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Myth and Ritual in Moonrise Kingdom

Abstract

This essay examines religious themes in Wes Anderson's film *Moonrise Kingdom*. An analysis of the film reveals the characters utilize ritual and myth as a means of creating knowledge and as the catalyst for a transformation of self. This essay argues that Anderson's characters construct and interpret their reality, of self and world, by engaging with ritual, myth, and community.

Keywords

ritual, myth, film, rites of passage, Wes Anderson, Moonrise Kingdom

Author Notes

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Wes Anderson's films introduce thoughtfully constructed worlds abounding in religious meaning. An examination of Anderson's film, *Moonrise Kingdom*¹ (2012), reveals a diegetic reality rich with religious symbolism. The symbolism manifests through character interaction with myth and ritual that results in new identities and communities being formed. The following analysis of *Moonrise Kingdom* considers the function of myth and ritual as reflected in the growth of the two main characters. As a parabolic narrative,² an approach steeped in mythological criticism reveals the religious context of *Moonrise Kingdom*. Such an approach includes a larger scope of analysis that considers the fundamental values and cultural assumptions of a community in its quest for the sacred.³ It is through myth and ritual that the young protagonists, Sam and Suzy, recreate their place in the world.

As an approach to film analysis, myth criticism provides an interpretative framework that works well with Anderson's films, as Anderson uses the traditional structure of myth and rites of passage for his protagonists. For *Moonrise Kingdom*, myth critical approach allows for an understanding of its use of myth and ritual to establish meaning, for both characters and viewers. Myth and ritual are inextricably linked. As Lyden notes, "Theories of myth are very often linked to theories of ritual. Rituals have been viewed as myths enacted or dramatized; they re-present the world depicted in the myth, and so provide a link between that world and the realm of the everyday."⁴

Moonrise Kingdom tells the story of twelve-year old protagonists Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman) and Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward) who navigate young love on the fictional New England island of New Penzance.⁵ The film opens in Suzy Bishop's house as she and her younger brothers listen to Leonard Bernstein's recording of Benjamin Britten's "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra."⁶ Outside an historic storm brews as we are visually introduced to the rest of the Bishop

family in their Summer's End house. Omniscient, nameless narrator Bob Balaban, dressed like a 1965 version of an L.L.Bean catalog model, introduces the viewer to the island of New Penzance and the historic storm upon which the plot is centered. The viewer is then taken to Camp Ivanhoe led by Scout Master Ward (Edward Norton) who learns that co-protagonist Sam has escaped from the Khaki Scout camp, as Suzy's parents realize, she too, is missing. As the adult characters organize a search party we learn the children's non-traditional family lives serve as that which unites them. *Moonrise Kingdom* follows the journey and developing romance between Sam and Suzy. As they forge their path as a pair they outsmart the adults during which time they survive the historic storm, ultimately, with a new understanding of their own place in the world.

The following examination of *Moonrise Kingdom* considers myth as a story with sacred meaning. Such a broad definition allows for us to reflect upon the function of myth in relationship to ritual, particularly, the rites of passage present in film. Myths function as bridges to the sacred, as a means for humans to connect to what is religiously meaningful to them. They provide individuals with ways of understanding the world and their place in it. Plate writes, "...a definition of myth must deal with the ways myths *function*, how they do what they do and how they do them to people. The primary functions of myths are to make meaning, make memories, and make communities."⁷ In the films of Wes Anderson, the existence of a unified community is integral to plot development and narrative success.

The rituals most prevalent in *Moonrise Kingdom*, or in all of Anderson's films for that matter, are rites of passage. Specifically, the plot of *Moonrise Kingdom* follows the coming of age of the two young protagonists as they embark on a pilgrimage. The film presents a 1960s-era hero myth that sees the young protagonists struggle to find their place in the world. *Moonrise Kingdom* focuses on the relationship between myth and ritual through rites of passage. The myth of the

heroic journey becomes the conduit for character development and self-realization. Childhood is universal, and we can all relate to the suffering experienced as one is on the precipice of young adulthood. Myths are embodied and through ritual their meaning is inscribed into the world of the practitioner. Plate notes, “[m]yths may be fictions, but they are believed to be true in a deeper sense than historical investigations can provide because they tell something that the facts alone cannot. They are embodied, performed, and memorable.”⁸

