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What is myth, and how does it affect literature? The word “myth” comes from the Greek “mythos”, which means a story passed on from generation to generation in a tribe, culture or nation. Patterns emerge; plotlines, characters, symbolism, rituals and human drama can be seen from pre-historical times to the present in the works of writers, artists, story tellers and in more recent times, movie makers. This paper will first describe some of those common elements and then link them to well known literature. The examples will be taken from the works of Raymond Chandler, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and the Bible.

The earliest signs of creativity can be seen in the cave paintings of the Neolithic age in southern France and northern Spain, dated around 30,000 B.C. An aura of myth surrounds the paintings. The figure of a man disguised as a deer represents a summoning of game for the cave dwellers. It is a common thread in myths that quasi-natural powers are called upon to help solve human dilemmas. Those are “good”, meaning protectors and food providers. Then there are those imagined entities whom are “evil”; that is, they obstruct the survival needs of the tribe or village. (Day 273) The use of myth to explain natural phenomena continues through recorded history into the Greek mythologies.

The Greeks personified nature's mysteries into a number of deities. There is Zeus the thunderer, Eos is the dawn of the day, the winds are Aeolis, various gods and goddesses help provide an adequate grain harvest. A residue of this connection might be seen in American beauty pageants, where the winner is crowned as “Miss Idaho Potato” or “Miss Cucumber”. (Day 37)

Myths are not only longstanding, going back to the early emergence of mankind, they are deep-seated in human consciousness. According to Joseph Campbell, “Mythology is apparently coeval with mankind. As far back as we have been able to follow the broken, scattered, earliest evidence of the emergence of our species, signs have been found which indicate that mythological aims and concerns were already shaping the arts and world of Homo sapiens.” (19)

Modern examples of how myth affects our lives are abundant. There is religion. Raphael Patai writes that religious functions have remained pretty much the same for the past three thousand years. “Myth informed religion in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia can still be recognized without difficulty in the popular-traditional varieties of Christianity and Judaism.” (131) The Catholic Mass is a repetition of the story of sacrifice, death and resurrection. Popular movies and TV shows feature the archetype of the

mythical hero, such as James Bond, Superman, Wonder Woman, John Wayne, the list goes on. (Frey 252) In literature, mythological motifs and characters are the "matrix out of which literature emerges, both historically and psychology. As a result, literary plots, characters, themes and images are basically elaborations and replacements of similar elements in myth.." (4)

The pattern in stories can be traced back to the earliest written forms. A central character begins life in a humble environment, often born to royal parents. He is separated from his home, drawn away by the call to adventure or threatened by an adversary. He returns homeward, where he is called upon to make a sacrifice. (Frey 23-4) The story may be familiar in Biblical terms, as it applies to Moses and Jesus Christ. It is the story of Oedipus in the Greek tragedy, as well as the story of Beowulf. In Shakespeare, Hamlet goes on a voyage to England. On his return, he finally makes the decision to confront his uncle, which ends in his sacrificial death.

Campbell refers to the archetypal fiction as the monomyth, and he describes it this way: "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." (Frey 1, Patai 59) A variation of the monomyth is described by Spivey, beginning with the concept of the "wasteland", which is parallel to Campbell's region of the supernatural. When the hero recognizes the wasteland of his environment, he begins a quest to find a solution, a way to bring harmony to the universe. He encounters helpers, as well as those who would obstruct his quest. He continues the journey in the hope that he will gain the power, or often the artifact, that will help him overcome the obstacles. (Spivey 13)

The Hard Boiled Detective

In American fiction, the hero is a descendent of the myth of the knights errant. A well known Japanese film critic, Tadao Sato, describes even the popular yakuza films of the 1940's as a descendent of American western movies. "Of course," he says, "if you go back further, those westerns were influenced by tales of knights in the middle ages that had been imported from England and Europe." (Japan Times)

The knights of King Arthur went on their search for the Holy Grail, and this search is metaphorical for the search for truth and goodness. The knight errant evolved into the hero of the American west, a more modern day version is the detective on a case. Raymond Chandler invented the character of Philip Marlowe, a loner in the vein of the hard-boiled detective.

In the view of modern writers, civilization has devolved into a wasteland waiting to be redeemed. T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922) emphasized this concept. Humans are basically not good, conversations are filled with deception; human weaknesses and defects rise to the surface. The hard-boiled detective is

not without his flaws; he is tempted by the femme fatale, he disregards the rules imposed on him by higher authorities. Yet, he has a moral code which is non-negotiable. He is the knight errant seeking truth and justice, with a desire to help out the weak and the victimized. In order to set things right he takes risks, makes sacrifices, overcomes the temptations. In the end, he is a sacrificial victim to his own moral code; he has neither gained power nor status, money nor the femme fatale. He might be physically wounded by his antagonist as well.

