MYTH AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR LITERARY CURRICULUM

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A tenacious assumption underlying the teaching of college English is that the discipline is untamable. Students have an infinite variety of interests; the age constantly makes new demands upon us as teachers of literature. Outside of the classroom theories of criticism that attempt to provide an overarching continuity to literary study are suspect, to the point where criticism itself becomes suspect, as a field of study that interferes with the direct experience of the work itself. Instead of the concept of literature as a unified, cohesive body of knowledge, there are individual poems to be analyzed, discrete genres to be catalogued, self-contained historical periods to be set in order. Faced with a profusion of critical approaches to literature, departments of literature and individual faculty have adopted a laissez-faire approach to the organization of literary knowledge, acquiescing to a myopic eclecticism that finds its more articulate champions defending this lack of cohesiveness on the grounds that the reading of literature is a "private enterprise."

Unlike our more prosperous and gregarious friends in the social sciences, humanists tend to work in solitary ways. The enterprise that we engage in is often that of a mediator in a quasi-spiritual ritual that takes place between the reader and his book. However, as expressed by Graham Hough in An Essay on Criticism[1], "it is when

we step back to reflect on that enterprise that criticism really begins... there arises the need to question, to analyze, to set down in order, to compare. And this activity we call criticism." While we cannot control, much less understand, the nature of the reading process itself, we can begin to examine the nature of the response that a work of literature succeeds in eliciting. As a "normal prolongation of intelligent reading" criticism is thus an integral facet of literature study. As Northrup Frye claims in The Anatomy of Criticism, perhaps all that can be taught about literature is criticism. Instruction in literature by necessity, then, is involved with instruction in criticism, and whether the theories that we either explicitly or implicitly use fully serve the ends to which we put them, will depend upon the importance and the power of the system at hand.

Since World War II, and more precisely, the publication of Northrup Frye's Anatomy of Criticism in 1957, myth criticism has become an important mode of criticism practiced in the universities. It has become the logical precursor of the diverse movement known as formalist criticism or new criticism as articulated by I.A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Wellek and Warren in their Theory of Literature. Unlike the advocates of new criticism, the myth critics eschewed the one common principle that linked the new critics in a common bond, the claim for objectivity in literary analysis with the primacy of the literary work itself as

the sole focus of critical attention. By placing the total ontology for the work within the work itself, new criticism had committed the fallacy that the reader has the ability to remain "within" the work, that somehow it is possible to separate ourselves from the age, from other forms of knowledge, from the sense of continuity to literary experience. On the other hand, myth criticism offered the profession a perspective from which to view the totality of literature and the literary response, rather than a discreet set of formula by which individual poems might be analyzed. Freed from such conceptual elements as point of view, paradox, symbol, and irony, professors were able to focus on the experience and impact of literature on the reader. Though the movement has been labeled as reductionist, that it distorts literature beyond recognizable shape, that it denies historicity and process, and that it fails to accurately define its key terms, such as "myth," its detractors prefer to ignore Frye's own comments that his work is ironic, and that he does not wish to create a system that enslaves others.[2]

The origin of the modern school of myth criticism may be found in the work of the Cambridge Hellinists, notably that of Jane Harrison and Sir James Frazer whose Golden Bough has been the seminal influence for much of the literary, anthropological, and psychological thought of this century.[3] Rejecting the notion that myth is merely a "story," a "lie," or a "misconception," the psychologist C. G. Jung and Erich Neumann claimed that myth externalizes the psychic

experience of the entire race, hence having the power to reveal truths not attainable by rational analysis alone. Neumann speaks of the archetype as accompanied by a cluster of symbols that may have a powerful effect on the individual subconscious. Neumann in The Great Mother speaks of the manner by which the archetype can result in an energetic disruption of the natural functions within the psyche, "This effect appears .... in positive and negative emotions, in fascinations and projections, and also in anxiety, in manic and depressive states, and in the feeling that the ego is being over-powered."[4] For Jung and the myth critics, the source of the archetype is the collective unconscious, that vague and admittedly ill-defined area that links all men by means of universal patterns or symbols.

