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A Campbellian Analysis of Departure in Shaffer's *The Gift of the Gorgon*

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Abstract

Among the mythologist of the 20th century whose concern was to relate any mythical story to the human psyche and studies of human psychology, Joseph John Campbell (1904-1987), an American mythologist, professor, writer, speaker, and anthropologist, was greatly influential. Campbell brought to life the myths and legends of cultures throughout the world when he introduces his theory of Monomyth or hero's journey, the term he borrowed from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Departure, initiation, and return are his monomyth three stages; each of them is divided into some subsections. Among Campbell's contemporaries, Peter Shaffer (1926), an English playwright and screenwriter of many award winning plays, is the one moving readily from farce to the portrayal of human suffering in his myth-like plays. This study attempts to highlight the quotations carrying either concepts of monomyth and demonstrate that Peter Shaffer's play *The Gift of the Gorgon* is a mythical one, where several elements of departure glamorously glitters.

Key words: *The Gift of the Gorgon*; Departure; Monomyth; Campbell

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INTRODUCTION

"Peter Shaffer has frequently been an enigma for critics and scholars. Some view him as a "serious" playwright

exploring important metaphysical concerns. Others seem him as a "popular" playwright, notable largely for explosive dramatic effect" (Watson, 1994, p.143). Shaffer wrote *The Gift of the Gorgon* (1992), about a wild Russian-Welsh dramatist and his tragic marriage. It is somewhat like a continuing debate between revenge, the view adopted by the ancient Greeks, and forgiveness, the modern, more civilized way of thinking.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell introduces his theory of monomyth or hero's journey which divides his theory into three key stages. The first phase is departure or sometimes called separation, the second one is initiation, and the last stage is returned. Each stage is divided into some subsections.

In the first stage, the hero starts his journey from his safe place in everyday life into an area of supernatural phenomenon where he learns fundamental facts about his true nature, capabilities and outlook on life until he reaches the first major trial. Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* divided this part in five sections: First, 'The call to adventure' in which the hero receives the call to the journey by a herald. Next, 'Refusal of the call' that indicates the hero either accepts to start his journey or not. Afterward, 'Supernatural aid' in which the hero meets somebody, who gives him magical items to help him through journey. Fourth, 'The crossing of the first threshold', the hero steps over into the unknown land and something that normal people try to stop the hero from entering. Fifth, 'The belly of the whale' that this stage has ended with the hero cannot conquer the creatures in the threshold of the unfamiliar and dying instead.

"Mythology" stands for "the study of myths". The word "mythology" can refer either to a collection of myths or element of some cultures and dates back to ancient times. The word 'myth' is a term that signposts complexity in history and meaning; as a matter of fact, it is the product of sometimes artistic narrative, shaping by consciousness. "In classical Greek, 'mythos' signified

any story or plot, whether true or invented” (Abrams, 1999, p.170). The main concept of myth is creation which clarifies how something comes or exists.

This study focuses on the departure and its elements trying to consider Peter Shaffer’s *The Gift of the Gorgon* and search for the elements of departure there.

1. THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

According to Campbell, in monomyth, the hero lives in an ordinary world, and suddenly receives a call to enter an unknown world of strange powers and events. Both Edward and Helen are the students of Cambridge. After their marriage in England, they want to go to the Greece because it is the cheapest and unknown place for them. Helen explains how she meets Edward in Cambridge, to Philip:

HELEN. The very first moment we met ... Cambridge: Summer, 1975. I was living there with my father.

PHILIP. He was a professor, wasn't he?

HELEN. An eminent one. I was hoping to follow in his footsteps. Somewhat haltingly, at twenty-five.

PHILIP. (Surprised) You mean you were an academic?

HELEN. Post-graduate. Like you, I'd written a dissertation people approved. I was trying it up into a proper book: that meant spending most of my life in the library. Which is where I met Edward, I mean really met. I was running out of the door and he was running in ... Ow! I really hurt. (The Gift of the Gorgon, p. 14)

Helen is an academic student who is serious and her father is a university professor of Cambridge that they study the Greek drama. Helen and Edward meet each other in the library of the Cambridge University as the other people; therefore, they have a usual life like other heroes.

