

Myth & Literature

Wherever one turns, our society seems to be in turmoil. Drug addiction tightens its stronghold on our population, suicide among young people continues to rise, and depression among people of all ages increases. In our families and schools, we seem unable to find common ground, a foundation upon which we can rediscover our individual and collective identity. To cope with anxiety, people flock to cults or therapists or seek membership in movements. Some of these movements can be constructive, as has been the women's movement for many. More recently, the poet Robert Bly, in his best seller *Iron John* and in conferences around the country, has initiated a comparable movement in identity searching among men. What all of these phenomena perhaps suggest, however, is what the contemporary psychologist Rollo May calls "the cry for myth," stories in which people find their most important meanings.

The tremendous national response to the television talks of Joseph Campbell represent one obvious demonstration of this cry for myth, this profound need to search for meaning and significance in the patterns of great stories from world mythology. According to Campbell, myths are metaphors that suggest deep spiritual truths not speakable in ordinary words. These sacred stories, considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past in the society in which they are told, explain how the world and humans came to be in their present form. Although entertaining, these tales can also provide direction to enable us to harmonize our life with reality, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The problem for us today, Campbell says, is that we have lost our myths because science and religion have refuted them by taking them literally instead of symbolically.

Campbell says that mythology portrays the struggle between the unconscious self and the conscious ego. Our conscious self relates to society through a mask or "persona," for traditional society demands that we each assume a role in our social order. We then experience problems, for we begin to identify with the role that society demands we assume. Many of us capitulate and decide to stay on this path, and we end up living noble and prosperous lives. Others, however, refuse to stay in the village compound and obey the required dictates; instead, they enter symbolically the dangerous forest of following their own intuition. These people, Campbell thinks, discover myths to live by and live interesting lives. Their source of life comes from below the threshold of consciousness, from an ultimate source that we cannot know mentally. This ultimate source is transcendent of knowledge. Mythology thus tries to bring our ego back into order with our inner self, for the ego must become transparent to the transcendent in order to become aware of the life source, the divine.

In this comparative study of world religions and mythologies, Campbell finds that the same images and themes constantly recur and appear everywhere. These elementary or basic ideas provide the background of all religions. Examples of these ideas include virgin birth, the death and resurrection of a god, fights between brothers, the quest of the hero, and great floods or other disasters. Wherever these occur, however, they appear in different costumes or provincial forms with different applications and different interpretations. He calls these folk or ethnic ideas; they represent variations of elementary ideas in different times and cultures. Historians and anthropologists, Campbell thinks, are concerned with the costumes or folk ideas while psychiatrists and theologians should be concerned with the elementary, recurring ideas that are constant among all people in all times. This does not usually happen, however, because--as Campbell says--most religions stress the local culture so much that the elementary ideas are hidden. As a result, the rituals of modern religion do not function in their deep meaning possibilities. Rituals are supposed to be the enactments of myths that enable an individual participating in a rite to participate in the myth and thus activate the elementary ideas within one's own psyche.

Campbell's view of elementary ideas relates to Carl Jung's archetypes of the unconscious. Both men think that if we can disengage ourselves from the socially functioning ways of our culture, we can be led--if we follow--beyond maps to that wellspring from which all gods have sprung, which is the revelation of the deepest source and being of ourselves. In their symbolic function of leading us to both our deepest inner being and ultimate reality, myths spur us on to experience the oneness of all people; they can make it impossible for us to reserve love and compassion only for an in-group--those of the same religion or nation--and project aggression and abuse on those outside our local or provincial orders: "We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet... When you see the earth from the moon, you don't see any divisions there of nations or states. This might be the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come. This is the country that we are going to be celebrating. And those are the people that we are one with." In this process, Campbell believes that poets and artists, rather than ministers or priests, can best extract the spiritual essence from modern life so we can pitch our minds beyond ethnocentric rims, to what can be known but not told. The great problem of mythology becomes how one can live as if one with others, and yet live prudently too.

The Power of Myth

by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers

In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell talks about one of the most famous myths, the one he first explored in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that of the paradigm or model of the hero. This pattern is based on bits and pieces from many different myths and legends from all over the world. Campbell's words can best describe this quest: "The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive in the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which gave magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again--if the powers have remained unfriendly to him--his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendent powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir)." This hero represents all human beings, for the quest into inner reality that the hero undergoes is the same quest that we all undertake. Each of us has the heroic potential, for we all follow the mythological path from dependency and immaturity to freedom.

The cycle of the hero can serve as a guide for the path one must follow to reach self-knowledge, to experience the energizing bliss of a spiritual re-birth. And while the cycle can include many elements, the major ones are a going out and a return--death and resurrection--a leaving one condition or way of living and finding the source of life that delivers the individual into a new understanding. This process is always a journey deep into the darkness of self, a journey into one's own spiritual and psychological labyrinth; however, the journey is usually triggered by or reflected in the symbolic landscape of a real physical journey. In *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk travels to a mountain top as well as across the ocean to Europe; in *A Passage to India*, Mrs. Moore and Adela both journey to India; in *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown travels alone to Turkey and then into small villages deep in Spain; in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway has traveled from his midwestern roots to the glamour of Gatsby's parties and the green lawn of his mansion on Long Island. Whether each of these characters finds a spiritual essence that

triggers transformation varies; they all, however, seem to confront the possibility that they have failed to live at all.

