

Myths and the Human Consciousness: Definitions and Interpolations

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Abstract

This paper delineates the definitions and interpolations about myths. They are discussed from the point-of-view of an English Literature classroom wherein the narratives on Myths and Human Consciousness are explicated. Moving into the Multi-disciplinary domain, myths are here to stay. Myths record observations about the natural world. The purpose of a myth is not simply to describe something but to explain how it came into existence. Many individuals believe that the world today is devoid of moral standards, and it has become necessary to use myths to tie the cultural strings together. Myths safeguard and convey cultural values, and they serve as a key to society's morality, value structure, and acceptable behavioural patterns. The Literary Theory and Criticism classrooms are now being overwhelmed by discussions/deliberations/narratives on how to protect/safeguard myths for explication to be done by the present and the future generations.

Keywords: Myth, Human Consciousness, Fantasy, Reality, Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

Every region, community and social group of the ancient world possessed its own peculiar local myths, folktales and legends. As time passed on, these narratives were diffused over wide areas because they were relevant not only to a specific group or region, but were structured upon fundamental and universal aspects of human nature and conditions of life. They became a shared heritage of ancestral memories related consciously from one generation to another. Myth is the thread that holds the past, present and future together. The word 'myth' is highly speculative and chameleonic. A direct comprehensive definition of myth is not possible since a direct experience of myth has not been recorded. The English term 'myth' is derived from the Greek 'muthos' which means 'word' or 'speech' or 'a tale or something one uttered' or 'any information transmitted verbally including truth and falsehood' (Larue 5). The Princeton *Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines myth as "a story or a complex of story elements taken as expressing and therefore as implicitly symbolizing certain deep-lying aspects of human and trans-human existence" (Preminger ed. 538). This definition tries to draw a parallel between two viewpoints: one in which the myth is treated as a mode of consciousness, that is, a basic way of imagining experience and the other in which the myth is merely a story, a more popular form where anything mythical is considered false.

MYTHS AS NATURAL PHENOMENA

The idea that Myths record observations about the natural world and how it came into existence is revealed in the definition given by the cultural historian and professor of

English, Stephen Ausband: “tales that are accepted on the whole, as either true to historical fact or as reinforcing and demonstrating a society’s understanding of the truth about natural phenomena, and which are treated seriously by most members of the society” (Ausband 6). Thus, they form a part of the living tradition. According to him, no age can be without myths, as they are stories through which the age can see itself. As human beings always connect themselves with the goings-on of the universe, both their real and imagined relationships with nature find an outlet in the form of myths. These myths reflect a world that is meaningful and orderly and when they are outgrown due to the changes in the ideas of human beings, they have to be discarded or altered or replaced by new ones. Ausband believes that myths are stories “that will define us to ourselves” (Ausband 6). Some mythologists define myth as a literary vehicle or kind of literature involving divine beings. In such a case, they refer to what gods and goddesses do in their own realms as well as in the world of humans. James G. Frazer, the Scottish anthropologist, believes that there must have been a vegetation-ritual, a central activity from which all mythologies were derived. Alan Dundes, Professor of Anthropology and Folklore-studies, University of California, regards myth as “a sacred narrative explaining how world and man came to be in their present form” (Dundes 1). He reiterates that myth is a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world and it expresses and confirms the society’s religious values and norms.

MYTHS AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Myths are also defined in terms of human consciousness. Sigmund Freud defines myth as “representative illusions produced entirely as a result of psychic projection, (which) include our ideas of immortality, retribution (and) the world after death, all of which are simply reflections of our inner psyche” (quoted in Ruthven 17-18). Freud names them “endopsychic myths” because the inner mind stimulates illusions that are projected outwards in the form of myths. Therefore, while a few myth critics talk about ‘landscapes’ as the potential womb of mythology, Freud considers ‘mindscapes’ as the means for myth’s origin. He looks upon myths as precipitates of unconscious processes. He ignores the basis of myths often on reality. Nevertheless, for Carl G. Jung, the contents of the collective unconscious are ‘archetypes’ and these archetypes produce archetypal images familiar in myths, dreams, art and literature.

A new wave of interpretation of myths arose with the arrival of psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud. Myth was now interpreted as a symbol. Freud applied his concept of the origins and nature of neuroses to explain the origins and nature of ancient mythology. He rejected the idea that myths personify natural phenomena, and turned to human beings for an explanation. He made an analogy between dream symbols of modern man and the symbols contained in myths. Just as dreams are wish fulfillments for human beings, myths were also wish fulfillments for the ancient man. According to him, all myths are “sex symbols (and) distorted expressions of the libido of primitive man which assumed the form of fantasies as a result of repressing anti-social impulses”(quoted in Reinhold 18). Thus, myths were understood as mass dreams, expressions of a collective subconscious mind that is revealed in dreams together with the personal subconscious. For instance, Freud considers the Narcissus myth as a mode of neurotic inversion, which he first identified as narcissism in Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’.