Marlowe's beat is the streets of Hollywood, where he is keen to cut through the glitz and glamour generally associated with Hollywood and expose the dark side. At the beginning of *The Little Sister*, he describes his office:

"The pebbled glass door panel is lettered in flaked black paint: 'Philip Marlowe... Investigations.' It is a reasonably shabby door at the end of a reasonably shabby corridor in the sort of building that was new about the year the all-tile bathroom became the basis of civilization." (3)

The flaked black paint, the shabby corridor, the implication that a bathroom with tiles is 'the basis of civilization', the tone of the introduction is an invitation to the reader. Welcome to the wasteland, Chandler seems to be saying. Marlowe's call to adventure comes in the form of a quite prim and proper young lady from the midwest, who hires him to find her missing brother. His search leads him to Bay City, a still darker and forbidding version of the wasteland. Bay City is populated by drug dealers, various shades of con artists and gangsters, and murderers of course. The investigator encounters a helper in the form of a George W. Hicks. Mr. Hicks provides Marlowe with the artifact that will allow him to navigate his way to the truth.

Chandler's fiction is full of femmes fatales. His client, a Miss Orfamay Quest, has a sister who has changed her name to Mavis Weld and is now a Hollywood movie star. Miss Gonzales, assistant to the movie star, provides Marlowe with leads in his quest for the brother named, perhaps as an intended pun by Chandler, Quest. Orfamay has hired the detective in order to get her share of blackmail money, Miss Gonzales turns out to be one of the murderers. They are all after the artifact, the key to the story, which is a set of photos showing the movie star spending some private time with a known gangster.

His search for truth, his version of the knight errant, requires Marlowe to avoid the temptations presented by the femme fatale and the obstructions posed by the police, who threaten him with arrest. Marlowe confronts the police, a lieutenant in the Bay City Police department, head on.

"We got to have you," he repeated. "We got to have sharpers with private licenses hiding information and dodging around corners and stirring up dust for us to breathe in. We got to have

you for suppressing evidence and framing set-ups that wouldn't fool a sick baby. You wouldn't mind me calling you a goddam cheap double-crossing keyhole peeper, would you, baby?"

"You want me to mind?" I asked him.

He straightened up. "I'd love it," he said. "In spades re-doubled."

"Some of what you say is true," I said. "Not all. Any private eye wants to play ball with the police. Sometimes it's a little hard to find out who's making the rules of the ball game. Sometimes he doesn't trust the police, and with cause. Sometimes he just gets in a jam without meaning to and has to play his hand out the way it's dealt. He'd usually rather have a new deal. He'd like to keep on earning a living." (212)

In the wasteland, even the cops are antagonists. Along with the femmes fatales, they are part of the what Frey calls "The Twin Pillars of the Myth-Based Story". (63) The antagonists are determined and ruthless, they are skilled and competent, they threaten and obstruct the quest.

The Old Man and the Sea

In Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the story begins with the everyday routine in a village on the coast of Cuba. The fisherman Santiago hasn't caught a fish in 84 days. He makes a dangerous decision to go out further than he's ever gone before in a desperate attempt to change his luck. He breaks the unspoken rule of the village, which is to stay close to the shoreline in order to find the way back home. He enters the swift flowing Gulf Stream, a metaphorical realm that Frey calls the Mythological Woods. It is a place "full of dragons and monsters, a strange and wondrous place..full of fabulous forces." (165-6).

Santiago's sidekick, a boy named Manolin, is taken away from him by the boy's parents, who believe Santiago is bad luck. According to Frey, "The Sidekick is a close friend and associate of the hero. The Sidekick has all the qualities of the hero, including having a special talent,... but the Sidekick is usually not wounded and is usually not quite as gifted as the hero". [119]

About this relationship, Spivey adds; In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the familiar "pattern of the hero and the comrade is repeated. The relationship between Santiago and Manolin, the boy who 'keeps me alive,' lacks some of the liveliness of earlier friendships in Hemingway, but there is about it a tenderness that is as fine as nearly anything in the earlier novels." (107) Spivey is referring to characters in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Across the River and into the Trees*.

On his return to the village, having navigated by the direction of the wind, the currents, and finally the lights of Havana, it is Manolin who is waiting for him.

