobility of his choice is left for the audience to decide as the film ends with him walking down an Iraqi road in full EOD protective gear while heavy guitar plays. The Return section of the Hero’s Journey is heavily condensed in The Hurt Locker, lasting only five minutes. Yet its provocative framing and strong juxtaposition nails the message within that short period of time and leaves the audience pondering James’ choices as the credits roll.

The Best Years of our Lives dedicated its entire runtime to the narrative of The Return while The Hurt Locker only focused on it for the film’s finale. Now I will explore a film that uses its entire third act for the return home similar to how Vogler laid it out in The Writer’s Journey, Cast Away (2000). Chuck Nolan, a systems engineer for FedEx, proposes to his girlfriend Kelly on Christmas Eve. However at the last minute he is told he has to go to Malaysia to fix a problem. Dedicated to his job, he goes and gets caught in a horrible storm that crashes the plane and leaves him stranded on a small island all alone. The majority of the film focuses on Chuck’s desperate struggle for four years as he attempts to survive. Eventually he is able to make a raft and sail off the island. A cargo ship discovers him by chance and soon enough he’s heading back home.
However he learns upon his return that Kelly has married someone else and has a daughter. The entire third act of the film is focused on Chuck returning to civilization and how he deals with the seismic changes that have occurred while he was away. Her husband Jerry greets him at the airport and explains that Kelly wanted to be there but couldn’t. However afterwards he can see Jerry and a crying Kelly in the parking lot. Director Robert Zemeckis chooses to have a plane taxiing in this scene so the sound of the plane’s engines overwhelms everything else, letting a diegetic sound communicate the emotion of the characters rather than a musical score. That night Chuck goes to Kelly’s home to speak with her. The following scene uses no music for the majority of it, rather letting the awkward silences between Chuck and Kelly speak for themselves. Long continuous shots display Chuck taking in the new environment as Kelly scurries around the kitchen making coffee for him. She even opens her photograph-adorned freezer door right in front of his face, prompting him to ask about her daughter.

He returns a stopwatch she had gifted to him years ago because family heirlooms should stay with her family. The awkward unresolved tension continues to build as she gives Chuck his old car and he drives off into the rainy night. It is here that the score finally returns and begins to build until Kelly runs after him and they share a loving kiss in the rain. She declares that she loves him and sits down in the passenger seat of the car, looking at him expectantly. However Chuck returns to her driveway knowing that her home is no longer with him. Later on, in one long circular dolly shot, Chuck tearfully confesses to a friend that he considered and nearly attempted suicide on the island. He mourns, “I’ve lost her all over again” but decides to repeat what he did on the island and “…keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?” (Cast Away). The film ends with Chuck delivering one
package that had been with him throughout his time on the island and standing in an intersection of country roads, looking at each in turn to decide where he should go next.

Like many of the previous films, *Cast Away* uses the medium of filmmaking to its advantage by manipulating shots and sound and strong performances to wring the most emotion possible out of these scenes. It spends the time across its third act to show Chuck working through his unexpected return to the ordinary world. He has lost much thanks to the time that was stolen away from him but he is able to accept what has happened and use his boon, the mindset the island instilled in him, to move forward even though he does not know what the future may bring.

The time the hero has been away from home has been a factor in each one of the films so far and *Cast Away* showed how much drama can be mined from making the time difference long and unexpected. *Gunbuster (1988)*, a six episode Japanese animated series, takes what *Cast Away* did with time and brings it to new levels by using the Return narrative in a science fiction setting. In 2023 Noriko Takaya is going to a high school that trains its students to pilot giant robots so they can one day join the war against the alien Space Monsters. Although she initially struggles, one of her teachers, Coach Ohta, shows her the work ethic of the school’s top student Kazumi Amano and inspires her to try harder. Realizing the talent Noriko possesses, Coach Ohta takes Kazumi and Noriko with him to one of Earth’s space-faring battleships so they can learn teamwork in combat and pilot the powerful Gunbuster robot.