Campbell defines the herald to be typically regarded as “dark, loathly...judged evil by the world.” (Campbell, 2004, p.48) Otherwise misjudged by appearance or, alternatively, the herald is an unknown, mysterious figure, who in any case would show wonderful things to the one who followed him. Helen is Edward’s herald. She summons him to death .She helps Edward to write some plays that these plays make him eminent. Shaffer in act I, scene II, describes Edward before their marriage as: “Edward runs on and halts. Looking across at her with open mouth. He is an unkempt man of twenty-eight in untidy clothes. When he speaks, the words tend to tumble out with massive energy, but also great relish in their phrasing. Exchanges between them, in the main, move fast.” (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.14)

Hence, Helen helps him for changing from negligent man to the famous writer. His writing before their marriage was not complete. Edward in the first part of his journey to the Greece swears a vow like a Perseus that he writes some plays and he may die in torment if he breaks this oath. According to Campbell’s definition, herald is

a judged evil by the world, Edward is a student of Jarvis and he believes that:

JARVIS. Then let’s just admit I haven’t the inclination to try and alter Mr Damson. If that’s his real name.

HELEN. What do you mean?

JARVIS. Well, doesn’t it sound made up to you?

HELEN. No!

JARVIS. This is a person, one sense, who brings pain. Please, dearest. I have no right to ask, but I would really happy if you didn’t see him again. (The Gift of the Gorgon, p. 20)

Edward and Helen get married in England and then, Edward tries to persuade Helen to go and live in the Greece. Edward wants to go to the Greece because he believes that he can be successful in play writing in this land. He needs someone to support him for writing and Helen can help him because her course in the university was the Greek drama. Their journey starts from here:

EDWARD. I’m going to Greece. Will you come with me?

HELEN. (lowered voice) When?

EDWARD. This week. I’ve just decided.

HELEN. I couldn’t.

EDWARD. Why not?

HELEN. for one thing, I can’t afford it. I haven’t that kind of money.

EDWARD. Greece is the cheapest place on earth. You can see all of it for fifty pounds: every single island worth your scrutiny.

Kiss. Clitoris. The lot. (The Gift of the Gorgon, p. 24)

In the story of Athena and Perseus, Athena is a “herald”; Perseus is a hero who wants to kill the Gorgon which is a horrific snake-haired monster whose appearance turns the beholders to stone. He went to Athena’s temple for helping because he swears an impossible vow that he must kill the Gorgon or live in a shame or else die of it.

ANCIENT GREECE: The Temple of Athena. Enter Perseus - an eager, young would - be hero in search of Glory. At this moment - like most would -be young heroes in Greek legend- he has made an exceedingly for foolish vow which he cannot possibly fulfil.

Perseus falls dramatically to his knees

“Desperately he calls on the goddess-smartest deity in the sky-given to extricating young men from impossible situation.”

PERSEUS. (*Edward’s voice on tape*) Great Athena! Dispenser of Divine Restraint! Hear and help an Unrestrained fool! (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.11)

At first, Athena doesn’t want to allow him to do such a thing because she thinks that he becomes a stone or his face turns into a splendid statue. Finally, she accepts to give her Shield of Showing to protect him from monster and so that he can find the Gorgon by its reflection, further, the shoes of Hermes, the messenger of god, to fly across the sea of destiny, the cap of darkness to fly invisibly in Gorgon’s eyes, and the sickle of Adamant, the blade to cut Gorgon’s neck. Perseus starts his journey and goes to Gorgon’s land.

2. REFUSAL OF THE CALL

Refusal of the summons changes the adventure into its negative, it means that, the subject loses the power of significant positive action and becomes a victim to be saved. Several elements in this play represent the refusal of the call, particularly Jarvis is like a saver, and Jarvis tries to keep Helen off because he thinks Helen has a brilliant future:

JARVIS. I am prepared to admit you may possess qualities I do not perceive. I am afraid I can only speak-like all of us-as I find. Helen is an exceptional girl. She has ahead of her a brilliant future. I would not wish her to spend any part of her life with those who would wish to waste it. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.24)

For the first time that Jarvis understands that Edward and Helen meet each other, he does not know that they want to get married, he rejects Edward and memorized him as a face that he never forgets because in his lecture in the university he had to asked him to leave the lecture and also, he alarms to Helen that Edward brings pain for her. In fact, the role of Jarvis in the story clear that the refusal essentially is a refusal to give up what Helen takes to be her own interest. The future is regarded not in terms of a constant series of deaths and births, but as though her present system of ideals, goals, and advantages was to be fixed and made secure. On the other hand, Edward is going to the Greece and he tries to convince Helen to live there, but Jarvis never accepts him and calls him as a person who wants to waste her daughter. The following lines clearly illustrate that Jarvis tries to show that Edward is a wasteful person and tries to persuade Helen that leaves him forever:

JARVIS. This is a person. One sense, who brings pain. Please, dearest. I have no right to ask, but I would be really happy if you didn't see him again.