Freud's theories were taken up by Carl Jung and expanded in his analysis of myths. However, for Jung, myths were collective archetypes rather than symbols of individual fantasies. According to Jung, all people possess an inborn ability to create in the subconscious certain common symbols, which he termed 'archetypes'. These archetypes revealed themselves in dreams, which express the 'collective unconscious'. In addition, this 'collective unconscious' is a repository of myth. The similarity of many myths in plot and characters, the attraction and persistence of myth arise from the common store in the unconscious of all men. Sometimes Jung's archetypes have a religious content unlike Freud's myths, which have a sexual content. Jung's archetypes can be expressed only figuratively. His psychotherapy correlates the mythic archetypes with the dreams of neurotic patients. For instance, archetypes like 'mother and child', 'journey of the hero', 'suffering', 'rites of passage', 'the healer' etc., are basic human motifs inherited by the modern man from primitive times. They survive and reappear in modern man's dreams through 'the collective unconscious'. Jung correlates these mythic archetypes with the dreams of neurotic patients and thus psychoanalyses ancient mythical characters. Though he has been accused by literary critics of ignoring the history and nature of myths, his theories did have enormous influence on literary studies.

The basic difference between the Freudian and Jungian approach is that Freud interprets the symbol as a generalization from a particular; for example, 'pits', 'boxes', etc. symbolize 'womb' and Jung regards the symbol as the particularization of a general; that is, 'womb' is the womb of a Great Mother, the symbol of eternal fertility and nourishing care (Day 288). In addition, while Freud and his followers regard myth as infantile and neurotic-psychotic, Jung and his followers consider myth as vital to man's creativity and maturation.

Joseph Campbell, the American mythologist, talks of a pattern common to all the myths—"monomyth"—and he reiterates that "myths arise just as dreams arise [...] in man's subconscious mind which deals with hopes and fears that have scarcely been articulated" (quoted in Ausband 15). The French sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss acknowledges the unconscious element in myths when he defines myths as "not stories which are made up voluntarily and arbitrarily but that they have a compulsive hold on the human mind and manifest themselves in the mind" (quoted in Munz 5). He also believes that myths ought to be decoded as they are in a language not easily understood and therefore, they should be translated into a language that can be understood. According to him, myths should be interpreted serially, that is, each myth should be broken up into its constituent phases and these phases must be taken to be a series of messages with the same meaning. Thus, in his structural study of myth, all its versions are taken into consideration.

MYTHS AS AESTHETIC DEVICES

Richard Chase (1904-1988), the American scholar, defines myth as "an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural forces into a manageable collaboration with the objective (that is, experienced) facts of life in such a way as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind" (quoted in Murray 276). Thus, myth becomes a mediator between the external reality and the internal variations of man. Myth often lives on the feather line between fantasy and reality. Myth also serves as a pattern to all the aspirations of human

beings. Therefore, externalization of the inner impulse in the form of myth provides the basis for a sharing of the inner experience. As myths originate from the depths of human nature, they appeal to the depths of human mind. Myths are also defined in terms of an unveiling of the mystery of human beings as well as nature. Mircea Eliade, the Romanian scholar, defines myth in such terms: “the myth defines itself by its own mode of being. It can only be grasped, as a myth, in so far as it reveals something as having been fully manifested, and this manifestation is at the same time creative and exemplary, since it is the foundation of a structure of reality as well as of a kind of human behaviour” (Eliade 1963, 14).

Sometimes, myths develop in response to important social needs and therefore are accepted universally. They can be viewed as literature that develops out of a concern for survival and the desire to understand the implications of what it means to be human. Through myth, human beings are able to give order and structure to their world and perhaps bring meaning or purpose to an existence that otherwise may appear meaningless. Myths can be understood in terms of the individual's awareness of power outside his/her own self. They enable the individual to understand his/her place in the world and to grasp the dimensions of being human. Thus, they provide exemplary models for life. They are the mind at play, a form of primitive science and a way of maintaining cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

Myths, in reality, often support the existing social structure, patterns of belief and conduct and the current interpretation of the world. They may serve to maintain the stability of the society, which may be felt to be moving towards its doom. Many people feel that the world today is bereft of moral values and it has become a necessity that myths have to be evoked to hold the strings of culture together. Myths protect and transmit cultural values and they become the key to morality, value structure and acceptable behavioural patterns of the society. The world today is fast changing and filled with insecurity. Myths, however, make it easier to face the insecure world. In other words, if a society has to survive the several challenges imposed upon it, it has to depend on mythical perspectives because they provide a stronghold of sustenance. Several concepts like patriarchy, matriarchy, marriage and other such social institutions are shaped by mythologies. Thus, we understand that myths serve as models for the orientation of self-development and the development of the society in general.

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