Rituals are what religious practitioners *do*. Rooted in myth, rich in symbolism, ritual is repetitive in nature, related to the sacred, intentional, and formalized. A broader consideration of ritual includes both its emergent and its creative nature.⁹ Ritual Studies scholar Ronald Grimes offers a broad, but useful definition: “ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment.”¹⁰ Rituals do not remain static, they change, are often messy, as life tends to be. Yet, they often have the ability to control, as evidenced in their formalization. While ritual performance is the outward action, inward the performer is mentally creating and inscribing their new world. Furthermore, Richard Jennings argues that, “ritual may be understood as performing noetic functions in ways peculiar to itself. Ritual is not a senseless activity but is rather one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world.”¹¹ For Jennings, it is through ritual that one gains *and* transmits knowledge, so much so, that “ritual does not depict the world so much as it finds or creates the world.”¹² Through ritual, the young protagonists of *Moonrise Kingdom* learn about themselves and their place in the world. It is this element of ritual that is integral to the following analysis.

Rites of passage are central to Sam and Suzy’s adventure. *Moonrise Kingdom* includes the performance of several *rites of passage*. Though not always traditionally performed or identified as such, they are important to character and plot development – as the film is, without a doubt, a

coming of age story. *Rites of passage* include ceremonies or rites that mark major life events, such as birth, death, coming of age, marriage, and initiation. Early scholars of ritual, such as anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner identified the stages and states of being experienced by the ritual performer during rites of passage. In his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep divided rites of passage into three phases: the pre-liminal (separation phase), the liminal (transition phase), and the post-liminal (incorporation phase).¹³ As an example, consider a pilgrimage or vision quest where the individual, upon entering the first phase, is separated or detached from their usual state of being. The individual leaves behind their home, family, and status while transitioning into the second phase, characterized by liminality. During the liminal phase the individual exists in an ambiguous state, no longer identified by their usual state of being and not yet fully transitioned into a new identity or state of being. Liminality is characterized as an ambiguous state, inhabited by those deemed on the fringes of society, or in the case of Sam and Suzy, marginalized in their peer groups and family units. Yet, it is within this ambiguous state that creativity exists, the potential for a rebirth or new identity awaits.

Victor Turner classified liminality as a “betwixt and between” state where the ritual performer is on the threshold of a new and different status.¹⁴ While in this liminal state, stripped of past identifiers and existing in an ambiguous form, individuals develop social relationships with other liminal figures based on shared experience. Continuing with the above example, a religious pilgrim, having left behind job, family, and social standing, embarks on a sacred journey and travels perhaps a great distance to unfamiliar territory where they join a similarly inclined group. They detach from their usual life and transition into the liminal phase: as a group they may be required to don the same clothes, engage in rituals and communal activities, thus developing social relationships based on shared experiences. Turner identified this experience as *communitas*, in

which social relationships develop in the ambiguous state of being where social status and structures are no longer present.¹⁵ It is in the liminal phase that egalitarianism and potential for personal growth exists. When the pilgrim completes the journey, they re-assimilate or re-incorporate into society and assume a stable state of being, often with a new identity (consider a coming of age ritual such as a vision quest) and a new understanding of their place in the world gained through the religious experience. Thus, the rite of passage has resulted in the pilgrim acquiring both a new identity (e.g., from girl to woman) and knowledge that now informs their worldview.

As a coming of age story, *Moonrise Kingdom* is similar to Anderson's other films.¹⁶ As in most Anderson films the characters, both adults and children, struggle with identity issues. At the forefront are the young protagonists, each on the fringe of their peer groups and family life. As liminal characters, orphaned Sam and troubled child Suzy escape the rejection they experience in their daily lives in favor of a unifying coming of age pilgrimage.