What makes *Gunbuster* particularly interesting is that its story obeys some real laws of physics such as relativity theory. In particular, time dilation. According to Merriam Webster time dilation is “a slowing of time in accordance with the theory of relativity that occurs in a system in motion relative to an outside observer and that becomes apparent especially as the speed of the
system approaches that of light.” For example if a person is traveling on an object moving near the speed of light for an hour and another person is standing still on Earth waiting, only an hour will pass for the person on the object but a longer amount of time will pass for the person on Earth. In Gunbuster after several months of training and winning their first victory over the aliens, Noriko and Kazumi return to Earth and find that ten years have passed back at home due to the near light speed travel. They have a graduation ceremony at their high school for just the two of them and Noriko runs into her best friend Kimiko who is now a twenty-seven year old mother. As they reminisce on an old playground, Kimiko notes that a huge space station is being constructed in case an evacuation of Earth is required. She drops all casual conversation and asks Noriko if she can use her connections with the military to ensure that Kimiko’s daughter has a place aboard the station. The request shocks Noriko and makes it plain as day just how much life has passed her by. “Space is a vacuum of memories,” she states in an inner monologue (Gunbuster).

Later on in the fifth episode Noriko and Kazumi are sent to the outskirts of the solar system in Gunbuster to fight off a massive army of aliens. However Coach Ohta, who Kazumi is in love with, is suffering from a terminal disease and may not be alive by the time they return due to time dilation. Kazumi even suffers a mental breakdown inside her cockpit as she watches the days on Earth rapidly click by on her clock. But Noriko convinces her to fight for the sake of Ohta along with everyone else on Earth and they manage to stop the aliens. When they return Ohta is still alive despite six months passing on Earth and Kazumi is able to confess her love to him. In every episode the show continues to find inventive ways to wring more drama out of the time dilation concept.
Kazumi’s happiness is short lived once episode six opens on a shot of Ohta’s grave after fifteen years have passed. Director Hideaki Anno decided to make the final episode entirely black and white as well as changing to a widescreen aspect ratio in what may be a love letter to old cinemascope war movies. Regardless, Kazumi decides to join Noriko in space for one final mission to eradicate the aliens once and for all. Once again only six months have passed for Noriko and she acts awkwardly around Kazumi referring to her by her official title rather than her nickname. Kazumi gives Noriko a letter from Kimiko who explains that her daughter is now eighteen. She writes, “I may not be able to see you again before my time is up but please, at least come back while my daughter’s alive” (*Gunbuster*). Noriko’s heroism is rewarded with solitude and loneliness and she cannot help but cry.

The giant final battle against the aliens progresses well until the massive bomb the humans have brought with them fails to go off. Noriko and Amano volunteer to go inside the bomb and jump-start it with the core of Gunbuster. No one knows what will happen to them if they get caught in the ensuing black hole but Noriko preserves, fighting to ensure that Kimiko’ daughter and the next generation will not have to endure what she has. They detonate the bomb and get caught in the supermassive black hole. When they come to, the broken remains of Gunbuster are drifting above Earth 12,000 years later and they see no lights down below. At first assuming the worst, they are soon surprised as city lights appear across Japan spelling out “welcome back.” Having saved humanity they launch their escape pods and drift down to the Earth below, proper color and aspect ratio finally being restored as the heroes make their triumphant return. This series was the single biggest inspiration for the creation of *Light Years* as I was fascinated by how the time dilation grounded *Gunbuster* in strong understandable human emotion despite its ridiculous sci-fi setting and action. Though there was a film that came out not
long after I began planning *Light Years* that also tapped into realistic sci-fi for the sake of drama, Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014).

In the near future of *Interstellar*, massive droughts and famine have decreased the world’s population and it will soon accelerate to apocalyptic levels. Joseph Cooper, a widowed former NASA pilot, decides to assist in a NASA expedition with the goal of finding a new hospitable planet for humanity. It is a difficult decision for him to leave behind his son Tom and daughter Murphy but he decides to go in order to give them a future. Cooper and the other astronauts travel through a wormhole to investigate three planets near a black hole that have scouted out by their predecessors as having the potential for life. The first planet they visit is covered entirely in ocean and has severely dilated time due to its proximity to the black hole. For every hour on the planet, seven years pass back on Earth. Cooper goes down to investigate despite his concerns about too much time passing and discovers that the equipment had been destroyed long ago and that there is no life on the planet. They narrowly escape being killed by an enormous tidal wave but do lose one of their members and spend longer on the planet than they planned. When they arrive back at the main ship 23 Earth years have passed.