In ancient times, it was the shaman whose visionary experiences helped his or her people keep alive the spiritual power of their mythology. John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* recounts the stirring tale of an incredible latter day shaman whose vision simultaneously plummeted him to the depths of his native culture and yet also enabled him to transcend it to include all people. Today, artists fulfill the function of a shaman, a Black Elk. The aesthetic experience the artist can generate within us transcends ethics and didactics; it provides the kind of ecstasy that puts us in touch with our spiritual essence. This spiritual rebirth awakens us at the level of the heart to compassion, the beginning of humanity, Campbell says.

In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell also focuses particularly on the Grail legend, the great myth from medieval Europe that F. Scott Fitzgerald and other artists in our time have referred to in describing the modern world as a wasteland. In this spiritually empty place, people live inauthentic lives. The grail that the knight searches for represents the fulfillment of the highest spiritual potentialities; it belongs to those who have truly lived their own lives, following their own volition and achieving harmonious relationships rooted in compassion for others.

Black Elk Speaks
as told through John G. Neihardt

"My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it... It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit."

So begins John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, an overtly spiritual testament of Native American mythology and a vivid example of Campbell's discussion of the power of myth. An Oglala Sioux holy man, Black Elk in his late sixties first meets the poet John Neihardt in 1931 on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He wants to pass on to him the great vision that he had received in 1872 at the age of nine standing on Harney Peak, the highest mountain in the Black Hills. In his vision, his spirit had been called from his body by a loud voice and transported into the heart of a mystery, some realm of power beyond the protective bounds of his own society. In this vision, he saw images that can be associated with the visions or mysteries at the heart of other great religious traditions: roads of good and evil converging; a holy stick that becomes a great flowering tree; a morning star, a soaring eagle, and a healing herb; the sacred hoop of

his own people as one of many hoops that make one great circle of all living things together as one being. In his return from this experience, he assumes the role of a prophet, exercising healing power and trying to recreate the mystery of the vision for his people through the tribal ritual of the Sun Dance. His efforts appear futile, however, for Sioux history and tradition seem to have come to an end with the massacre at Wounded Knee, the killing of the heroic Crazy Horse, and the shift from a way of life based on the hunt of the buffalo. Black Elk himself lives in doubt, wondering if he has failed to live up to the responsibility his vision had bestowed upon him.

The recording of this story from the oral tradition by the poet Neihardt without the loss of the sacred essence at the heart of the vision represents a masterful transformation of truth within one language and culture into another tradition. Black Elk's decision to tell his story to Neihardt can be seen either as a desperate effort to communicate the healing power of his vision to the world beyond the Sioux or the wise realization of the triumphant wholeness of his vision. On the one hand, Black Elk mourns the loss of his people's dream within historical time, for the sacred tree within the center of his nation's hoop is dead. On the other hand, however, he perhaps senses the difference between the basic or elementary ideas within his vision and their folk expression with Sioux culture. Has he come to realize that the central mountain of his vision is not just in the Black Hills, that God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere?

A Passage to India

by E. M. Forster

In *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster compares and contrasts three major religious or mythical traditions--Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. He satirically depicts the enclave of British citizens desperately trying to hold together the fabric of Empire as they confuse Christianity with imperialism. They seem to live with old myths that have lost their meaning, ones that identify individuals only with their local group. The barriers that exist to make unity among diversity difficult include nationality, religion, culture, caste, and gender. These barriers limit the horizons of characters and pervert their understanding of elementary ideas; love and compassion are reserved for members of an individual's own group. The novel then becomes a profound meditation on the possibility of individuals' realizing, as Campbell says, that "truth is one," though the sages have called it by many different names.

Forster also compares and contrasts the mythical and physical journeys of several characters in relation to the pattern of the hero. Mrs. Moore, perhaps, provides the fullest illustration. In her old age, she has traveled from the provincial security of England to experience India. Responding to the call to move beyond the British enclave,

she enters a mosque, respectfully removes her shoes, and encountering Dr. Aziz, transcends cultural and religious barriers by declaring "God is here." Later, guided by Aziz, she undergoes a threshold-crossing experience in her visit to the ancient Marabar Caves, symbolic of primitive forces, the primal womb and tomb, the dark labyrinth of self-exploration. In the cave she begins to hear an echo, an echo that reverberates to the depths of her being the rest of her life. No matter what sound she hears, no matter how evil or praiseworthy, the echo returns the same; all things that exist seem to be identical, and the neat distinctions Mrs. Moore has always made between good and evil, fair and foul, English and Indian, Christian and Hindu are dissolved. This intense confrontation with a deep sense of evil at the heart of life unnerves her, precipitating a physical and psychological collapse. Her new perceptions lead her inward to confront her mortality, to reassess her whole life.