The journey becomes the grounding point for Sam and Suzy's ideal. It is through the journey to the beach that the ideal is established for them. They just need to figure out how to make it their reality. Fortunately, ritual has a creative nature, and it is through rites of passage that new realities can be inscribed. Sam and Suzy's rites of passage (pilgrimage, communion, baptism, and marriage) function to connect their ideal with what is real.¹⁷

As an experienced Khaki Scout, Sam is knowledgeable about camping and the wilderness. Arguably, the meticulous ritual and mythic qualities of Khaki Scout life keep the chaos of Sam's unstable life at bay. However successful he is as a Khaki Scout, he remains the outsider of his troop. As noted above, one of the functions of ritual is as a means to control or negotiate the messiness of life. "The world often does not comply with the way things ought to be; it cannot be

fully controlled. Ritual is a way of performing things as they ought to be, a way of doing in which all things can be controlled.”¹⁸ The life of a Khaki Scout is meticulously regimented as personified by Edward Norton’s character Scout Master Randy Ward. The ritualized behavior of Scout life provides Sam with a sense of identity; we do not see him out of the Khaki Scout uniform until the end of the pilgrimage. The narrative of Scout life, that is, what it means to be a part of this community, and the ritualized action demanded of its members, give orphaned Sam a sense of identity and the stability his life lacks. If we consider the Boy Scouts of America as an equivalent, we can conclude that Sam’s membership in the Khaki Scouts offers not just a community of peers, but a quasi-religious community that is grounded in ritual and ceremony. Regarding the religiosity of the Boy Scouts of America, “...the BSA requires that members both espouse a theistic conception of God and reaffirm their belief both publicly and privately through oaths, ceremony, and ritual.”¹⁹ This is further confirmed by the Boy Scouts of America’s website which devotes an entire section to the importance of ritual and ceremony in the scouting community.²⁰

If Sam’s identity is entrenched in Khaki Scout life, then Suzy’s is rooted in the world of books and music. As an experienced camper, Sam brings necessities on their pilgrimage, while Suzy brings her kitten, binoculars (her superpower), music, and books. Suzy is an outcast in her own family. Her father, played by Bill Murray, doesn’t even acknowledge her by name until one of the final scenes of the film in St. Jack’s Church. The family does not even notice her absence until dinnertime on the day of her departure. Suzy’s behavior indicates that she yearns for something, even when her actions towards others are based in anger. Sam, the Khaki Scout, is the hero in this story; he’s prepared for the adventure. Suzy is not. In his daily life Sam lacks control and is an outsider, but on the pilgrimage with Suzy, his scouting skills, at least in his mind, give him a sense of security and ultimately safety. Hancock writes, “If these windows fail to appear on

their own, they create them by embarking on epic journeys, by playing out their dramas on the stage or the page, by immersing themselves fully in whatever endeavor or adventure they might find to lend meaning to their lives.”²¹

When we consider the function of the rite of passage undertaken by Sam and Suzy, we witness two children who transform as their pilgrimage progresses. They are liminal figures, on the fringes of their communities of family and peers, and it is through ritual that the two develop a sense of community with one another. Similarly, a religious pilgrim in separating themselves from their family and daily life, embarks on what is usually an arduous journey of self-transformation. In the midst of the arduous journey pilgrims find unity in their shared experiences; a community is built.

Suzy and Sam leave behind the uncertainty of their daily lives to retrace the old Chickchaw harvest migration route. The destination is *their* beach – their Moonrise Kingdom. When they claim the beach for themselves, they reclaim their identity and happiness. As they make their way over rocks and through rivers we see their bond forming as they navigate the arduous journey to their destination. Just as pilgrims on a sacred journey enter into a sense of *communitas*, Sam and Suzy reveal their devotion and connection to one another. Even though they are betwixt and between, they find meaning in their shared experiences on the beach. Lyden writes, “...the liminal scenario not only suspends ordinary rules but also invokes a utopian ideal, and this returns us to the idea that rituals connect the world of “reality” (how things are) with “ideality” (how things ought to be).”²² Sam “marks” Suzy, piercing her ears with fishhooks, foreshadowing the wedding ceremony that happens during the second leg of their journey. The viewer witnesses the children make the transition into young adulthood as they experience their first intimate moments. The beach scene where this happens is one in which the potentiality of the liminal state is at its height.