This leads to arguably the most emotional scene in the film where Cooper replays all of the video messages he has received over the years. The first shot is a simple medium shot of Cooper that very slowly dollies forward as the first message from Tom plays. Much like in the previous films, Nolan keeps it simple and lets the emotional moments breathe without lots of cutting or complex camera moves. Periodically a light from the spaceship window lights up Cooper’s face and Hans Zimmer’s pipe organ score stays low in the mix, allowing Matthew McConaughey’s gradual tearful breakdown to take center stage. The scene descends from melancholy to depressing quickly as Tom’s third video explains that Cooper’s dad has died and
that Tom’s own first born child died years ago. Just as Tom says it is time to move on and signs off for the final time, Zimmer’s score abruptly cuts out. However a different single note piece of music starts up as Murphy’s first and only message appears. She tells Cooper that she is now the same age he was when he left. Watching the broken promises, aging, and steady collapse of his children’s lives play out before him understandably torments Cooper and the film has built up the family enough in the first act for the audience to feel Cooper’s horror too.

After falling into a black hole and breaking the laws of space-time in the film’s climax, Cooper wakes up decades later and is picked up by the massive space station Murphy helped build to send humanity to its new home. He reunites with Murphy as she is on her deathbed, now an old woman. But she tells him a parent should not have to watch their child die and instructs him to take a ship and find Amelia Brand, his fellow astronaut who investigated the third and only life supporting planet in the system. Just as soon as Cooper returns to the ordinary world after a time bending journey through space, he goes back out into the extraordinary. Like Noriko, time dilation has set Cooper apart from those he loves and he chooses to brave the dangers of space once again to give Amelia solace rather than resting for his efforts. I would adopt this type of protagonist for *Light Years* as well but it took trial and error before I realized that character what the story needed.

Back in summer of 2014 I was in Chicago, far from my home in Traverse City Michigan. I had received an opportunity to get experience on an independent feature film and was working on set as an Assistant Cameraman for no pay. It gave me a good experience of working with professionals outside of Ohio University as well as truly living on my own for the first time. Amidst all that excitement I was thinking in the back of my mind about what I would make for my thesis film. A few concepts came to me but none of them really stuck until I watched
Gunbuster one weekend. The series had plenty of heart-pounding moments and awesome action scenes but what really struck me was the time dilation premise and how Noriko continued to drift farther away from the rest of humanity. When Noriko read the letter from Kimiko in the final episode and began to cry I felt her pain despite how little Kimiko was actually in the series. But right after that scene the story moves into the preparations for the final battle and barely refers to that poignant moment again. I thought that was a shame and began to conceive of ideas for a short film that would focus specifically on the effects of time dilation on a relationship. Seeing the trailer for Interstellar not long after that reinforced my belief that this type of story had deep narrative potential as well as an audience.

But that did not mean I had everything figured out. My thesis advisor Annie Howell and I had long conversations where I would bounce ideas off her about how the story should proceed. I had decided that the primary characters would be Dave, the astronaut protagonist, his wife Lisa, and his young daughter Sarah who would be high school age by the time he made it back. He would be aboard a faster than light spaceship that would have an accident, flinging the ship out of hyperspace and leave them speeding through the galaxy at near light speeds. However the framing of that story and the width of its narrative focus changed multiple times. Originally I conceived that the crew would need to continue moving at those speeds in order to ever return to Earth. So the entire film took place aboard the ship and centered on the video calls Dave would make to his family every day, watching as years passed on Earth and his family changed while he remained the same. This version was more of a survival story with Dave working with his crewmates to overcome obstacles and deal with the depression brought on by the how much time is passing on Earth.
It was here that I remembered *Cast Away* and how the film dedicated its entire third act to what happens to Chuck after he returns home. That is where the film reaches its emotional climax and deals with the most heavy drama, not the survival on the island. Add onto that the complexity of building a convincing spaceship set for the entire film, (something I got to witness first hand while working on the set of fellow student Gavin Farnsworth’s thesis film) I decided to set the majority of the film on Earth. So now in the narrative the spaceship quickly decelerates after the accident and arrives back at Earth but even that short time traveling so close to the speed of light causes ten years to pass by on Earth.

