

MYTH IN HIGH CULTURE AND IN LOW: RESONANCE AND REFLECTION

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I chose the title, "Myth in High Culture and in Low: Resonance and Reflection," because it indicates a fundamental difference between the way myth is used in high culture and in low. The phrases high culture and low culture carry with them elitist connotations which no amount of protest on my part can fully eradicate, yet they are more useful than the terms mass media and popular culture because they are flexible, have pedagogical applications, and because we all know quite well what "fits" in each category. High culture includes those modes of expression which are canonical; that is, modes which are taught, analyzed, and preserved in our academic institutions. This system of classification has few ambiguities in a given age, yet remains flexible. What is considered low culture in one age--the novel, for example, several hundred years ago--can become canonical, or high culture, in another. This flexibility renders most elitist arguments in favor of high culture myopic.

Low and high culture products cannot be distinguished one from another simply by their medium or other external differences. For example, novels are not automatically high and magazines low culture. The distinction comes on other levels, as we will see. Yet, these terms are useful pedagogically. Students understand this division particularly well, and this fact argues its utility. If, for example, I, as

professor of English, come up to a student of mine who is obviously engrossed in reading a mystery, pornography, a comic book, or the latest Star Trek log, and say, "What are you reading?" I nearly always get the same response. The student closes the book, turns it over so I cannot easily see the cover, smiles, and refusing to look me in the face says, "Oh, nothing, really." Students get caught reading or using low culture. They would never feel embarrassed if one found them reading Shakespeare. One need not hide high culture. This distinction applies to more than literature. One can get caught waiting in line to see Jaws for the second time in a way that cannot happen to one waiting to see Bergman's Face to Face.

The differences between high and low culture are multiple: format, durability, language, effect on the audience are a few. Many of these differences have as their common cause the way in which cultural products utilize myth. Professor Deming has defined myth and its relation to culture thoroughly, so I feel free to move toward a discussion of its use by simply emphasizing a few definitions. Myth, in its broadest sense, is a narrative in which characters--who are generally super-human--engage in unrealistic activities in such a way as to illustrate some truth about human life and its meaning. Simply, myth deals with the desires and repugnances of humans in a stylized, non-rational fashion. When myth deals with the desires and repugnances of a given culture, it is considered culture-specific. The cowboy is the most often

cited example of a culturally-specific American mythic figure. His indigenous nature is clearly seen if he is contrasted to the Vaquero who is the culturally-specific myth figure of Hispanic South and Central America. Each figure does essentially the same work, but is dressed differently, has different attitudes about work, and exhibits different values. In contrast to culture-specific myth is monomyth. As Professor Deming suggested, monomyth is a myth that has universal or near-universal concurrency. The figures in monomyth are archetypes--universal forms and ideals. The figures of culture-specific myths are stereotypes--the familiar forms and ideals of a given culture. In the most obvious way low culture is dominated by stereotypes and high by archetypes, but this fact does not fully illuminate the process of myth utilization, its purpose, or its effect.

Let us first look at myth utilization in high culture and in low. The distinction is clearest in the following analogy. If one looks at the old Chinese legend about the origin of the game of chess, one finds the following story:

Three hundred and seventy-nine years after the time of Confucious, Hung-Ko-Chu, king of Kiang-Nan, sent an expedition into Shen-Si under the command of Han-Sing. After a successful campaign the soldiers were put into winter quarters, where they became impatient and demanded to be sent home. Han-Sing realized the urgent necessity of calming them if he was to finish his operations in the following year; he was a man of genius as well as a good soldier, and after considerable contemplation he invented the game of

chess which would serve as an amusement in times of leisure and, being founded on the principles of war, would excite military ardor. The strategem fulfilled his expectations; the soldiers were delighted and in their daily contests forgot the inconveniences of their position. In the spring the general took the field again and added the rich Shen-Si territory to the kingdom of Kiang-Nan.¹

