

## The Meaning of Myth

According to Joseph Campbell, myths are the collective dreams of mankind. There are many similarities between myths and dreams. In dreams we quest, or search, for something we value. In myths, the main character (or the hero), quests after something society values. Myths are important to us for that very reason; they give us definitions of and symbols for what we value. Through many of the films, stories and readings we have explored in this class, we've discovered how important mythological symbols are to humanity.

In class and in the Study Guide for *The Art of Being Human* we learned that myths are important because they insure an individual's and society's survival. In defining the value system, myths tell us how to survive in society. If we violate the codes and guidelines of society, we will often end up being excluded from society. Human beings are not autonomous and require the company and aid of others to survive. Myths help define what is good and evil in the world and increase our understanding of the world around us. We try to understand as best we can what goes on around us, and if we do, we can succeed in the world. Myths are mirrors of society and when we look into a mirror, we see ourselves. In this way, we understand ourselves better.

The archetypes, or symbols, in myth often stand for things within ourselves. There are several archetypes; the Hero represents the ideal individual. The person we consider perfect and strive to be. The Garden is the place in myths where all is in harmony with nature; all is at peace. Mandalas are circle archetypes. Mandalas in myth often symbolize eternal cycles, like seasons or birth and rebirth. The Quest is the journey. It is symbolic of the journey through life that all humans make. The Temptress is the darker, Hedonistic side of humans. She represents the greed, lust and sloth all of us are capable of. The Beast is the savage, violent part of ourselves, the fight or flight instinct inside of us. He is something we all must overcome in order to live in civilized society. The Mentor is the older guide for the hero. S/he usually remains distant from the hero and often doesn't actively participate in his/her quest. He seems to say that though we have much knowledge available to us, we must make our journey through life on our own. Magic is the force available to the hero that helps him on his quest. It seems to say that when we do the right thing, "higher forces" will aid us.

These images are present in many of the materials that we covered in this class. Of the slides showing the Garden and the Hero archetypes, I have selected two that portray elements of myth. In "Adam and Eve" by Suzanne Valoden, we see the beast in the serpent by the tree. Eve seems to loosely represent the Temptress with her sly smile and seemingly coy look. Adam seems to loosely represent the reluctant hero. He has given into his greedy and uncivilized side and has fallen from grace (his arm is around the "Temptress" and he has accepted a gift from the "Beast") The Garden is, of course, present, but in Adam's fall from grace, he loses the peace that the Garden represents. In "Rocky Mountains" by Albert Bierstadt we see an excellent example of the peaceful nature of the garden. The colors, mellow grays and greens, imply a peaceful image. The Native Americans are "in harmony" with nature. They are dressed in nature tones, gentle browns and tans. They seem to indicate the ideal of humans working and living hand in hand with nature.

We have also seen elements of myth in some of the short stories we have read. "The Maypole of Merrymount" by Nathaniel Hawthorn is rich with such images. The pagan couple is the hero of the story. They stand together till the end, brave against the terrible threat of the Puritans in the story. (The "Eternal Couple" might also be seen as a common element of myth) The Puritans are represented as having no compassion or respect for the many creatures in the story. In that way they are dehumanized and are portrayed as the Beast. The Maypole, of course, and the circle of pagan worshippers is the Mandala image of the story and represents the seasons. (The mention of the coming of winter in the beginning of the story helps indicate the purpose of the Mandala) The Mentor is the pagan priest, of course. He teaches the Lord and Lady of the May and then disappears because Endicott orders him arrested. The Lord and Lady are about to embark on their heroic quest of surviving their arrest and maintaining their beliefs.

In "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin we only see a few mythic archetypes. James is the hero of the story. His quest is to save his brother and take care of him, no matter the cost to himself. Sonny is the one with the magic, his music. His magic saves him from losing himself in darkness. The Beast is represented by drugs, a common villain in today's society. In "Young Man Axelbrod" by Sinclair Lewis we see a few mythic elements also. Axelbrod quests after knowledge despite the pain it causes, and the harassment he receives from other students. He is a hero, but it's not his goal to be one. The story, however, isn't very mythical overall, and so lacks many of the archetypes.