Communitas has an aspect of potentiality, as it is often in the subjunctive mood, that is, it's contrary to the everyday reality experienced by the children.²³ As we watch them learn about each other, our sense of hope for their future grows. As two children who lead very solitary lives—seen in the way in which the film distinguishes them from their peers—they are able to enjoy a sense of companionship on the beach that they have never previously experienced in their short lives.

The beach scene deserves further unpacking, as Anderson, himself, has stated this is the most important scene, “the center of the film.”²⁴ Upon their arrival, Suzy and Sam immediately lay claim to the land. Sam says, “This is our land!” And Suzy, “Yes, it is!” Sam removes the coonskin cap, itself a symbol of the wild nature of the American pioneer, while Suzy removes her “Sunday-school shoes.” On the count of three they jump into the water, an act which ushers them into their experience of communitas; they are united. More specifically, the action is symbolic of the rite of baptism at the sacred site they named Moonrise Kingdom. This is not just a symbolic baptism, a ritual where water offers purification, but it is also an act of communion, identifying the two as having undergone a renewal of Self.²⁵ We next see Sam approach Suzy with beetles hanging from fishhooks. He pierces her ears, ritually marking her; blood streaming down her neck, wincing in pain, she is fully accepting of the experience. The act of piercing or bodily modification is a common ritual within the larger framework of rites of passage.

The process of producing the alteration creates a situation in which the individual must endure a painful procedure. Being able to have one's body cut, pierced, tattooed, and scarred without showing pain is often a critical element in rites of passage. The experience and acceptance of pain is an important feature of liminality, and this pain may play a role in developing an altered state of consciousness, an important aspect of a ritual experience.²⁶

The scene continues as Suzy and Sam undress to their underwear, losing identifiers of the lives they have left behind. With flowers in their hair they dance on the beach, entering into an intimate moment culminating in a French kiss and intimate touching, actions clearly symbolic of a coming

of age. As night falls, Suzy reads to Sam from *The Disappearance of the 6th Grade*, indicating the transition or maturation the two have experienced since leaving their homes. The experience on the beach has matured them beyond their previous status as 6th graders. It is during the ambiguity of *communitas* that they experience a reversal of status. They are children no longer. The creative potential of the middle phase of a rite of passage has allowed Sam and Suzy to develop a relationship but also mature in ways they were unable to prior to their journey.²⁷

After the two have been found by a search party and have returned home, Suzy's mother (Frances McDormand) attempts to undo the work of the ritual. The ritual piercing of her daughter's ears is a defilement in her eyes. By purifying Suzy in the bath and removing the fish hook earrings, Mrs. Bishop works to erase Sam's ritual marking. Sam, on the other hand, is at Captain Sharp's (Bruce Willis). He is no longer wearing his Khaki Scout uniform and together they sit drinking beer. The juxtaposition of the two scenes contrasts a parent unable to cope with the transition or maturation of her daughter, with an authority figure, Captain Sharp, breaking the law by offering Sam alcohol, in recognition of Sam's coming of age experience and change of status. For many, the act of drinking alcohol is itself a modern-day rite of passage.

When we consider the importance of myth in a religious context, that is, as a way to make sense of the world, or as a bridge to the sacred, the importance of books and myths in *Moonrise Kingdom* permits the viewer to delve into the mindset of its main characters. The most obvious is the flood myth, specifically, the performances of *Noye's Fludde*, a play meant to be performed by children, that bookends the film.²⁸ Sam and Suzy's initial meeting occurs backstage, pre-performance at St. Jack's Church, with Suzy dressed as a raven, a bird rife with religious symbolism. The raven has multiple representations in various cultures around the world, including as a messenger, creator, and trickster and is associated with both prophecy and bad luck.²⁹