HELEN. All right. I will try not to do.

JARVIS. Thank you. Dear one. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.20)

Helen has always been the role of saver for Edward because he considers himself as a madman, and Helen can cure him. They need Helen to go to the Greece. However, Edward has benefited from Helen's ideas in writing his plays, he wrote some plays but he couldn't finish them before their marriage.

EDWARD. No, I'm mad. You've got it right. Only you can cure me.

HELEN. Goodbye, Edward.

EDWARD. For Christ's sake! (He grabs her) Understand it. If you don't come with me, I'll never go there. I'll never see Greece. Ever! (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.26)

Helen is a master of Greek tragedy; therefore, this is a factor to help Edward as she explains the situation that she helps Edward for writing a scene, to Philip:

PHILIP. So – you wrote him a letter?

HELEN. Yes. His way.

PHILIP. You mean- a Scene? (Amazed) You wrote him a Scene, yourself? HELEN. Why not? I had helped him enough to do dialogue To hide behind dialogue. I'd lived with him long enough to know what hurt.... (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.77)

Athena doesn't want to allow him to kill the Gorgon because she knows that the Gorgon can change him to a stone. Perseus was doing all that he can be the hero of his land so he needs to savor for his succession. As a matter of fact, Athena is a saver because she finally helps him to conquer the Gorgon. In the Gorgon story, Perseus has a request:

PERSEUS. To become the truest hero in all of Greece! To be honored above all others who ever strode forth to conquer evil!

ATHENA. You are not modest, are you?

PERSEUS. I am! Deep in myself I am! I will submit entirely to your will. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.12)

3. SUPERNATURAL AID

"Once the hero accepts the call, he must equip himself with powerful weapons. The weapons of power are typically bestowed by the mentor; often have a supernatural or divine force behind him. Campbell referred to this stage as *supernatural aid*." (Indick, 2004, p.74) In this section, the hero who is Edward meets Helen, who gives him some advices to aid him through their journey. This helper, Helen, also acts as a guide to the hero, Edward. According to Campbell, "The higher mythologies develop the role in the great figure of the guide, the teacher, the ferryman, the conductor of souls to the afterworld." (Campbell, 2004, p.66). Edward guides in this play by Helen, indeed, their course in university is mutual and Jarvis is a university professor and she grows in a place that is familiar with Greek tragedy; therefore, Helen is like a teacher for Edward. Before they went to the Greece, Helen asked:

HELEN. How many plays have you written?

EDWARD. Fifty. The climatic scenes, anyway. There's no point in writing the rest-they're never going to be produced. People prefer the shrivelled stuff-reflections of their own shrivelled lives. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.16)

In fact, he was able to write a play but he couldn't produce it because he never finished any of his plays. When they get married and go to the Greece he swears that he starts to write a play and finish it, indeed, he takes benefit of Helen's advices and writes his works. Edward writes his plays for money and Helen as a helper is always trying to control Edward's widely passionate explosive and self-absorbing character which independently influences his plays.

Gradually, Edward becomes famous and finds some fans. Campbell in *the Hero with a Thousand Faces* presents supernatural aid is:

What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny. The fantasy is a reassurance—A promise that the peace

of Paradise, which was known first within the mother womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as in the past... protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. (2004, p.66)

Although there are some opposites exemplified in the central characters of Edward and Helen, the one a passionate dramatic writer, the other an emotionless academic, irresistibly drawn to each other's worlds whose love-hate relationship forms the play's story. Helen is a serious character who grows in an academic place and his father is an educated person, but she loves Edward and always guides him both through their life and his writing. In this play, Edward calls himself as a Perseus and calls Helen as Athena. In fact, Perseus gives Gorgon's head to Athena and Edward gives his plays to his beloved, Helen. Here, Philip talks about the Gorgon story and compares this story with Edward's love:

(*Seriously*) I guess he was telling you something very important, wasn't he? Making you his personal Athena to help him conquer his *personal* Gorgon: paralysis through excess.

HELEN. Very good.