Turning to the Persian, Indian, or Japanese legend of the game's origin, one finds that each makes the same point: the game was invented as a substitute for battle. In what follows I will speak in more detail about his point in order to develop the analogy with the use of myth. But stated in its simplest form, the analogy is that the relationship of chess to war parallels the relationship which obtains between myth in low culture and in high.²

The most obvious difference between chess playing and warfare is that the game is an abstract mode of combat. Chess play is a form of absolute order. The order is determined by rules of chess, the borders of the field of engagement, the time frame in which action is allowed to occur, and by the furniture of the game. The vast sweep of battle is reduced to sixty-four perfectly symmetrical squares, and armies are compacted to thirty-two pieces. The movements of troops are replaced by the "inflexible symmetry of permissible moves."³

If one does not follow these rules, one ceases to be playing chess. The game, though founded upon the principles of war is only a patterned and stylized approximation. Chess is not war partly because it lacks war's complexity, ambiguity, and chaos.

Myth is used in low culture in the same stylized and conventionalized way that chess utilizes the principles of war. There are strict rules governing the usage. The primary rule of myth usage in low culture which corresponds, in a sense, to the playing board, is that myth must always remain within the boundaries of cultural values: it must be faithful to cultural desires and repugnances. Therefore, it is used first to clarify and to abstract rather than to introduce ambiguities. In this mode it serves as a template or pattern upon which to build a narrative edifice. For example, Frank Herbert's Dune--a science fiction novel involved with the issue of ecology--bases much of its plot on Greek and Roman myth. Paul Atreides, the novel's central character traces his family back to the ancient Greeks. And because we know that his name Atreides is Greek for the son of Arteus, we are conveniently able to know what visions of the past that character has. In the trilogy of which Dune is the first novel, we find the basic narrative shape is derived from Sophocles' vision of the Oedipus myth.

All kinds of myths lend themselves to this low culture template utilization. Mary Stewart frequently uses mythic patterns like King Arthur and Camelot upon which to fashion her novels, The Crystal Cave being a particularly popular one. Robert Heinlein, for example, makes use of the Christ story as the basis of his novel Stranger in a Strange Land. In this case, even the book's title is derived from a biblical

source. The result is not intended as a thorough philosophical exploration of the proper nature of religion or of man's search for meaning as one expects to find in James Joyce's high culture novel Finnegans Wake which also relies heavily on Christian mythology. Instead, Heinlein uses the myth to create an exciting narrative. Myth is used less for its meaning and ambiguity than for its overall form. How does this translate itself in Heinlein's novel? Heinlein uses a complex ritual based on the sharing of water with one's waterbrothers as the counterpart of baptism. He replaces transubstantiation and communion with a Martian brand of cannibalism. He provides the Christ figure--Michael Valentine Smith--with twelve close friends and an old mentor whom Mike calls Father. Heinlein has Mike stoned to death after he succeeds in converting his twelve friends into disciples and in starting his own church. While Christ was not stoned to death, Stephen Promartyr, the first Christian martyr was, and so again myth provides the pattern for the narrative. Mike even returns from the dead to help another character in his moment of despair. The novel ends with the remaining disciples boiling up a pot of soup made from the freshly dead Mike. They gather together and have a last supper at which--in less than a symbolic way--they share the body and the blood of the new Redeemer. The novel is interesting, has action and other sub-plots, but its edifice is clearly raised on the pattern of the familiar myth.

The second way low culture utilizes myth is an overlay, as a source of gimmick, as a means of providing recognizable furniture to cast a particular color upon a piece of narrative design. To return to the chess analogy, it is possible to find chess sets in which the pieces are designed to represent historical personages, Napoleon and so on. Yet most chess pieces--even those in the Star Fleet Manual--are in the Staunton design. These pieces are lathe created, highly symmetrical, and capable of being mass produced. Chess reduces the many people involved in actual war to a series of interchangeable pieces. In this systematic way, low culture abstracts from myth certain forms, patterns, and people and utilizes these pieces in plots which are not otherwise consciously reliant upon myth.

