

MYTHIC PASSAGES
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
MYTHIC IMAGINATION INSTITUTE
A NON-PROFIT ARTS & EDUCATION CORPORATION
COPYRIGHT 2005

The Question of Meaning

By Joseph Campbell

Editor's Note:

"The Question of Meaning" is an excerpt from essays written by Joseph Campbell between the years 1944 and 1968. These essays have been published in *Flight of the Wild Gander, Explorations in the Mythological Dimension*, which was recently republished in 2002 by the Joseph Campbell Foundation.

This excerpt (pages 19 — 23) is copyrighted material. It is reproduced here with the written permission of the Joseph Campbell Foundation. It may not be reproduced without such permission. While these essays were written over forty years ago, they still speak to central themes of interest to persons studying or just enjoying myth, folklore, sacred tales, or psychology. This excerpt on meaning is part of a chapter titled "The Fairy Tale." *The Flight of the Wild Gander* is available at bookstores and at the Joseph Campbell Foundation's website, www.jcf.org. The Joseph Campbell Foundation is an official partner of the Mythic Imagination Institute.

The Grimm brothers, Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and others, have pointed out that folk tales are "monstrous, irrational and unnatural," both as to the elements of which they are composed and as to the plots that unify these elements. Since a tale may have a different origin from its elements, two questions propose themselves. What is the origin and meaning of the motifs? What is the origin and meaning of the tales?

The Motifs

Many of the incidents of the merry tales, jokes, yarns, tall stories, and anecdotes are simply comical and clever inventions spun from life. These offer no problem.

The "monstrous, irrational and unnatural" incidents, however, are of a kind with those of myth; indeed, they are frequently derived from myth. They must be explained as myth is explained. But then, how is myth explained?

The reply varies according to the authority.

Euhemereus, a Greek writer of the fourth century B.C., noting that Alexander the Great, shortly after his death, was already appearing in legend as a demigod, propounded the view that the gods are only great mortals, deified. Snorri Sturleson (1179 — 1241), in the preface to his *Prose Edda*, explained in the same way the pagan divinities of the Norse. This theory called "Euhemerism," has its advocates to this day.

Among the Indo-Germanic philologists in the period of the ascendancy of Max Müller, it was believed that myths were originally sentimental descriptions of nature. Man half consciously read the tragedy of his own life in the birth of the sun, its "kissing of the dew to death," its culmination, descent, and disappearance into the arms of night. Because of the fact that Indo-European nouns are either masculine or feminine, the descriptions tended to personify their objects. And because of the fact that the language was evolving, the original references of the personifying nouns were presently forgotten, so that the words were finally taken to be personal names. For example, such a metaphorical name for the sun as Kephelos, the "Head" (of light), presently lost its meaning and was thought to refer to a human youth; and correspondingly, the fading dew, Prokris, bride of the "Head," became a mortal girl of tragical demise. One more step: the names might become confused with those of actual historical heroes, whereupon the myth would be transformed into a legend.

Müller's theory was the most elaborate attempt to account for the mechanics of personification. Among the "anthropologists" it was, more easily, simply assumed that savages and poets tend to attribute souls to things and to personify. The childlike fantasy of primitive man, his poetic feeling, and his morbid, dream-ridden imagination, played into his attempts to describe and explain the world around him and thus produced a phantasmagoric counterworld. But the savage's effort, at the core, was to discover the cause of things, and then, through spells, prayer, sacrifice, and sacrament, to control them. Mythology, therefore, was only a false etiology; ceremonial, a misguided technology. With the gradual, unmethodical, but nevertheless inevitable recognition of error upon error, man progressed through the labyrinth of wonder to the clearer-headed stand of today. *

Another view (and it rather supplemented than contradicted the descriptive-etiological theory) represented primitive man as terrified by the presences of the grave, hence ever anxious to propitiate and turn them away. The roots of myth and ritual went down to the black subsoil of the grave-cult and the fear of death.

A fourth point of view was propounded by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He argued that the collective superexcitation (*surexcitation*) of clan, tribal, and intertribal gatherings was experienced by every participating member of the group as an impersonal, infectious power (*mana*); that this power would be thought to emanate from the clan or tribal emblem (*totem*); and that this emblem, therefore, would be set apart from all other objects as filled with *mana* (sacred versus profane). This *totem*, this first cult object, would then infect with *mana* all associated objects, and through this contagion there would come into being a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting in a single moral community all believers. The great contribution of Durkheim's theory, and what set it apart from all that had gone before, was that it represented religion not as a morbid exaggeration, false hypothesis, or unenlightened fear, but as a truth emotionally experienced, the truth of the relationship of the individual to the group.