The myth of the flood as found across cultures presents a symbolism that is simultaneously one of destruction and creation. The symbolism of *Noye's Fludde*, coupled with the storm of the century, further highlights the transition that Sam and Suzy experience throughout the film. The denouement occurs at the height of the storm as the destruction caused by the storm's flooding waters, in the myth and in their lives, need not be entirely negative, as from it results a fresh start for Sam and Suzy, the waters having the ability to purify the past. And, as with their liminal status, there exists potential. Here, the flood reinforces the baptism Sam and Suzy experienced back on the beach. When the storm subsides the two are ushered back into society, yet with a new sense of Self. As Hancock notes, "...Anderson's characters undergo a turn toward the Self in which they realize their interdependence upon other characters – their need for communion – and discover the Self in communion with the Other."³⁰

Additionally, when we consider the role of myth in *Moonrise Kingdom*, we need to reflect upon the role of storytelling and Suzy's attachment to books. As Crothers Dilley writes, "This narrative is set in a meticulously crafted Anderson cosmos, and takes as its motif children's stories—the tall tales, Sunday-school stories, boy's adventure narratives, fables, and fairy tales that once again point to the power of literary narratives in Anderson's work."³¹ The act of storytelling, and filmmaking for that matter, can be viewed as a bonding experience, as both are inherently creative processes. In the course of the journey we see Suzy and Sam connecting as she reads to him on the beach. Connections are further developed when Suzy reads *The Light of the Seven Matchsticks* to Sam and his former Khaki Scout troop on the second leg of their journey. The viewer learns that *The Light of the Seven Matchsticks* tells the story of young Barnaby Jack, who is planning to run away, for what is not the first time, accompanied by Annabelle.³²

The symbolism of Suzy's books highlights the importance of their pilgrimage and the ability of myth to make sense of the world.³³ The books she reads were created for the film, their passages written by Anderson and Coppola. She brings with her *The Girl from Jupiter*, representing her pre-pilgrimage alienation. While on the trip she reads aloud from *The Francine Odysseys*, and later *The Disappearance of 6th Grade*. In the final scene of the film she sits in her house reading *The Return of Auntie Lorraine*, a near replication of Suzy's opening scene, albeit with a different book. Arguably the books are symbolic of the stages they experienced during pilgrimage—separation, liminality, and return. Specifically, the books represent their inability to fit in at school and with family, which lead to their separation and journey where they experience *communitas* and renewal, and ultimately their return after their unofficial marriage. Suzy returns to her family, her parents appearing to have made some of their own realizations. Sam returns not just to a new life, but to a new family with Captain Sharp. Up to this point, Sam proudly donned his Khaki Scout uniform and its associated identity. The removal of the uniform signifies Sam's new sense of Self, that is, his new life, revealed by his new Island Police uniform, that of his new parental figure. The potential of his liminal existence is now fully realized in his surroundings.

Undoubtedly, Sam and Suzy experience a coming of age on their pilgrimage, a transition that is firmly marked by their unofficial marriage at Camp Lebanon. Here, in this scene, the viewer witnesses overtly religious themes. The wedding is performed at the Fort Lebanon Chapel, while the officiant, Cousin Ben (Jason Schwartzman), wears a sash adorned with crosses, and stands in front of more crosses along the back wall of the chapel. The marriage marks another rite of passage for Sam and Suzy. The first one is a private ceremony, but this one testifies publicly to their commitment to one another. Before the ceremony Cousin Ben tells Sam and Suzy their marriage

will not be official for obvious reasons, “but the ritual does carry a very important moral weight with yourselves.”

The final scenes of the film take place in St. Jack’s Church, the place where Sam and Suzy first met. Here they are, one year after their initial meeting. The child actors are dressed as animals, but *Noye’s Fludde* has been canceled due to the massive storm. The church has become a place of refuge for those seeking shelter from the storm, reminiscent of Noah’s Ark. Sam and Suzy, dressed as foxes, are in the balcony, spying on the search party. Spotted by Captain Sharp they ascend carefully to the steeple, out in the storm, the scene steeped in religious symbolism. The location of the scene as well as the canceled performance require no further explanation. However, the symbolism of the fox merits consideration. In many cultures, the fox symbolizes the characteristics of cunning and wisdom. It is often associated with the trickster figure, the figure that is both sly and to be feared. Parlevliet writes:

Although Western European literature is still haunted by this trickster fox figure, only a few people will know him by name. Even if they do, they will probably not know him through the original *Reynard* story, but through one of the illustrated adaptations for children. They ‘would be surprised to learn,’ wrote Varty (1999), the English *Reynard* specialist, ‘that he was once the leading character in a book meant for adults which became a best-seller in the fifteenth century and remained popular for more than 200 years, a book characterized by violence, murder, adultery, rape, and corruption in high places.’ (p. 23).³⁴

This manifestation of the fox is often depicted as a dangerous, liminal figure.³⁵ Early in the film, Sam and Suzy are similarly depicted as “dangerous” by Suzy’s school and Sam’s foster family, and here, Sam and Suzy are liminal figures, ambiguous by nature, not yet reintegrated into society, in fox costumes, in a sense doubling their ambiguity. Outside on the steeple, they remove their masks, and we watch them float to the cemetery below. It is apparent they are willing to jump, thus sacrificing themselves instead of following the adults’ commands.³⁶ Sam and Suzy do not jump, yet the significance of the scene is not diminished. These two liminal children, stuck between

childhood and adulthood, have an unbreakable commitment to each other. One way or another, their liminality ends with this scene: either through suicide or with their descent from the steeple and subsequent reintegration into society.

Fortunately, the adult characters have done some growing throughout the film, so Sam and Suzy's reintegration into society is less painful than anticipated. The storm's waters are destructive, but also represent a new beginning for Sam and Suzy. Rachel Joseph writes, "[t]he flood, in one rush, brings them together both as a community and as love itself. The floodwater purifies each character and leaves them ready to establish new or refreshed relationships with one another. What began in miniature on the stage is mirrored and magnified in the climactic big storm scenes where each character's mettle and connection to one another are tested."³⁷ The storm changed not only the people, but the actual island. Balaban narrates, "[t]he coastal areas of New Penzance were battered and changed forever. But harvest yields the following autumn far exceeded any previously recorded, and the quality of the crops was said to be extraordinary."

Moonrise Kingdom presents a parallelism seen in other Wes Anderson films. In several of his films, Anderson has used "bookends" as a means to open and close the film. Much like a structured rite of passage, *Moonrise Kingdom* moves through three distinct phases. The film opens and closes in Suzy's house. Reality for the Bishop family is entirely different from the reality (or I should say the ideality) of the closing scene. Additionally, the film includes early and late scenes that focus on performances.³⁸ The viewer learns a lot through these performances. In *Moonrise Kingdom*, the film opens (post-narration) and closes at St. Jack's Church on the day the play *Noye's Fludde* is to be performed (though the second performance does not occur). Arguably, the viewer learns through these performances, similar to how myth functions in the lives of the characters in both films. *Moonrise Kingdom* ends with a recording of Leonard Bernstein's narration of Benjamin

Britten's "Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra" (just as the film began) in which he states that the composer "has taken the whole orchestra apart. Now he puts it back together again in a fugue."³⁹ This transitions to Britten's "Cuckoo!" This serves as a nice bookend in standard Anderson style, just as Sam and Suzy's lives were taken apart and made whole at the end.

So, if ritual and myth help one construct, construe, and understand the world (as Jennings noted above), what can be said about the main characters of *Moonrise Kingdom*? When a person engages with the ritual and mythic dimensions of religion their focus turns inward, and it is this self-reflection that aided in the transformation of Sam and Suzy in *Moonrise Kingdom*.⁴⁰ Whether it is a pilgrimage, a wedding, or the retelling of a myth, the purpose of ritual and myth is to serve as catalysts for the individual to reflect on the nature of life. For the young protagonists of *Moonrise Kingdom*, the internal transformations they experienced would not have been fully realized without the communities and relationships they formed. In his argument regarding the importance of crews or communities present in each Anderson film, Hancock writes, "[h]e claims Anderson's approach to personhood depends on "...characters' recognition that authentic being or personhood is found only in communion, which is to say in radical inter-relationship with others through participation in a particular community of character(s)."⁴¹ This holds true not only for the characters in each film, but also for those who work on Anderson's films. The significance of community extends beyond the screenplay for Anderson.⁴²