This usage of mythic pieces is not limited to a particular medium. Representative Star Trek shows like "Who Will Mourn for Adonis" are replete with planets and people that have Greek and Roman mythological names. The films Westworld and Futureworld are salted and peppered with names out of traditional mythology, having their primary action taking place in an amusement park of the future--somewhat astonishingly named Delos, after an island in Greek mythology. In Jerome Brunner's novel, Jagged Orbit, we find the same sort of thing. The central character, Lyla Clay, is called a pythonesse and takes Sybil pills, again evidence of a sprinkling of traditional myth in the sauce of modern low culture. Comics and television too utilize myth in this fashion. DC Comics bring us Isis who is also the star

of a Saturday morning children's television show. Her only tie to the Egyptian goddess whose name she bears is an Egyptian costume and an occasional Egyptian enemy. Otherwise Isis is Andrea Thomas, Chemistry Teacher at the High School. Marvel Comics give us The Mighty Thor, also a children's television show character, whose home is in Asgard but who in reality is the "lame mild-mannered treater of the sick" Dr. Don Blake. Though the comic god of thunder does use the mythic hammer and has occasional spats with his father Odin and his evil half-brother Loki, the primary action involves his earth life and its complications. This is not intended as criticism of the way low culture utilizes myths, but it is to make clear how they function. Implied here is the idea that high culture used myth differently, and we will examine that point shortly.

The third way low culture utilizes myth is quite different from what we have already discussed because it involves creation of new myth rather than abstraction of that already existing. The creator of low culture is essentially a story teller. She or he wants to grab the audience and carry them somewhere--usually along an emotional line. This creator wants to engage the audience actively, making the reader or watcher stick around until he sees "who done it and how." After that he can go home, having experienced a satisfactory emotional response. The creator of high culture works with a different premise. As Wallace Stevens suggests, high culture is "an allegory addressed to the intellectual

powers." That means the emphasis is not on narrative or plot but, instead, on the creation of a controlled illumination of the whole. The hoped for response to canonical art is detached, intellectual and full-conscious. It occurs after the reading and viewing is complete--not during it as does the response to low culture--and criticism of high culture involves an examination of the work seen as a simultaneous whole. It is a common misconception that the creator of low culture lacks a conscious vision of the process of myth making. Stan Lee, long-time editor of Marvel comics exhibits a high level of self-conscious awareness of his role as creator of myths:

...we are creating an entire contemporary mythos, a family of legends that might be handed down to future generations just as those we had read as children had been handed down to us...Marvel's heroes have some of the charisma, some of the flavor of ancient fairy tales, of ancient Greek and Norse mythology. And that was what grabbed me.⁴

Although he or she is conscious of being a creator of myth, the low culture artist is also conscious that he must use his created myths in a different fashion than does the high culture artist. She or he is bound by a different set of rules. As in chess, the playing area is restricted because the low culture creator must work more closely with the culture. Marvel heroes, for example, are tied to America. They drink coke and drive American cars, though also an occasional Rolls Royce. DC Comics show superheroes who

attend rock concerts at which the Woodworkers--the comic book equivalent of the Carpenters--play. These characters are drawn from contemporary America. They are all, though they do not bear his name, the counterpart of the mighty Marvel hero, Captain America. That they say something to a great number of Americans is obvious, especially when we consider that the press run per issue of a Marvel comic is 48 million. The goal of these mythmakers is not to create figures which transcend their culture but to have their characters represent it in the same way the familiar chess figures are abstractions of things greater than themselves.

