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TRANSFORMING THE MONOMYTH: THE FEMALE QUEST FOR SELF IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, protagonist Celie engages in a successful quest of the type described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*¹, most fundamentally revealed in the opening and closing letters of the novel. Beginning poor, sexually abused and battered, Celie ends triumphant, in a house of her own, with a profession, amidst loving friends and family. Her primary achievement, the attainment of self-knowledge, underscores a transformation that provokes interpretation in relation to Campbell's "monomyth"². As outlined by Campbell, the path of the hero involves both a physical and psychological quest for Self; yet, its phallogentric bias makes inadequate provision for the female quester, thereby excluding her from crucial revelations. Through Celie's quest, Walker effectively transforms and diversifies Campbell's monomyth, creating a model that illustrates a female quest for Self.

Campbell selects myths that concentrate primarily on the male hero. His discussion of the female quester renders her passive, the victim of her own quest, for it centers on her relationship with a man. Conversely, the monomythical hero is his own man. For example, Campbell suggests that the path of the heroine ends in marriage: "...when the adventurer...[is] a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal" (119). And they live happily ever after. In contrast, the hero does not actually marry, excepting a "mystical marriage....with the Queen Goddess of the World" (109), which functions as a temporary state "represent[ing] the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master" (120). This "marriage" becomes controverted in the next trial, atonement with the father.

Campbell characterizes this next adventure as "the son against the father for the mastery of the universe, and the daughter against the mother to be the mastered" (136). Not surprisingly, in view of Campbell's direct acknowledgement of Freud, this structure functions similarly to the Freudian hypothesis of gender-role identification, in which the child emulates his/her same-sex parent and during which the oedipal and electra complexes occur. In both contexts and for both hero and heroine, achievement of atonement with the father correlates with a

rejection of the mother; for the heroine, her subjugation to the father connotes a victory over her mother.³

This rejection of the female principle continues in Campbell's "Apotheosis," in which "the two apparently opposite mythological adventures come together: the Meeting with the Goddess, and the atonement with the Father" (162). Campbell, however, fails to grant the two experiences equal validity. He asserts that the hero "learns that male and female are....two halves of a split pea....[but] the Father is found to be antecedent to the division of sex" (163). In other words, the original pea was male, thus effecting an essentially solipsistic epiphany for the male hero, for "[h]e is the twiceborn: he has become himself the father" (137). This construct eliminates any true corollary for the female quester, in an apotheosis that exemplifies the hidden criterion of the monomyth: for men only.

Celie's quest for Self in *The Color Purple* parallels Campbell's monomyth, yet it also deconstructs and recreates its "phallacies." Having rejected the heroine's marriage, desire to be mastered, and traditional encounters with the female and male principles, Celie experiences an authentic apotheosis.⁴

By emphasizing Celie's experience of poverty and sexual abuse, Walker directly contradicts two of Campbell's phallogocentric assertions: the heroine's desire to be mastered by a man and marriage as the end to her quest. As a victim of incest, Celie exemplifies the monomythical situation of the daughter against the mother. As Mr. _____ says, "[y]ou gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker, 11). From the perspective of Campbell's paradigm, this situation reflects the stage of atonement with the father; however, this characterization directly opposes Celie's reality, which is predicated upon subjugation to a violent relationship with her father. Mr. _____ soon marries Celie off; according to Campbell, her "fulfilled" quest thereby ends (119-120). She meets Shug Avery, however, a woman analogous to the goddess whom the hero meets in the monomyth. Under Campbell's paradigm, the road of trials precedes the meeting with the goddess; thus, from this perspective, the mastery of Celie and her marriage reflect trials to be survived in the female quest rather than desirable endings to it.

