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The mythological perspective of modern media: Cross-cultural consciousness and modern myths

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Abstract:

This piece assesses the cultural implications of modern narratives that incorporate classical mythology, specifically focusing on the hero's journey. When the similarities of different myths across different cultures are analyzed, it becomes clear that there are modern analogs that incorporate mythic qualities and cultural values. These mythic foundations are analyzed here in popular works like *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, and *Legend of Zelda*, where the hero's journey becomes an almost universal experience that inspires cross-cultural consciousness. The hero's journey has evolved from a simple literary tool into a cross-cultural touchstone that shapes narratives into familiar works of cultural significance across new media, incorporating new values and cultural ideals that allow the audience to learn about cultures outside of their own in a positive experience. Because modern media incorporates aspects of myth, that media is both familiar and transformative and has brought new and widened perspectives of cultures across the globe. This in turn creates a cross-cultural consciousness that arises from shared media, whether that is in the form of movies, books, games, or otherwise, and shows how classical mythology is still an important artifact and foundation that influences modern culture and media.

Introduction:

      Myths are the commonality of cultures. There is no culture, long lost or thriving, that does not have myths in some form and is not influenced by those myths. Greek and Roman civilizations are seen as two of the most mythologically rich cultures in history, and their myths and philosophies are still taught to students across the world. These cultures are the most common examples that modern media and literature draw from because of the wealth of materials that remain from storytellers like Homer; however, the wealth of other cultures' myths are just as vibrant, expansive, and popular. From Asian to African to Native American to Norse, there is an endless bank of mythological and religious texts that are even deeper sources for modern adaptations. When exploring these various mythologies and comparing them to one another, it is easy to see that the collective human experience runs along similar lines. Myths may develop insularly, but it is clear by looking at the global body of myths that sharing myths is common among all cultures (the strongest example of which are the ties between Greek and Roman culture). "Myth" is merely the most common term used to describe the traditional stories that have survived from past cultures. These stories are at the center of every religion and moral system, and even many modern fantasy novel or action movies. They create the patterns that each culture and society follows in their storytelling, whether it is through written word, film, or games. According to Mary Midgley in "The Myths We Live By," myths are "imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world." (2011, p. 1). The narrative structures of myths then grow from the urge to explain the world and to pass on history and moral lessons. In addition, because of the consistent use of myths throughout the ages in every culture, they are also the foundation of modern literature and media in every culture.

The patterns of ancient myths are repeated in modern media and literature, with minor changes to make them fresh and interesting in the modern context because of an increased depth of imagination and ability. There are different versions of many myths across and within cultures that circulate today, similar (or the same) in terms of characters, motivations, and plot lines (Doherty, 2001, p. 9). All of these versions, when combined, embody the mythic sources of cultures. Without myths, and the pattern of human longing for adventure and growth that accompanies them, the rich culture of literature and media today would not exist. Any changes that transcend the traditional narrative boundaries of the time and place set by ancient myths create an impression of originality—because of the context in which they are read, as modern examples of creativity and collectivity—and thus suggest new ways of interpreting the contemporary world.

The reason that audiences are still captivated by these stories is linked to the sense of cultural consciousness and remembrance. Audiences seek out and respond to patterns within modern narratives that are structured around the historical origins of tales and myths and therefore push a recognizable order and structure. The underlying mythic tones of a story enhances its credibility and relatability, and by conforming to the themes and practices of the ancient storytellers, the narrative becomes distantly familiar and more easily consumable. The "powerful thrill of recognition" that readers experience by reading, watching, and playing with myths helps to connect the mythic to the new narrative, and lend a sense of authenticity because of its ties to the collective origin of storytelling (Goodrich, 1962, p. XIII). Moreover, it pulls readers in with classic storytelling hidden in a new narrative, retaining the same, essential storytelling factors that have been employed for centuries. There is a continual cycle of creativity

and inspiration, leading to the forms of art in literature and media we have today, that transcend the boundaries of genre and medium.