Just what are these "formulas" that appear to be universally shared and recurrent in the myths and literatures of various peoples? Frye's statement that they are "relatively restricted" appears to be an understatement judging by the numerous anthropological studies that appear in print dating back to Frazer's classic studies. The search for the father and father-slayers appear again and again. A. H. Gayton has catalogued the various retellings of the Orpheus myth in folk-tale and legend, particularly in the Western hemisphere.[5] Mircea Eliade has written on the myth of the eternal return and the "paradise myth" in primitive cultures. Some consider the oedipus-type myth as the prototype for all human myths. Erich Neumann has

traced the "great mother" archetype through a formidable body of cultural mythologies and art. Joseph Campbell finds the hero-myth to be the classic urmyth that links all mythologies.[6] Clyde Kluckhohn's survey of the mythologies of fifty diverse cultures discovered numerous recurrent patterns in myth among which are tales of floods serving as punishment, the slaying of monsters, incest, sibling rivalry, castration (actual and symbolic), and androgynous deities.[7]

These recurrent patterns are often labeled archetypes, which in turn make up individual myths, which in turn lead to comprehensive mythologies. For Jung, Neumann, and Campbell a mythology represents, then, a comprehensive externalization of the collective unconscious, or,in other words, the total corpus of its literature. Literary critics have been teased into making rather extravagant claims for the special knowledge that literature may reveal as viewed from the mythic prospective, and have on too many occasions given to myth a special kind of knowledge that borders on, if not encompasses, the sacred.[8] In scorning the "literary-psychoanalytical" school, Brian Vickers in a recently published book entitled Towards Greek Tragedy[9] argues that myth ought to be interpreted according to the syntagmatic approach employed by Lord Raglin and Vladimir Propp, "in a linear or horizontal manner....following the sequence of events in the tale in the chronological order in which they occur." (183) Vickers, echoing the complaint of other anthropologists,

claims that myth critics have forsaken the social realities inherent in ritual, preferring instead to seek the basis for myth in the sacred. And of Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, "One can read the whole book and find no other awareness of the social realities of ritual, despite glib references to anthropology." (169) It is natural to assume that the anthropologist or literary historian would be more concerned about the syntagmatic function of myth than the mythic critic, whose concern is more with the universalities and applicability of the archetype. This is not to say that the mythic critic is a-historical, nor does he neglect the social function of myth. The confusion and controversy surrounding the use of the word "myth" might clarify itself if "myth" could simply mean "story" or "narrative" which is closer to the Aristotelian and Latin "mythos" than it is to modern uses.

Joseph Campbell claims that mankind has not outgrown his need for myth. A living myth, according to Campbell, has four functions.[10] A living myth has first a mystical function which inspires a sense of "awe and gratitude" in relation to the mystery of the universe. (215) The solitary individual thus is able to unite himself with the transpersonal, that which is beyond the self. In participating in and communing with the wonder of existence, the mythic approach says to the student and instructor alike, "Look, there is something bigger than the both of us. There are forces, beliefs, patterns, symbols that transcend individual poems, national literatures, civilizations,

time itself. Your vague imaginings, fears, your entire emotive life are not separate from the literatures and languages of other nations and ages."

Campbell's second function of myth, the cosmological, offers an image of the universe consistent with the scientific knowledge of the day. And in Campbell's view "The world picture of all the major religions are at least two thousand years out of date," creating a "sure pill for at least a mild schizophrenia." (215) In the secular age in which we live the failure of religion to provide an adequate explanation for the mystery of the cosmos has been superseded by science fiction's dominance of the mass reading market. Science fiction has been called by some "the new mythos" creating images of the universe and of man that are consistent with the most advanced of scientific thought. Science fiction fulfills the requirements of a living mythology in that it provides myths of the destiny and perhaps the survival of man based upon modern scientific knowledge. Science fiction may be found in every technological society in the world, affirming human mastery and control over his own future. Its power to enthrall an audience fulfills the need for us to believe that a future is possible, that somehow the overpowering forces of the universe will not blot out man's recognizable existence. Even though he may be a mutant, he is still homo sapiens. The financial success and the emotional

response of audiences to the recent Twentieth-Century Fox hit Star Wars confirms the belief that the public needs affirmations of the destiny and triumph of man. While we in the profession have argued for more careful discrimination among conflicting points of view and a greater complexity in the portrayal of character types (because we have somehow been misled into the notion that reality is complex, even beyond our understanding,) SF has presented the public with credible images of a future that, if not complex, at least avoid the numbing ambiguities of ordinary life.