He was asleep when the boy looked in the door in the morning. It was blowing so hard that the drifting boats would not be going out and the boy had slept late and then come to the old man's shack as he had come each morning. The boy saw the old man's hands and he started to cry. He went out very quietly to go to bring some coffee and all the way down the road he was crying.
(122)

Santiago is obstructed in his quest for the fish by the sharks, which represent the "dragons and monsters" in Frey's "Mythological Woods". He ultimately loses this battle, yet he returns home as a hero, with his prize being the skeleton of the fish, "eighteen feet from nose to tail. Never has there been such a fish" a villager exclaims. (123) Santiago is redeemed, everybody can see that he fought a ferocious battle.

Hemingway's telling of the fisherman's returning home is perhaps the most dramatic episode of the story. His battle with the sharks has been compared to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Santiago's back is scourged, his hands are bloodied by the ropes. The fight with the sharks is symbolic of Christ's battle with Satan. His prize is taken from him, yet he returns to his village as a hero. Santiago is "as much a hero as Hercules or James Bond" (Frey 32), the hard-boiled detective, or the mythic gunman of the Old West. The novel was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954, credited with its universal theme and "lasting literary merit".

William Faulkner's Heroes; Tragic and Benign

William Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha County, "a cosmos of his own, the postage stamp of native soil" [Urgo xvi] Faulkner wrote a great deal about his mythological creation in the deep South of the United States, and an often used motif is that of the outsider. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the mythical archetype is Thomas Sutpen, one of the original settlers who carved out a plantation from land which he bought from the Native Americans. Sutpen is a doomed tragic hero, in that he sowed the seeds of his own destruction by his use of slave labor and his abuse of the land. Another group of outsiders is the Snopes family, about whom Faulkner wrote a trilogy, beginning with *The Hamlet*.

In the worldview of Yoknapatawpha County, someone from as near as 8-10 miles away would be considered an "outsider". The Snopes had no past record, they were nomadic sharecroppers who settled on large farms and paid rent with the harvest. Later in the novel, more is learned about their past; they had a history of burning the barns of their landlords. In both cases, Sutpen and the Snopes, the characters had been wounded, both in the matter of their personal pride. Pride is the downfall of many of Faulkner's characters, as it is with characters throughout mythological stories. [Spivey 136]

The character who most personifies the hero, in the sense that sacrifice is required, where truth and goodness are the goals, might be Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*. She is the black servant to the

Compsons. In the family there is a mentally handicapped child named Benjy. Dilsey risks her friendships, her reputation, her position in the Compson family, in order to treat Benjy with the dignity and respect owed to any human being. She takes Benjy to the Negro church, because the pride of the white people won't allow him into their church. Her daughter, Frony, complains that Benjy is an embarrassment to the black people as well, and Dilsey responds:

"I wish you wouldn't keep on bringin him to church, mammy," Frony said. "Folks talkin"

"Whut folks?" Dilsey said.

"I hears em," Frony said.

"And I knows what kind of folks," Dilsey said, "Trash white folks. Dat's who it is. Thinks he ain't good enough fer white church, but nigger church ain't good enough fer him."

"Dey talks, jes de same," Frony said.

"Den you send um to me," Dilsey said. "Tell um de good Lawd don't keer whether he smart er not. Don't nobody but white trash keer dat." (Spivey 88)

So here we have Dilsey, in the racist environment of the deep South in the 1800's, taking a position against the white people who have the power, in order to provide for a young white boy, in the meantime taking great personal risk. Dilsey is the voice of compassion, love and sanity in the world of the Compson's. Because of her basic human decency, "she can convert the pain of her life into the gold thread of spiritual regeneration". (Spivey 89)

Another benign heroic character is the Reverend Hightower in *Light in August*. Hightower is a preacher, who finds that he cannot continue his calling within the Church. A motif of the tragic hero is the hermit, one who isolates himself from humanity and seeks spiritual regeneration. Hightower secludes himself in, with a bit of wordplay by Faulkner perhaps, the tower of his mansion in Jefferson, the county seat. In a sense, Hightower has experienced a death and rebirth as a more spiritual being. "The purpose of the death-and-rebirth motif is to bring the hero to a new state of consciousness, even a new state of being." (Frey 195-6)

Hightower, in tandem with a local artisan named Byron Bunch, "manages to forge a new life based on the mythic religious tradition..." (Spivey 90) Hightower realized, in his raised awareness after deserting the Church, that "he can now search for his true self and thereby be reborn. He had used the church to run away, but now he turns to face life on a renewed quest." (91)

The Bible as Myth and Literature

Let us turn to the Bible, which presents a few difficulties. In the first place, we have a great book, including the New and the Old Testaments, which has been read for two thousand years and therefore qualifies as a work of literature. On the other hand we have millions of people around the world who read it not as literature, but as a religious doctrine which is to be taken seriously and interpreted literally. The Bible has mythical undertones in itself, yet the mythology of the Bible has been used metaphorically in a great many works of Western literature.