PHILIP. He will give you the monster's head - the actual source of paralysis - and you will keep it powerless in your shield. (*Pause*) Which I guess meant your love. (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.39)

In the story of Athena and Perseus, a protective figure is Athena who provides Perseus with charms against the Gorgon forces he is about to pass. All of the supernatural aid and guiding that Perseus receives is from the same goddess, Athena. At first, Athena gives him her shield of showing so that he can find the Gorgon by its reflection, and also, the shoes of Hermes, to fly across the sea of destiny, the cap of darkness to fly invisibly in Gorgon's eyes, and finally, the sickle of Adamant, the blade to cut Gorgon's neck. "PHILIP. I get it! The foolish vow Perseus talks about - the one he couldn't fulfill alone - that was his promise to write a finished play. The whole scene was a cry for help - a learned cry made to a learned reader!" (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.38) These lines show the story of Edward and Helen is equal to the story of Athena and Perseus. Both Edward and Perseus in their success and vow need Helen and Athena.

Then, Athena wants Perseus to spare the Gorgon, but he does not want to do such a thing, again Perseus tries to memorize his vow to her. Athena gives him another advice that he must conquer the Gorgon face to face:

ATHENA. To conquer the Gorgon face to face-no weapon in his hand- standing before her fully visible! He must stare deep into her eyes, without one flicker of feat. And also, she must whisper in his inmost ear certain ancient words?!

PERSEUS. (Outraged) That is impossible.

ATHENA. Without *me*, yes: But I shall stay above you. I will whisper in your inmost ear certain ancient words, which you must speak to *her*! (The Gift of the Gorgon, p. 61)

4. CROSSING THE FIRST THRESHOLD

"For the hero, *the crossing the first threshold* in to the world of adventure is a significant transition". (Indick, 2004, p.75) Crossing the first threshold can be understood in two ways in Edward's Journey. It can either be a symbolic crossing when Edward finds out what the play really is and steps into the world of legends and myths, the Greece land, or it can be understood literally as he crosses the boundaries of marriage by Helen and entering the Greece.

According to Campbell, the hero leaves his familiar surroundings in crossing the first threshold and steps into the unknown, where darkness and danger lie. (Campbell, 2004, p.71) Edward and Helen went to the Greece. The first place that they meet is an unknown place which Shaffer shows the description of this place throughout the Helen: "We were at Mycenae. We'd visited the famous Lion Gate under which Agamemnon passed to his murder in that bath. We were staying in an awful little hotel by the ruins. The cheapest room we could find." (p.27)

For Helen, 'Crossing the First Threshold' is repeated once more when she enters into the Greece. The Greece is definitely a place that Helen wants to stay away from.

EDWARD. Profoundly. So did the Greeks. If you don't understand that, you don't understand *them*. Have you ever been there? To Greece?

"HELEN. Endlessly. My parents took me every summer. I actually detested it.

EDWARD. You did? HELEN. Oh yes. It was always so dusty and remorseless. And all those stones. They never interested me at all." (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.16)

Helen experiences the Greece and she does not like this kind of place. Although his father alarms her for their marriage but she accepts and goes to the Greece because she is not a usual woman and she does not like to limit in her world. She indicates their home as:

EDWARD. Hell on earth, English style! (*To Helen*) This room must be the nastiest in London.

HELEN. It's all we can afford.

EDWARD. *I can't afford it. I'll be dead in six months, staying here. Or at least doused. Any flicker or flame put out. Kill- burn: oh, yes!* (*He goes on writing*) (The Gift of the Gorgon, p.32)

And then Shaffer in act II compares this home to the Gorgon's home as, "...This room is just like the Gorgon's home: an island of Immobility. All my scenes lying about it like stones. And I'm in the middle of them, active and yet inert. Powerless to make any form out of them... It's like some appalling sickness. *Active paralysis!*" (p.35)

5. BELLY OF THE WHALE

"The passage in and out of the Belly of a Whale (or beast) is an archetypal theme in myth and literature". (Indick,

2012, p.51) The symbolic "Belly of the Whale" occurs three times for Edward. The first occurs when he hears the voice of critics; he loses his power of writing.