This recognition by Durkheim of a kind of truth at the root of the image-world of myth is supported, expanded, and deepened by the demonstration of the psychoanalysts that dreams are precipitations of unconscious desires, ideals, and fears, and furthermore, that the images of dream resemble — broadly, but nevertheless frequently to the detail — the motifs of folk tale and myth. Having selected for their study the symbol-inventing, myth-motif — production level of the psyche — source of all those universal themes ("Elementary Ideas")* which men have read into the phenomena of nature, into the shadows of the tomb, the lives of the heroes, and the emblems of society — the psychoanalysts have undoubtedly touched the central moment of the multifarious problem. In the light of their discussion, theories which before seemed mutually contradictory become easily coordinated. Man, nature, death, society — these have served simply as fields into which dream-meanings have been projected. Hence the references of the wild motifs are not really (no matter what the relationalizing consciousness may believe) to the sun, the moon, the stars, to the wind and thunder, to the grave, to the hero, or even to the power of the group, but *through* these, back again to a state of the psyche. Mythology is psychology, misread as cosmology, history, and biography.

A still further step can and must be taken, however, before we shall have reached the bounds of the problem. Myth, as the psychoanalysts declare, is *not* a mess of errors; myth is a picture language. But the language has to be studied to be read. In the first place, this language is the native speech of dream. But in the second place, it has been studied, clarified, and enriched by the poets, prophets, and visionaries of untold millenniums. Dante, Aquinas, and Augustine, al-Ghazali and Mohammed, Zarathustra, Shankaracharya, Nagarjuna, and T'ai Tsung were not bad scientists making misstatements about the weather, or neurotics reading dreams into the stars, but masters of the human spirit teaching a wisdom of death and life. And the thesaurus of the myth-motifs was their vocabulary. They brooded on the state and way of man, and through their broodings came to wisdom; then teaching, with the aid of the picture-language of myth, they worked changes on the patterns of their inherited iconographies.

But not only in the higher cultures; even among the so-called primitives, priests, wizards, and visionaries interpret and reinterpret myth as symbolic of "the Way": "the Pollen Path of Beauty," as it was called, for example, among the Navaho. And this Way, congenial to the wholeness of man, is understood as the little portion of the great Way that binds the cosmos; for, as among the Babylonians, so everywhere, the crux of mythological teaching has always been that "an everlasting reiteration of unchanging principles and events takes place both in space and in time, in large as in small." ** The Way of the individual is the microcosmic reiteration of the Way of the All and of each. In this sense the reasonings of the sages are not only psychological but metaphysical. They are not easily grasped. And yet they are the subtle arguments that inform the iconographies of the world.

Myths, therefore, as they now come to us, and as they break up to let their pregnant motifs scatter and settle into the materials of popular tale, are the purveyors of a wisdom that has borne the race of man through the long vicissitudes of his career. "The content of folklore," writes Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "is metaphysics. Our inability to see this is due primarily to our abysmal ignorance of metaphysics and its technical terms."

Therefore, in sum: the "monstrous, irrational and unnatural" motifs of folk tale and myth are derived from the reservoirs of dream and vision. On the dream level such images represent the total state of the individual dreaming psyche. But clarified of personal distortions and propounded by poets, prophets, and visionaries, they become symbolic of the spiritual norm for Man the Microcosm. They are thus phrases from an image-language, expressive of metaphysical, psychological, and sociological truth. And in the primitive, Oriental, archaic, and medieval societies this vocabulary was pondered and more or less understood. Only in the wake of the Enlightenment has it suddenly lost its meaning and been pronounced insane.

* Reflection and enquiry should satisfy us that to our [savage] predecessors we are indebted for much of what we thought most our own, and that their errors were not willful extravagances or the ravings of insanity, but simply hypotheses, justifiable as such at the time when they were propounded, but which a further experience has proved to be inadequate. It is only by the successive testing of hypotheses and rejection of the false that truth is at last elicited." (Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, one-volume edition [New York and London; The Macmillan Company 1922], p. 264.)

** The Babylonian astrological mythology, as described by Hugo Winckler, is a local specification, amplification, and application of themes that are of the essence of mythology everywhere.