Campbell's third function of a living mythology, the need to "validate, support, and imprint the norms of a given, specific moral order....of the society in which the individual is to live" has been a central purpose for the reading and teaching of literature going back at least to Plato. When departments of English came into being in the 19th century, the Horatian pleasure-instruction principle emphasized the wealth of moral instruction that could be applied to the student's daily thought and activities. Pleasure from literature came as a by-product of moral instruction, which meant in the lower grades, students read such anthologies as Longfellow's"A Psalm of Life," Bryant's "Thanatopsis," Washington Irving's "The Grave," and Jane Taylor's "God Blesses the Industrious." Richard Ohmann, in his recent book, English in America: A Radical View of the Profession[11] claims that the college teaching of English originated with the need of the universities to equip the new cap-

tains of industry with the necessary skills to lead the expanding industrialism of the late nineteenth century. In its support of the moral order, instruction in literature served to acculturate the rising middle class with the proper forms of morality and etiquette of a commercial society. The power that literature possesses in changing social mores is testified to by its suppression by dictatorships, the attention given to it by minority movements' drive for equality, the ever-persistent surveillance of it by local school boards and the tax-paying public.

While it may seem obvious enough that literature fulfills the need of a living mythology, in validating and supporting the moral order of society, its role in terms of Campbell's fourth requirement is perhaps of even greater significance for a college curriculum. Campbell's fourth function of myth is to guide the individual, "stage by stage, in health, strength, and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life." (215) The universality of myth and the applicability of a mythic approach to literature cohere directly with the levels of maturity that the student undergoes throughout his college experience. College enforces a rapid maturity upon students. If we consider education as an ongoing process, then we need to recognize those universals of human development that repeat themselves in human life.

Joseph Katz and associates in a book entitled, No Time for Youth[12] compiled exhaustive data concerning the affective devel-

opment of 3,500 students at Berkely and Stanford. Many of the psychological tasks and problems undergraduates experience are repeated in various forms in archetypal patterns in literature. Such psychological problems involve the separation from homes and parents, confrontation with a variety of peers, the insecurities and often staggering doubt associated with a questioning of one's powers and identity. Katz shows how even the most rigid and self-assured of students express imaginative dreams of escape from the pressures of maturation and academic accomplishment. The forms of escape often take the form of motorized journey, travel, heroic accomplishments and inevitably some type of transformation or metamorphosis, in which the student's concept of self is altered. In the words of Katz, "older problems and feelings, often dating back to childhood, are revived once more, and many students find themselves more or less consciously struggling with derivatives or earlier feelings of narcissism, omnipotence, or passive dependency. At the same time, there are the demands of the new roles that the student is about to fill, which call for greater social, sexual, and occupational maturity." When asked in their senior year "How have you changed since the fall of 1961?" most note that they have become more stable, and have achieved self-understanding, self-satisfaction, self-criticism, a better defined philosophy, better emotional control, etc. It is apparent that the major quest in the undergraduate's experience does not involve an increase in knowledge.

nor an increase in intellectual curiosity. For the student, in the words of Katz, "To him, 'education' seems only secondarily to be the education of the mind." (10)

The mythic approach to literature has the effect of making the reader aware simultaneously that his own inner life is separate from the total life of man yet it is a part of that total life. Herein lies the power of the mythic approach to literature, in its ability to ease the student from one difficult transitory stage to another, by means of an increasing self-awareness, as well as an awareness that his development is only a part of a universal pattern that finds its fulfillment in the definition of man. Myth offers the individual "the assurance that he can bank on the universe and its laws, and, more importantly, on society and its structure."[13] Such knowledge can be comforting as well as disturbing, for the mythic vision ends in man's mortality.

It is apparent by Katz's study that students are continually engaged in a process of problem-solving concerning difficulties associated with maturation, and these problems may be clarified and refined through study in imaginative literature. The mythic approach immediately engages the student and encourages him to view a literary work as an expression of forces he must continually grapple with in his daily activities. In my own experience I have found nothing that excites the students so much as the discovery of an ancient archetype or primitive myth in modern literature or current social

events. The problem is to contain the imagination once the search for such principles is begun. The danger of the mythic approach is that it may be too zealously applied, by the student and the professor alike. Once the surface is plummeted for its mythical allusions the study of literature may become mechanical and reductive. The danger is alleviated if a broader concept of the role of myth is introduced in the beginning of the course, relating myth to other subject areas, including anthropology, psychology, and religion. Myth criticism in its broader sense attempts to examine a literary work in its reference to the social, religious, and historical complex from which it comes. Hence, the study of literature through myth becomes interdisciplinary in nature, while respecting the autonomy of the discipline itself.