Critics frequently criticize Edward, initially praise him and finally disapprove him. Edward considers his job as a crucial profession, as MALE CRITIC in the radio says, "In *I.R.E* Damson misuses the power a playwright can exert over his audiences. This is actually a wicked attempt to seduce it into abetting mental and physical torture. In a man of his abilities one can only deplore such deliberate perversion." (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.65)

Here Shaffer explains Edward's reaction throughout Helen, when she tells her story to Philip: "All the acclaim of the past only weakened him now. He was like some huge tree whose roots have softened, so it falls in the first high wind. No struggle at all... It was more horrible than if he'd yelled." (p.65)

And the second Belly of whale takes place when Edward loses his job:

EDWRD. (*dead cold*) "This should expire your career", I think you said.

HELEN. It was like my death warrant.

PHILIP. (*sarcastic*) You'd only tried to save him. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.65).

And finally, the third one happens when he chooses his death:

HELEN. I'm leaving you, Edward. This is the last time *we'll* speak.

Pause

EDWARD. Do you mean this?

HELEN. Tomorrow. First boat.

He turns sharply away from her:

(*To Philip*) I hadn't meant to say it. Not out loud to his face. But suddenly I knew I wanted it. To get away from him as far as possible. Never, never to hear him again. (*To Edward, savagely*) *I can't wait.* (*To Philip*) He said nothing. Just walked out on the terrace. And shut himself away in the dark. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.81)

Campbell explains that although the hero may "appear to have died" (Campbell, 2004, p.83), the belly of the whale actually symbolizes a womb and means the hero's rebirth. The two events for Edward took him nearly dying either physically or mentally. Edward dies physically, and Athena believes that:

PHILIP. (*reading it over his shoulder*) Athena speaks, for the last time.

ATHENA. (*pronouncing*) The art is not dead. It cannot die. The only artist dies. Only the worshipper. The lover. The father. The husband. Only the man. (*The Gift of the Gorgon*, p.81)

And when he loses his job, he dies mentally because it is horrible for him that simply he has ceased to be an artist.

CONCLUSION

Monomyth is a term that Campbell borrowed from James Joyce's novel *Finnegan's wake*. In this theory,

he argues that all stories, or all heroes, are mainly the same; therefore, the name of the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he introduced the idea providing examples of myths from cultures all over the world and history. In *The Gift of the Gorgon*, the major characters deal with the idea of hero's journey. Edward and Helen, Athena and Perseus all manage the elements of departure in this play. Edward wants to go to the Greece because he believes that he can be successful in play writing in this land. In the story of Athena and Perseus, Athena is a herald, Perseus is a hero who wants to kill the Gorgon, and he goes to Athena's temple for helping because he swears an impossible vow that he must kill the Gorgon or lives in a shame or else die of it. Edward needs someone to support him for writing and Helen can help him because her course in university was the Greek drama; therefore, Helen is his herald (supernatural aid). Athena gives him her shield of showing so that he can find the Gorgon by its reflection, and also, the shoes of Hermes, to fly across the sea of destiny, the cap of darkness to fly invisibly in Gorgon's eyes, and finally, the sickle of Adamant, the blade to cut Gorgon's neck. Crossing the first threshold can be understood in two ways in Edward's Journey. It can either be a symbolic crossing when Edward finds out what the play really is and steps into the world of legends and myths (the Greece land), or it can be understood literally as he crosses the boundaries of marriage by Helen and entering the Greece. When Edward loses his job, he dies mentally because it is horrible for him that simply he has ceased to be an artist (Belly of the Whale).

Today, our modern cultures are largely based upon myths. This is definitely not to admit that there is something that escapes History, but rather to pay closer attention to the myth that there is something that does, and to the ways in which this myth, away from being a mistake, is crucial for considering of the borders of history even in so far as everything comes (as everything does) under its critical gaze. Ancient cultures imagined the journeys of heroes as metaphors for everyday life. A myth, rather than basically a fictional story, is an extension of humanity through the use of metaphor. In the monomyth, an individual hero is able to successfully cycle through the problems of life in order to give benefits upon fellow humans. The title of Shaffer's play *The Gift of the Gorgon* can refer to ancient Greek mythology; however, the mythological characters Perseus, Athena, and also Gorgon are important references in this play, which may explain the origin of myth in this play. Philip begs permission from his stepmother, Helen, to write Edward's biography and she agrees unwillingly on situation Philip tells the whole story. Helen offers a title to this story *The Gift of the Gorgon*. Edward's egotism had destroyed their life. Just like Edward's hero, Perseus, whose pride and greed caused him to forget his swear and reject Athena's worship, and

finally, as Athena had warned, the Gorgon's hunted head turned Perseus to stone.

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