Moonrise Kingdom shares a number of religious themes with other Wes Anderson films. Rites of passage in general figure greatly in the work of Anderson. The hero myth so common across cultures, centered on a journey or mission, is a key element of several Anderson films, including *The Darjeeling Limited* and *Isle of Dogs*. As noted elsewhere, Anderson's focus on children is typically done in the genre of a coming of age story.⁴³ Thus, rites of passage are integral

to the stories he tells. Other than coming of age, marriage, divorce, and death figure greatly in Anderson's oeuvre. The scope of analysis in this article was limited to *Moonrise Kingdom*. Yet the themes considered here could easily be explored in the context of Anderson's other eight feature films. The transformative power of myth and ritual are not limited to religiously intended contexts. *Moonrise Kingdom*' characters undergoing crises of identity for whom engagement with myth and performance of ritual aid in their understanding of themselves and their place in their larger community. Lyden writes, "[b]ut it is not only a reversal of status that takes place, in which the subordinate become insubordinate; there are also unlikely alliance formed... Turner views this as evidence of the fact that communitas is being ritually established as a place in which social distinctions are not reversed but abolished altogether. This reminds all of the ideal of unity, even as it reestablishes the hierarchy in purified form at the end of the ritual."⁴⁴

This brief examination of Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* reveals carefully constructed worlds with characters going through the processes of transformation and sharing the experience with those with whom they have developed close relationships. Through the use of myth and ritual, Anderson's characters come to an understanding of their role in the world and their relationship to others. In other words, it is through ritual and myth that they acquire knowledge needed to propel them forward. While religion and the sacred are rarely openly discussed in Anderson's films, other than *The Darjeeling Limited*, religious elements manifest in ways crucial to the development of both plot and characters.⁴⁵

¹ *Moonrise Kingdom* was co-written by Anderson and frequent collaborator Roman Coppola.

² See Anker, Roy M. "Narrative," *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*. Ed. John C. Lyden. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 340.

³ See Joel W. Martin, "Introduction: Seeing the Sacred on the Screen," in *Screening the Sacred* for further details.

⁴ Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. p. 79.

⁵ The island of New Penzance leads the viewer to consider similarities to Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Pirates of Penzance*. The plot of the opera focuses upon the young love of orphaned pirate Frederic and Mabel, the daughter of a major-general.

⁶ More specifically, they are listening to Bernstein's explanation of orchestral music. The portion the viewer hears focuses on early 20th century British composer Benjamin Britten who later composed *Noye's Fludde*, the play performed by the children in the film.

⁷ Plate, Brent S. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. 2nd edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 24-25.

⁸ Plate, p. 26.

⁹ See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. Ritual Studies International, 3rd edition, 2013.

¹⁰ Grimes, *Craft of Ritual Studies*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 195.

¹¹ Jennings, Richard. "On Ritual Knowledge." *Readings in Ritual Studies*, edited by Ronald L. Grimes, Pearson, 1995.p. 325.

¹² Jennings, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 328.

¹³ See Van Gennep.

¹⁴ See Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*. Eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, Meredith Little, Open Court Publishing, 1987, pp. 3-22.

¹⁵ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Routledge, 1995.

¹⁶ In particular, *Moonrise Kingdom* shares elements with *Bottle Rocket*, *Rushmore*, *Darjeeling Limited*, and *Isle of Dogs*.

¹⁷ For a discussion of myth, ritual and ideality versus reality, see Lyden.

¹⁸ Smith, Jonathan Z. "The Bare Facts of Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Ed. Ronald L. Grimes, Prentice hall, 1995, p. 473.

¹⁹ Reuveni, Erez. "On Boy Scouts and Anti-Discrimination Law: The Associational Rights of Quasi-Religious Organizations," *Boston University Law Review*. Vol. 86: 109, 2006, p. 158.

²⁰ See the Boys Scouts of America website: <http://www.programresources.org/ceremonies/> and Mechling.

²¹ Hancock, Brannon M. "A Community of Characters—the Narrative Self in the Films of Wes Anderson," *Journal of Religion & Film*. Vol. 9, Issue 2, October 2005. p. 6.

²² Lyden, p. 101.