But how should he reunite with his family? There were many iterations of this such as Dave returning the week before Lisa and Sarah were going to move to a new city. This focused on Dave living with them again and the arguments he gets into with both of them over what had transpired while he was gone. Lisa struggles with reuniting after years of thinking he was dead while Sarah flat out hates him for abandoning them. There was a scene where he meets his fellow astronaut at a bar and they discuss what its like feeling misplaced by time and even the suicide of one of their other crewmates. This all builds to a climax where the family yell at each other and express what they are feeling deep down. I had many endings in mind ranging from the family preserving and reuniting to tearful separation to ambiguity on moving day.

Ultimately however I rejected this narrative path. The drama would be heightened if Lisa had remarried while Dave was gone and condensing the majority of the film to a single day rather than a week works better for the short film format. Even in this new version I had extraneous scenes such as Dave visiting a graveyard and finding his parents’ headstones and exposition explaining that Dave had left NASA sooner than he was supposed to in order to see his family. My conversations with Annie helped me remember that this is a short film and to stay...
focused on the core narrative, the relationship between Dave and Lisa. We also agreed that a bittersweet ending had the most potential for drama while keeping all of the characters relatable. This is how the final outline of the story developed.

The screenplay begins with Dave on Earth arriving at Lisa’s home. However an older woman named Margaret answers the door and explains that Lisa moved out years ago. Before he leaves to visit Lisa at her new home, Dave has a flashback to what occurred on the spaceship. Back in the present, a high school age couple argues on the sidewalk as he walks by. Eventually he reaches Lisa’s new home and they embrace. But an awkward conversation in the kitchen reveals how strained their relationship is as well as giving Dave hints that Lisa has remarried. Before she can explain, Sarah arrives home. Dave sees his daughter all grown up and realizes she was the high school girl he passed by on the sidewalk earlier. Upon realizing who he is, Sarah runs into her room in anger and Roger, Lisa’s new husband, comes inside along with their young son Tristan. Rather than having Roger and Dave get into an argument as I had in past versions, Roger leaves Lisa and Dave so they can figure things out, though he does give Dave a threatening stare.

Roger and Lisa have an emotional conversation where they both lay out how hurt they both are. Realizing how complicated the situation has become, Dave decides to leave and spend some time alone thinking. A few days later Lisa finds a package from Dave in the mail containing a watch she had given to him in the past, now forever frozen and broken in the accident, and a letter explaining that he will be going back out into space. Dave, like Chuck in Castaway, does not hold any grudge against his wife for moving on and takes the selfless path by removing himself rather than trying to force his way into a happy family.
That final scene is underscored by soft piano, one of the few uses of music in the film. This was intentional as I wanted to save the score for the most important scenes and use it to reflect Dave’s mindset. It also helped me control the pace of the editing, somewhat like the airfield scene from *Best Years of Our Lives*. My focus in this final version of the film was to integrate high concept science fiction with relatable familial drama. I wanted to keep the focus on the realistic relationship of Lisa and Dave with the science fiction elements in the background setting the stage for everything. But even this was not the end for the development of *Light Years*’ story as I moved into the editing process.