Shug functions as the goddess archetype presented by Campbell, although Walker adds a defiant twist to her monomythical role. "She like a queen to me" (Walker, 28) Celie says, reflecting her deific stature in Celie's world. Shug fulfills two critical aspects of the monomyth's meeting with the goddess: she expands Celie's horizons, revealing the "totality of what can be known" (Campbell, 116) and thereby acting as

a catalyst for the quest; and she embraces Celie in the “mystical marriage” postulated by Campbell as the adventure with the goddess. The twist is, of course, that their “marriage” diverges from the heterosexual version offered in the monomyth. Shug’s role also expands upon the traditional in an act that alters the fundamental nature of a female quest for Self: she tells Celie that “God ain’t a he or a she, but a It” (Walker, 177). This crucial transformation enables the female to continue questing toward an apotheosis that affirms a female Self.⁵

Walker’s de-masculinization of deity eliminates an ontologically phallic construct and thereby renders the next stage of the quest—atonement with the father—essentially androgynous. For, as Mary Daly writes, “[t]he divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination” (19). Campbell’s discussion of atonement with the father implies female castration not only because of the assumption of male deity, but also because of a Freudian construct of female sexuality, in which the “successful” heroine must move from a pre-oedipal (clitoral) orientation to an oedipal (vaginal, and thus phallus-centered) orientation (Abel, 163-181). This “atonement” essentially negates the female through a psychological self-castration. Celie remains, despite her atonement with men, clitorally, and therefore Self, oriented. Her rejection of the phallus (but not of male human beings) is made clear when Albert asks her to remarry him, for she responds: “Naw, I still don’t like frogs, but let’s us be friends” (Walker, 247). This alternative atonement lies in contrast to the traditional one epitomized in Celie’s daughter-in-law, Tashi, whose clitoridectomy both literally castrates and figuratively subjugates her in terms of the Freud and Campbell paradigms. Celie’s transformation of father atonement, however, offers the female quester a new definition of “success” in this stage.

The final scene of *The Color Purple* both embodies and directly contradicts the final stage of Campbell’s monomyth, in which the hero assimilates the male and female principles in a vision of synthesis. In Celie’s final letter, a tribute to her God, all dichotomies attain resolution: Africa and America, male and female, old and young—all unite in a symbolic reconciliation of opposites.

This final scene generates a critical distinction between the apotheosis of Celie’s quest and that of the monomythical hero. First, the male hero’s attainment of self-knowledge rests on the perception that all is one: “All beings are without self” (Campbell, 151). In finding his Self, he finds all Selves, attaining the “ultimate state of anonymous presence” (237). From the perspective of a paradigm that asserts the Father as “antecedent to the division of sex” (163), this

construct of apotheosis insinuates an essentially male standard of ultimate being, dissolving individuation and, thus, alternative modes of experience.

Celie's apotheosis celebrates difference and suggests that the appreciation of individuality engenders the transcendence of opposites. As Harpo says, "Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (Walker, 250). Their acceptance of alternative experience is exemplified in their comments on their African relatives: "Everybody make a lot of miration over Tashi. People look at her and Adam's scars like that's they business. Say they never suspect African ladies could look so good. They make a fine couple. Speak a little funny, but us getting use to it" (251). Their appreciation of individuality therewith transcends opposites in a discovery of shared experience: Celie asks, "What your people love best to eat over there in Africa?" Tashi "sort of blush and say barbecue. Everybody laugh and stuff her with one more piece" (251). This family grouping thus reveals a deep respect for differences, as well as delight upon discovering underlying similarities. Celie affirms this all-encompassing ontophony in her closure, "Amen."

NOTES

¹Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, 1982); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1949). All references to these works will be cited internally.

²For an examination of an Afro-American questing heroine in relation to Campbell's monomyth, see Missy Dehn Kubitschek, "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in Their Eyes Were Watching God," *BALF*, 17 (1983), 109-115.

³See Elizabeth Abel, "Narrative Structures and Female Development: The case of *Mrs. Dalloway*," in *The Voyage In* (Hanover, N.J., 1983), pp. 163-181, for a clear explanation of the female oedipal situation and an illuminating application of it to *Mrs. Dalloway*.

⁴See Susan Stanford Friedman's introduction to *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington, 1981), in which she articulates the necessity for women to transform male constructs in order to quest.

⁵For, as Mary Daly writes, "if God is male, then the male is God." *Beyond God the Father* (Boston, 1973), p. 19.