²³ Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Ed. Ronald L. Grimes, Prentice hall, 1995, p. 518.

²⁴ See Wes Anderson interview in Kornhaber, Donna. *Wes Anderson*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017, p.154

²⁵ See Hancock for a discussion of communion and Self.

²⁶ Stein, Rebecca L. and Philip L. Stein. *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. 4th Edition, Routledge, 2017, p. 97.

²⁷ Additionally, it is interesting to consider that while the kids are not on the pilgrimage, that is, back home they are clearly kids, yet when outdoors on their journey they behave as adults.

²⁸ Following the symmetry so prevalent in Anderson's films, *Moonrise Kingdom* is "bookended" by opening and closing scenes at Suzy's house and the performance of *Noye's Fludde*.

²⁹ See Oosten Jarich and Frédéric Laugrand. "The Bringer of Light: The Raven in Inuit Tradition," *Polar Record*. Vol. 42, Issue 3, July 2006, p. 187 for a discussion of the raven as a trickster figure in Inuit tradition.

³⁰ Hancock, p. 11.

³¹ Crothers Dilley, Whitney. *The Cinema of Wes Anderson: Bringing Nostalgia to Life*. Wallflower Press, 2017. p. 168.

³² See *Suzy's Books*, the animated short film included in the extras of *Moonrise Kingdom*.

³³ Equally important, but not included due to constraints, is an examination of the accompanying music and its importance for the transformation of characters in *Moonrise Kingdom*. For example, Hank Williams' "Kaw-liga," a song about an Indian statue falling in love with a female Indian statute that is taken away, is played twice during the film. The song accompanies Sam as he begins his journey before Suzy joins him; and then the song is replayed while Captain Sharp and Mr. Bishop are riding in the police car after its discovered that Suzy is missing. The symbolism is clear when the song is played during Sam's scene; whereas, during the second scene the symbolism points to the affair between Suzy's mother and Captain Sharp. For a lengthy treatment of music in Wes Anderson films see Lara Hrycaj, *What is this Music? Auteur Music in the Films of Wes Anderson*. Ph.d. Diss. Wayne State University, 2013.

³⁴ Parlevliet, Sanne. "Hunting Reynard: How *Reynard the Fox* Tricked his Way into English and Dutch Children's Literature," *Children's Literature in Education*. Vol. 39, 2008, p. 108.

³⁵ Interestingly, *Moonrise Kingdom* follows Anderson's 2009 film *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Based on the story by Roald Dahl, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* follows in the vein of early representations of the mischievous fox in children's literature.

³⁶ Ragsdale, p. 7.

³⁷ Joseph, Rachel. "'Max Fischer Presents': Wes Anderson and the Theatricality of Mourning." *The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indie Wood Icon*. Edited by Peter C. Kunze, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 61.

³⁸ This is also true of *Rushmore* and *Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. And to some extent, *The Royal Tennenbaums* and *Isle of Dogs*.

³⁹ Dual meaning of *fugue*: in music, a polyphonic composition based upon one, two, or more themes, which are enunciated by several voices or parts in turn, subjected to contrapuntal treatment, and gradually built up into a complex form having somewhat distinct divisions or stages of development and a marked climax at the end. In psychiatry, a period during which a person suffers from loss of memory, often begins a new life, and, upon recovery, remembers nothing of the amnesic phase (dictionary.com).

⁴⁰ A lengthier analysis of *Moonrise Kingdom* could include an examination of the transformation of the adult characters.

⁴¹ Hancock, p. 4.

⁴² Anderson's use of the same crew members and actors in multiple films has been noted. See Anderson discussing the matter in two interviews with Charlie Rose in 1999 and 2007. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OoSv2ZdA_8 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtfMFiAFJz4>

⁴³ For a discussion of children and adolescence in Anderson's films see Ragsdale, Crothers-Dilley, and Kornhaber.

⁴⁴ Lyden, pp. 97.

⁴⁵ See Barry Stephenson for a discussion of ritual in *The Darjeeling Limited*, "Filled with Ritual": Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited*," *Bright Lights Film Journal*. Oct. 31, 2011.

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