Following the advice of my professors as well as my own instincts from having watched poignant dialogue-less scenes in films like *The Hurt Locker* and *Best Years of Our Lives*, I decided to cut around dialogue at several important points. For example instead of Sarah and Dave exchanging a few lines when they meet inside the house I changed it to a single moment of eye contact between the two before she storms off. When Dave leaves the house Lisa originally said “stay safe” but now the moment is communicated through their faces and Lisa retracting her outreached hand. This is a more elegant solution that takes advantage of the visual storytelling that can be accomplished in film. *Light Years* was originally not approved by my thesis committee mostly due to confusion over the spaceship scenes and the timeline. I solved these issues by rearranging the story so the spaceship sequence occurs first as well as changing some voice over and CGI shots to better indicate what was occurring. As is the case with many films I only truly discovered how *Light Years* worked once I was in the editing room and able to see how the disparate scenes came together. In this way I was able to craft a film that pushes the Return story forward in a different way than its predecessors.
My intention with *Light Years* was to take the strong emotional moments from larger time dilation stories like *Gunbuster* and *Interstellar* and cut away the complex setting and plot. By making the primary focus the grounded family drama on Earth rather than the adventure in space I hoped to create a film with a relatable emotional core while still having the intellectual intrigue and clever narrative devices of science fiction. I also intended to turn some of the traditional narrative beats of the Return on their head. The hero does journey out into the extraordinary world but that journey does not change much about him. Rather, the journey has an unintended consequence on the ordinary world, making home feel more alien to Dave than the cold reaches of space. From the world’s perspective Dave is an extraordinary figure returning from a long journey but for Dave he is just as ordinary as he ever was and it is the rest of the world that has been turned on its head. Beats of the Hero’s Journey do remain however. Dave’s Crossing of the Return Threshold is his argument with Lisa and his subsequent decision about what he should do. Does he fight to reintegrate with the changed world, pursue a relationship with his wife again, or accept that Earth is no longer home for him?

*Light Years* is also set apart from other Return narratives in its controlled drama, rational characters, and moral ambiguity. *Cast Away* did a good job with these elements but even then Kelly was willing to throw away her new life to be with Chuck. The film averts that Hollywood ending by having Chuck be the voice of reason but it also makes Kelly a character the audience should root for, a “good guy.” In *Light Years* all of the adult characters behave in a rational manners which helps emphasize that there is no right answer. It would be nice to have ended the film with Lisa leaving to be with Dave or Dave integrating into the family as a second dad. But reality is more complicated than that and hopefully the audience questions both Lisa and Dave at the end, wondering if what they did was right.
Tied into that is the temptation to make these pivotal return scenes big and overwrought with drama. I know at a time I wanted Dave to get into a fight with Roger and to have both Sarah and Lisa in tears unloading their years of suffering on Dave in the climax of the film. But while such behavior may be true to the characters it runs the risk of being overbearing to the audience. Some of the reaction shots in *Gunbuster* or the scenes with Peggy in *The Best Years of Our Lives* fall into this trap. As stated earlier, I tried to keep *Light Years* focused on the small scale interpersonal drama rather than the large scale plot and setting. Directing climactic scenes to match that vision lends the film an even pace and tone. But it is the combination of all of these elements that set *Light Years* apart from many other Return stories even though it also shares many universal elements in common with them.

There are many other books and films that focus on the Return that I would have liked to analyze in greater detail. The scouring of the Shire and Frodo’s decision to leave Middle-earth from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* or the increasingly long distance texts between space-faring Mikako and Earth-bound Noboru in *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002). Countless stories throughout the ages focus on the return home and each of them presents their own take on those universal beats Joseph Campbell noted. *Light Years* is but one new addition to this sea of content. The film certainly borrows some concepts from its venerated predecessors whether that is the adjustment process after trauma displayed in *The Best Years of our Lives* and *The Hurt Locker* or the confrontation of a strained marriage after years away from home as portrayed in *Cast Away*.

However, I believe it will stand out from the crowd due to how it incorporates those classic themes along with new deviations from the norm. It is a high concept science fiction film yet anyone can appreciate its focus on family and loss. This interesting premise flips the journey
from the ordinary to the extraordinary around and forces Dave to confront a world where everything around him has changed rather than him changing the world. Couple all of that with a lack of overblown drama and moral ambiguity that does not definitively answer which character is right or wrong. Narratively, *Light Years* is definitely an ambitious project for a short student film. Whether that ambition was properly executed or rushed due to the short length is up for the audience to decide. Regardless, I can say with confidence that I am proud of the film I made and the strides I took to explore what the Return narrative has to offer in modern day filmmaking.
Works Consulted


Needham, Col. The Internet Movie Database. Web.

