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Joseph Campbell: Mythologist

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Abstract

An appreciation of Joseph Campbell and his significance to the study of mythology.

Additional Keywords

Campbell, Joseph—Influence

Joseph Campbell: Mythologist

ROBERT HAUPTMAN

Twentieth century man has lost his spiritual center, his sense of wonder, his mythic perception. Mythologies are man's most potent resource, but they are invariably misconceived, misconstrued, and misapplied. The foolish emphasis in primary and secondary school on mythology as a series of narratives concerning anthropomorphic gods and goddesses, usually of Greek and Roman origin, is a most pitiable disservice. A specific mythology underlies every societal group, whether small and unsophisticated like the Tasaday or large and omnipotent like western civilization. Myths are simply the beliefs through which a social group functions effectively; they describe, explain, or predict. "Technology" controls. Mount Olympus, inhabited by Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite, and their friends; Haitian voodoo practices; and native American Trickster tales are all manifestations of mythic perception. But incisive thinkers have also pointed out that both modern science and theology are replete with mythic elements, and some scholars believe that all current explanations are as mythic as those promulgated in the past. As man progresses his myths simply become more sophisticated. Apodictic truth is presumably beyond his grasp. Even scientists now believe this to be so. It is only when myth degenerate into rigidly unbreakable norms, customs, and taboos that man stultifies and further development or progress becomes impossible.

There have been many compilers of individual myths, e.g., Thomas Bullfinch or Edith Hamilton, and innumerable scholars continue to record oral traditions in Africa, Australia, and South America. There are also anthropologists and historians who concern themselves with the theoretical aspects or modern implications; Mircea Eliade's influential work springs immediately to mind. Little doubt exists, however, that Joseph Campbell is the outstanding mythologist of the twentieth century. Teacher, scholar, compiler, and theoretician, Campbell has labored for fifty years to create a synthetic overview of all the diverse mythologies that man has created. This awesome task is theoretically possible for Campbell, because he believes that mythology is merely a function of human biological processes; mythology is sociobiological. Much influenced by Jungian thought, Campbell hold that myths are common archetypal properties, reproduced in similar or analogous forms or patterns in both geographically and temporally diverse cultures. These myths are man's basic images.

For forty years Campbell enumerated, explained, and theorized for students at Sarah Lawrence College. Early on, he began to assemble some of his lecture notes and ultimately produced one of this century's seminal studies, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a work whose very

title indicates his archetypal prejudices. Later came *The Masks of God* (1959-68), a four volume survey of world mythology. *The Mythic Image* (1974) was a departure from Campbell's normal format. But neither this oversize, profusely illustrated excursion into dreams nor any of Campbell's many other books prepared readers for his recently published masterpiece, *The Way of the Animal Powers*, volume one of his *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*. Whereas most scholars who have reached their ninth decade are enjoying the pleasures of retirement, Campbell was, until recently, feverishly producing his most significant studies.

The function of mythology is fourfold: mystical – to awaken a sense of wonder; cosmological – to imbue the cosmos with the mystical; sociological – to maintain a moral system; and pedagogical – to aid in life's transit. Mythology achieves its ends indirectly through poetry and analogy and "whenever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history, or science, it is killed." Nevertheless, it is the task of the mythologist to lift the veil and discover the truth disguised by myth, and this is what Campbell attempts in his *Historical Atlas*, a four volume thematic overview of man and his mythologies. The only published volume, *The Way of the Animal Powers*, deals with the hunter/gatherers – ancient and more recent illiterate and non-agricultural peoples. Campbell begins with a diversity of creation myths, and there is indeed an astonishing contiguity among them. In fact, some of the stories told in Africa are so similar to the Judeo-Christian version that one cannot help suspecting (despite scholar's disavowals) that the original tales have been exposed to Western influence. Furthermore, even Campbell admits (many pages later) that such temporally and culturally diverse comparisons can be improper. Next comes a brief survey of the earth's peoples, covering the earliest period through the paleolithic to the current era. There follows the two primary sections – the mythologies of both the hunter/gathers and the Great Hunt itself. Here is the wide-spread bear cult, the magnificent art of Lescaux and Altamira, the ubiquitous shamans, present-day neolithic peoples, and the great North American diversity of indigenous tribes. What makes all of this so effective are the hundreds of colored illustrations, photographs, tables, and maps. Virtually every page deserves careful scrutiny.

Many twentieth century scholars have enhanced man's knowledge and understanding of mythology and mythic perception. Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, Erich Neumann's *Great Mother*, and Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* are all outstanding contributions. But when one surveys Campbell's rich oeuvre, when one realizes that

both the first and last volumes of the prestigious Bollingen Series are Campbell's work (the first, *Where The Two Came to Their Father*, published in 1943; the hundredth, *The Mythic Image*, published in 1974), when one notes his pervasive influence, then one must insist that if mythology

supplies "the symbols that carry the human spirit forward," it is Campbell who has done more than anyone else in living memory to aid in that endeavor. Joseph Campbell died on October 31, 1987. ♣

Lost Tales of Narnia

...at the age of fourteen, I embarked on my first book: a set of twenty imaginary-world stories, more or less connected, set in the same world as Narnia, though my characters never actually ventured into C.S. Lewis's territory. I wrote C.S. Lewis, asking if I could use his world this way; and he very nicely wrote back, saying I could.
—Sanders Anne Laubenthal (1973)

What Secret wonders have not see their print:
what princesses were kidnapped, lost, or strayed;
what prince fought in wars of high intent:
what mythic creatures danced or loved or hid;
what talking animals, in woody haunt,
told tales of even older days of need? ♣

What noble prince, at time of need,
threw off her skirt with swans in silver print,
and, dressed in leggings, fled the social haunt?
Perhaps she followed where the centaurs strayed,
a herd of them; perhaps, 'neath lemurs hid
in leafy boughs, she pitched her grass-green tent. ♣

What noble prince, in sloth of soul's content,
feeling for great adventure nary a need,
a third son of an evil king who hid
in dungeon's depth a map, a jewel, a print —
what youth was stirred by a sudden thought
which strayed
most oddly, wondering if ghosts the cellars haunt? ♣

What leprechaun has left his misty haunt,
going a-cobbling with concealed intent,
wandering from hamlet to hamlet, as if he strayed
with but regard to monetary need?
Perhaps he sought a signet to imprint
an ancient seal; perhaps a sword long hid. ♣

What wallaby, with secret message hid

within her pocket, bounced, as if from haunt,
across the grasslands? What wildcat scratched
clawprint
in villain's hand? What goat, intent
on climbing mountain heights at sacred need,
leapt far to far, without a balustrade? ♣

All these and more, the twenty tales now strayed
might tell, but their high secrets are long hid:
who hears a pelican sing its lonely need;
who dared the graves invade of ghoulish haunt;
who failed and who proved glorious competent —
all these are lost, for never finding print. ♣

And did a hidden Lion's paw imprint
on those far, haunted regions, where strangers
strayed
a-questing, a needed, numinous content? ♣

—Joe R. Christopher

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