In studying how a basic mythic story or archetype is transformed through the imaginative literature of succeeding generations, an insight may be gained into the structure of contemporary society and its relationship to the past. In a course that I recently taught based on the scapegoat archetype, my students were disturbed that the archetypal ritual of the scapegoat as found in Frazer and primitive fold tales, was consistently adhered to in modern treatments of the scapegoat story. For instance, in several short stories by Lawrence, the lack of ritual in the modern age gives way to expression of cruelty and sadism in some of the major characters. The discovery that some of these overt, ritualistic patterns became

submerged or repressed in the subconscious of a people, and that like Proteus, took variegated forms, provided an insight into the working of mythic patterns in contemporary society. Myth criticism became for me and my class a means of returning to that aspect of literature which is bound in history, and it served to destroy the fallacy that all readers of literature need to do in examining the mythic contents of a work is to discover the relative parallels to ancient mythic stories. For my students, some of whom had already done some thinking about the relationships of society to its popular culture and mass media, this was a highly attractive way of making literature relevant to their own perceptions of experience.

An added attraction to the course developed around myth criticism is in the diminishing of the student's belief that the most relevant literature is the most recent, a notion which is partially nourished by views of historical progression. Although mythical archetypes are transformed, given certain social and historical settings, the mythic approach removes the work from history and gives it a universality that is rooted in some of the most exciting psychological thought of the time. Like the music student who thoroughly dissects a theme, examining its harmonic and progressive structure, in order to more fully appreciate the variations that follow, the student of literature is given a conceptual structure that may be identified and followed through a series of divers works, each illustrating and modifying the original unifying principle.

The mythic approach to literature fulfills those requirements for universality or "general truths" that no literary criticism dared speak of since Samuel Johnson.

A curriculum that has the study of myth as its core will proceed in an organized and linear manner. It will begin with the study of ancient mythology, the Bible, and comparative religion. It will serve to equalize the teacher and the students by the authority of the subject being taught. Its end result will create a unity of vision, thought, experience and literature that will liberate the students from the competing adjustment mythologies that vie for his attention. Northrup Frye once wrote, "We have no choice about teaching mythology; we have only the choice between teaching genuine and perverted kinds of it."[14]

FOOTNOTES

[1] (New York, 1966), pp. 4-5.

[2] Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), 308-14

[3] For Frazer's impact on such literary figures as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and W. H. Auden see John B. Vickery, The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough (Princeton, 1973).

[4] (Princeton, 1974).

[5] "The Orphic Myth in North America," Journal of American Folklore, XLVIII (1935), 263-293.

[6] Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton, 1968).

[7] "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York, 1968), 46-59.

[8] See Wallace W. Douglas's "The Meanings of'Myth' in Modern

Criticism," in Vickery, Myth and Literature (Lincoln, 1966).

9 Towards Greek Tragedy (London, 1973)

10 Myths to Live By, (New York, 1972)

11 (New York, 1975)

12 (San Francisco, 1969).

13 Harold H. Watts, "Myth and Drama" in Vickery, Myth and Literature, p. 81.

14 On Teaching Literature (New York, 1972), p. 17.

NEW BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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Alexander, Lloyd. THE FIRST TWO LIVES OF LUKAS-KASHA. Dutton, 1978. 213 pp. $8.50.
Suspense-filled fantasy in an imaginary Middle Eastern land. Lukas, the town n'er-do-well, is washed ashore in the land of Abadan and proclaimed king. Alexander's plot is tightly controlled; his characters, especially his hero, Lukas, are appealing. 10 up.

Baldwin, Anne Norris. A LITTLE TIME. Viking, 1978. 121 pages. $6.95.
Direct in its purpose to describe the family situation when one child in 5 (the 4th) is mongoloid. Told in first person but author has achieved some distance by what she allows Sarah to say and to think. Both sides of the issue of home-care or away-from-home care are considered. No sugar coating, not teary eyed. 9 up.

Bawden, Nina. REBEL ON A ROCK. Lippincott, 1978. 159 pp. $7.95.
Intrigue and mystery in an international setting make this a story that holds up without seeming to be a vehicle for explaining foster children and sibling rivalry. Smooth confident tone in the writing. Young readers gave it high ratings. 11 up.

Baylor, Byrd. THE WAY TO START A DAY. illus. by Peter Parnall. Scribners, 1978. $8.95.
Baylor's song to the morning is filled with love of life and