*Return of the Jedi* is full of mythological archetypes. The heroes are Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Chewbacca, Princess Leia, C3PO, and R2D2. Luke sets out to be a hero; his quest is purposeful. Han Solo and Chewbacca are reluctant heroes. They were smugglers and never set out to be great, but compassion and love keep them on their quest help Luke and the Jedi knights. Princess Leia never tried to be a heroine, but she does great things because she must. The heroes quest after the higher purpose of proper government. They quest for compassionate leaders. (These are things we value in free American society) The magic that aids them is the "Force," an intangible power that works for the good of the heroes. It prefers the heroes over the villains and this attempts to show that the right kind of person will always succeed. The Mentors of the movie are Yoda and Obi Wan. They are older and teach Luke many things. They aid the heroes without getting actively involved in their quest. The Beast is Jabba the Hut, of course. His greed, sloth, drunkenness, violence and treatment of women as sex objects and not deserving of life (like the dancer who was heartlessly thrown to the creature in the pit) represent what free Americans supposedly consider to be the greatest sins.

This movie says a lot about free American cultural beliefs and values. Darth Vader is interesting, because he is part beast, part hero. Vader's existence as mostly machine dehumanizes him, but not all the way. The broken Mandala of the unfinished Death Star seems to indicate that the cycle has taken pause. These incomplete images indicate that Vader is in conflict. He cannot fully believe himself to be the Beast, nor does he believe himself a hero. All is not lost to Vader, but much is. I think this tends to show the reluctance of Americans to fully believe in pure evil. The archetypes in this movie illustrate clearly what American society believes in most. Luke is self-contained, independent and detached, but is loyal to his friends and compassionate. These qualities seem to be what America would believe is the ideal male. Leia represents the ideal female, she is loving to her friends, but strong. She will fight for the men she loves. Han Solo is

not the ideal, but I think the intention of portraying him this way was to illustrate the American belief that fighting for what you believe in and having compassion can redeem anyone. It is interesting to note that, except for his friends, Luke stands empty-handed and alone at the end of the movie. He has no tangible reward such as wealth and no female companion. His mentors and family have died. Perhaps this illustrates that Americans believe a strong mind and friendship are the greatest gifts anyone can receive, and as such, are not deserving of such things as relationships or money.

Perhaps one myth that is very 20th Century in nature would be *Star Trek, The Next Generation*. *Star Trek* takes place in the 24th century in the bowels of space. Earth has achieved an ideal society; it is neat and structured. The Heroes of the show would be the Bridge crew: Captain Jean Luc Picard, Commander Wil Riker, Lieutenant Commander Data, Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge, Counselor Deanna Troi, Beverly Crusher, the doctor, Lieutenant Worf, and of course Gynan. Gynan is the mentor. She is the bartender and she serves as a source of wisdom for the crew (a common myth of American society). The crew of the Starship Enterprise endlessly quest for knowledge of space. They aid those in need whenever they can. They sacrifice the ability to see their families and homes again to find knowledge for humankind to share.

The amazing technology in this series would be the magic of this modern myth. The crew is always finding new ways to use it in order to save the day. The ship is circular in shape; perhaps this mandala indicates man's endless quest for knowledge. One can pick the Beast from any of the hostile races available to hassle the crew of the Enterprise. Or perhaps one can see the Beast as the invisible prejudice that keeps the intelligent, authoritative, and perceptive women from finding a willing mate. The Eternal Couple is not present in this modern day myth. The Cardassians are also a good choice, because they tend to be unnecessarily cruel. Another good choice could be the "empathic" male creatures that have preyed on Beverly Crusher and Deanna Troi. Or perhaps the Beast is present in the disfigured faces of those of other races on the show. In this show, also, there are many white actors and actresses with masks and strange make-up as well.

An interesting aspect of this show is the role of the Klingons. Klingons are very bestial in habits, rituals and appearance, yet they have a well-developed society, emotions and very advanced technology. Perhaps this indicates a desire on the part of Americans to reconcile and integrate the savage side of themselves, especially since in the original *Star Trek*, the Klingons were humanity's enemies. Their appearance as allies demonstrates that one of the ideals in American society is that the integration of our dark and light sides is workable and possible. It is also interesting to note that in this show, as well as many of the modern stories that come out in America, the Temptress has all but disappeared. The Temptor, however, is very present. There are women that appear to be Temptresses, but they are compassionate and caring and not true to the archetype. Perhaps her disappearance is a result of the sexual revolution and a realization on our part that sexual desires are under our control and are no longer as taboo as they once were.

Mythological elements are present in many of our stories, even the true ones. These elements of myth are very important to us, allowing us to define our value systems and survive in society. Like our dreams, myths symbolize what is really going on in our lives by using fantastic

imagery, or archetypes. In myths and dreams, the hero quests for some great gift or ideal; in our dreams, the hero is ourselves. Myths present us with life's journey and show us ways to make our journey successfully.

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October 29, 1993