High culture creators of myth seek to move beyond their cultures. They want to get beyond themselves as Northrup Frye says and point to a superior reality with such urgency and clarity that what they have created disappears into that reality. The low culture creator worries about frequent deadlines for production; the high culture creator seeks to move outside of time. Thus, he or she uses myth not to capture this culture, or to work exclusively within it, but to point through time at places where this world is tangent to worlds of the past and to worlds to come. Therefore he or she uses myth in order to get that image of reality to resonate. When one strikes a key on a piano, related wires vibrate giving that note resonance. In a similar fashion, the creator of high culture utilizes myth not to give a narrative pattern to his creation but to provide trans-temporal and cross-cultural resonances. That makes high

culture more difficult to read and understand. It is ambiguous, and its language is not explicit. The function of this utilization of myth is not to clarify values or provide plot, but to rouse the faculties to act, as Wallace Stevens said.

To fault a creator of low culture for not creating resonant fictions is to misunderstand and misvalue what he does. This sort of inaccurate criticism is commonly done by those who apply critical standards of canonical art to low culture and then get upset to find they do not work. This point is easy to document. Stan Lee talks about the difficulties he faced when he sought to create a suitable language for one of his mythic characters, Dr. Strange. Dr. Strange is a magician, a master of the mystic arts, whose function is to protect good from evil. When Lee was trying to figure out what would be appropriate language for this character he admitted he "didn't know an authentic mystic chant from a Martian egg roll,"⁵ and yet he could not expect this fighter against rooftop lurkers to go around saying things like "Hocus Pocus, go to another dimension" when he wanted to get rid of them. Lee relied on phonetics and chose words he called "totally meaningless." He ended up with characters saying things like

"Demons of Darkness
 In the name of Satannish,
 By the flames of the Faltine
 Let Spider-Man vanish!"

Lee goes on to say in his history of Marvel comics that academics reacted very strangely to these inventions:

Suddenly the mail started pouring in--from colleges, if you will. In ever-increasing numbers students were actually devoting term papers and theses to the language of Dr. Strange, investigating the derivation of his various spells and incantations. And the payoff was--many, many of those theses explained, in detailed chapter and verse, how I had obviously borrowed from the ancient Druid writings, or from forbidden Egyptian hieroglyphics, or at least the writings of H. P. Lovecraft...But the worst part was when they ended their letters by asking me to confirm that their conclusions were correct. After they had done all that research, all that probing and digging, how could I tell them that it wasn't so--I had made it all up? Finally I copped out by admitting I had been a vociferous reader in my younger days, and perhaps I had subconsciously retained a lot of what I'd read to use it later in recording the sage of Dr. Strange. No need to tell them I'd never studied Egyptian hieroglyphics and wouldn't know any ancient Druid writings if they were tattooed on my dome.⁶

Such enormous wastes of energy and such unproductive work can be avoided if we more clearly understand the nature of myth and how it is used. Low culture artifacts need to be examined as cultural documents because they provide ready access to the mythos of a culture, its values and beliefs. High culture research needs to focus on what Professor Deming rightly calls, "the fabric of complex relationships among the American mythos, monomyth, and the idiosyncracies of the imaginations of high culture creators."⁷ There seems to be plenty yet to do. As we are told by the Silver Sufer, "The cosmos lies before us--and the Spaceways beckon."

NOTES

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1

R. N. Coles, The Chess-Player's Weekend Book (London, 1950), p. 54, rpt. in Michael Holquist, "How to Play Utopia: Some Brief Notes on the Distinctiveness of Utopian Fiction," Science Fiction: A Collection of Essays, Mark Rose, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Printice Hall, 1976), p. 133.

2

Holquist uses the analogy of relationship of chess to war in his discussion of the relationship which obtains between a utopia and actual society.

3

Holquist, p. 134.

4

Stan Lee, Origins of Marvel Comics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 178.

5

This and the immediately following passages are all from Lee, pp. 224-25.

6

Ibid., pp. 225-26.

7

Caren Deming, "In Pursuit of an American Mythology: Some Definitions and Their Applications," Journal of the Tennessee Speech Communication Association, III: (Summer, 1977), p. 26.