Whether or not she emerges from this journey deep into herself is one of the mysteries of the novel. Her impact on other characters--potential hero travelers such as Aziz, Fielding, Adela--is interesting to explore. In addition, Forster's questioning of Mrs. Moore's Christian understanding of "God is love" in light of Golbol's Hindu acceptance of good and evil as aspects of God offers readers a mystery to enter into and meditate upon. And like Black Elk, Golbol tries to recreate the energy of myth through ritual in the closing section of the novel.

The Summer Before the Dark
by Doris Lessing

Kate Brown, the heroine of Doris Lessing's novel, begins her summer facing a familiar dilemma--the "empty nest syndrome." Her husband and grown children all have plans to travel, and there is suddenly no need for Kate to maintain the family home, no need for Kate to fill the roles of wife and mother. Her dilemma appears to be solved when she is offered a job as simultaneous translator for a conference sponsored by Global Food. If *The Summer Before the Dark* were a conventional late twentieth-century woman's story, Kate Brown's summer would end with her self-fulfillment as a career woman--a highly-paid executive at Global Food--with the added bonuses of her physical transformation through the acquisition of chic dresses and a flattering, youthful hairdo and her physical fulfillment through the acquisition of a younger lover.

But *The Summer Before the Dark* does not present a conventional story. Kate has already recognized that she is at a turning point: "She felt--to use a metaphor she had been using, indeed, developing, in her won thought, and for some time now--as if a suddenly very cold wind had started to blow, straight towards her, from the future." She discovers that both her position at Global Food and her brief relationship with Jeffrey require her to embody housewifery and motherhood in a professional and impersonal

manner. Kate is quickly promoted at Global Food because of her ability to organize the many schedules and respond to the varying needs of its multicultural representatives (she has raised three sons and a daughter); and with Jeffrey's illness, despite her own sense of detachment and freedom, Kate finally must arrange for his care. Kate realizes she must abandon all relationships in order to discard the masks she has worn throughout her life and face the "cold wind" head on.

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate journeys away from her home and the roles and responsibilities attached to it and toward herself, both literally and figuratively. Her last task for Global Food takes her to Istanbul where she meets Jeffrey, who in turn takes her to Spain. In interior Spain, the shallowness and frivolity of her own life in London are revealed to her in contrast to the ordinary poverty of the Spanish village. But the most important journey of Kate's summer is an interior one, the arduous journey to the ocean with the wounded seal that recurs in Kate's dreams. Kate recognizes that "the dream of the seal" has the flavor of "another time; myth, or an old tale." When her dream journey is completed, Kate knows, she will be able to return home as herself.

The Great Gatsby

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Like *The Summer Before the Dark*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's American classic depicts the events of a single summer, the summer of 1922 as recalled by Nick Carraway. Like many classics of twentieth-century literature, such as *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Great Gatsby* draws upon the patterns of ancient mythologies to shape the perceived chaos of modern life. At the same time, *The Great Gatsby* presents typical American characters as if they were figures of a new mythology. Jay Gatsby is recognized in the American pantheon alongside Shane, Scarlett O'Hara, and Phillip Marlow, among others, all of whom embody the illusions or perversions of the "American Dream."

Fitzgerald's editor criticized him for making Gatsby such a shadowy figure while the other characters were so clearly delineated, but Gatsby's vagueness is essential both to the story and the myth. He is revealed to Carraway and to the reader by his possessions—his magnificent house and cars, his Montenegrin medal and photograph from Oxford, his beautiful shirts; by the rumors about his past as a German spy, a killer, a bootlegger; and by his own and his father's revelations about his true past.

On the one hand, Gatsby represents an American success story; the hard-working ambitious James Gatz of North Dakota achieves his dreams of wealth and power despite many setbacks. On the other hand, Gatsby represents mystery and romance in a cynical era: "It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers

about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world."

The landscape Gatsby inhabits is also symbolic of the tensions and pretensions of twentieth-century America. The island which includes East and West Egg and the valley of ashes "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes--a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enhanced moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." Now the old wealth of East Egg condescends to the nouveau riche of West Egg and the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleberg gaze down on the valley of ashes--the wasteland that encroaches upon New York City.

The Great Gatsby is about the failure of myth in America. If Gatsby is the Fisher King, his death does not restore the wasteland. Tom, Daisy, and Jordan remain "careless" and unaffected. If Daisy is Gatsby's "grail," she represents the worldly aspirations of a mercenary twentieth century, as she remains "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor." Myth or religion has become so degraded that Wilson believes the eyes of Doctor Eckleberg to be the eyes of God. At the end of the summer, only Nick Carraway recognizes the need for a deeper moral order, and only Carraway recognizes Gatsby's greatness.

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