The Bible as literature based on myth must be separated from the Bible as a literal word given to us directly from God and a vehicle of absolute truth. Discoveries in archaeology, anthropology, astronomy and linguistics have proven that many aspects of the Bible are not absolutely true, and many parallels to the myths of other civilizations have been pointed out. Yet there are Christians, a considerable number of Christians in the United States for example, who believe that the earth was created by God about 5000 years ago and the human race lived alongside the dinosaurs. This is according to the Book of Genesis.

The debate cannot be settled within the scope of this paper, but it is worthwhile to compare some of the myths of other civilizations to those which have been passed on by the Bible. In the Old Testament, there is the story of Noah and the flood. Put simply, God was angry. His punishment was a deluge, Noah was warned and instructed to build an ark. In a cuneiform text dated to the 2nd millennium B.C., the Sumerian God Enlil was angry and sent floodwaters, the name of the ark-builder was Kish. In the Sanskrit mythologies of India, a world flood occurs at the end of every aeon. Aztec mythology in Mexico relates a similar tale. The flood theme occurs in mythologies all over the world.

In the New Testament, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ runs a remarkable parallel to the monomyth of the archetypal hero. Similar stories of the savior appear in mythologies of the Greeks, the Romans, the Sudanese, the Celts. The pattern goes like this: the hero's mother is a virgin, the circumstances of his birth are unclear, an attempt is made on his life and he is taken away to safety. We know little or nothing of his childhood, on reaching manhood he returns to his kingdom, later he loses favor with the authorities and/or his subjects. He meets with a mysterious death, often at the top of a hill. (Raglan 178-9)

According to Day, the virgin mother is "A possible evolutionary scenario" that may read as a goddess "who bore without impregnation from any male. This primitive myth appears among quite archaic peoples such as the Ifalik Islanders (Carolines), the Navaho American Indians, the Ainu of Japan. At least 30 virgin births of notable religious figures range from Adonis to Zoroaster" (212-213)

Having established somewhat peremptorily the similarities between the Bible and various other mythological belief systems, we can see a story in the Book of Judges, that of Samson and Delilah, as

having mythological motifs that have been used by authors in their literary works since the invention of the printing press and before. Samson betrays God and becomes an outlaw, he then becomes infatuated with Delilah, the femme fatale. Recognizing his sins and asking for mercy, he is redeemed by God. "Samson is the perfect hero for the Israelites - not only does he have the usual heroic qualities, but he has a spiritual death and rebirth as well." (Frey 37-38)

Frey explains how a spiritual transformation "is at the heart of all great dramatic works." (2) A brief inclusion of examples would have Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, who begins the story as a ruthless miser and ends up with a heart of gold. Dostoyevsky's character Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, transforms from a killer to a saintly Christian. Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables* is transformed from a common criminal to a sacrificial Christ figure. Scarlett O'Hara, in *Gone With the Wind*, begins as a flighty aristocrat and transforms into a desperate survivor. (2-3)

How it came to be that myths around the world and through all of history have remarkable similarities is the subject of much interest. There are numerous theories about how peoples in scattered times and places have adopted the same story telling techniques. One theory is Diffusion (or Migration), which asserts that all myths originated in one place and were spread by early migrations. Other scholars have used the term Polygenesis, that basic ideas were formulated in a number of places due to a psychic requirement. As mentioned earlier, the Greeks equated mythology with an interpretation of natural forces. Others conclude that myth-making induces moral standards, and by extension stability in primitive societies. (Day 27-40)

A psychological explanation of myths was proposed by Carl Jung, who coined the term "archetypes of the collective unconscious", defined by Campbell as "pertaining to those structures of the psyche that are not the products of merely individual experience but are common to all mankind." (Campbell 216). Patai furthers this idea by writing "according to Jung..., the formation of myths is a psychological process which is an essential or vital feature of the human psyche, and which can be shown to exist equally in primitive, ancient, and modern man." (22) In other words, myths are part of the biological structure of humanity.

The jury is still out on the how and why of myths as universal and constant. It is often said, "It's just a myth.", a statement intended to deflate the value of the story. Yet, that statement should be used sparingly, for as an early scholar of mythology, Giambattista Vico wrote in *Scienza Nuova* (1725), "Myth was man's response to the basic forces of life, and it was poetry to enunciate and celebrate the fundamental rhythms of man and the world... It is the sensitive intuitive perception by primitive man of a cosmos of power and passion." (Day 61)

In the ancient world, storytellers used myths to explain natural phenomena, from the dawn of the day to the thunder and lightening of a summer storm. The mysteries of human behavior were placed in a

mythological frame of reference, which became still more stories. The process is continuing into modern times, and will more than likely remain as a foundation of storytelling.

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