The forms of these stories have evolved with the rise of technology, ranging from oral traditions to the visuals of cinematography and even the altered reality of virtual-reality headsets. More importantly though, modern narratives are constantly evolving to adapt modern themes like diversity and concepts such as "own voices," (see Chapter 3)—authors sharing their own experience through narratives in modern stories. Classical stories have survived for countless years because of how they resonate with readers as cyclical narratives of adventure, success, and suffering. These tales are remembered for their cultural importance and their heroes, and continue to influence newer narratives. These narratives shape, form, and nurture the shared cultural consciousness that spans every culture's myths and thriving community. But the bones of the foundation remain, solid and reliable, utterly familiar, and myths continue to thrive as tangible forms of cultural identity. In turn, mythology remains a piece of shareable human culture that spans across the globe, with commonalities or unique traits that can be identified and researched in a multitude of ways in and out of their initial cultural context.

Connections between classical mythology and current literature and media are bountiful. Today, our mythology revolves around epics of every genre, from science-fiction movies like *Star Wars* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* to nonfiction that revolves around the pseudo-deification of people like former US Presidents or star athletes. From *Star Trek* and its countless spinoffs to *Harry Potter* and the literary universe that captured the attention of millions, and even branching out to the interactive forms of video games, there is a recognizable theme that highlights the parallels between modern culture and mythology. A consistent theme in classical mythology is the journey that the protagonist undergoes to become a true hero. These myths may have been

considered historical reality to those who lived in ancient times (Barthes, 1972, p. 142), but there is no way to properly date the mythologies seen today from this period. These myths could have already been ancient to the people who wrote them down from the oral traditions of earlier peoples, but the theme is consistent. Myths revolve around the protagonist of each tale, the hero, and how that hero moves through their traditional or modern narrative.

This paper will assess the cultural implications of modernizing mythology and narratives that incorporate changing values in the concept of cross-cultural consciousness with the proliferation of media. It also takes a deeper look at how heroism is incorporated in modern media and literature and how that has inspired cross-cultural relevance in today's society. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the various types of myth and genre and how they relate to and define the concept of the hero and the hero's journey, as well as introduce various forms of criticism. In the Chapter 2, I address four examples of modern media and their myth analogues, including popular examples like the *Harry Potter* series and the *Star Trek* oeuvre. In Chapter 3, I explore the concept of cross-cultural consciousness and modern perspectives that permeate current modern media.

Chapter 1: The Types of Myth and Heroes

Stories in the modern era are categorized by their genre, creating blurred lines of qualifiers that are frequently crossed to create new stories. These genres range from nonfiction to fantasy to romance to science fiction, and there are countless ways to analyze each form of story and their mediums. Classical myths, however, are generally put into just a few categories: religious (creation myths), philosophical (ethics), or fantastical (folk tales). These genres are the foundations for the more modern categories—and each can be split down and analyzed according to the various types of myths that are explored through their common themes and morals. Myths run the gamut of modern genres, though they are usually relegated to religious, fantasy and science fiction in terms of their subjects and settings. Genres encompass all types of myths, address the themes, morals, and life-lessons shared within each story, and may push certain types of stories to the back of the pile in terms of current cultural relevance. Myths at their most basic levels are traditional stories that often relate tales of creation, heroism, or of lessons to be learned. Typically viewed at a religious slant, it is impossible to separate a culture's values from its myths. Myths are valued because of what they contribute to society—namely those morals, themes, and life-lessons that can be translated to apply to real-life situations, and are a valuable aspect of ancient cultures. In this way, myths are viewed as relics of the past—but myths are very much alive in modern culture because of how they are viewed as teaching tools. Effort is put into preserving them on large scales—there are hundreds of translations of any Greek or Roman myth out there, fewer of Asian myths, and even fewer of African. These myths are studied and shared, and have informed the genres that have come to be and the types of myth that are seen in modern media.

The most common types of myths are creation myths and coming-of-age myths. Creation myths have relevance across all cultures, and often contain familiar themes (which can be called

tropes without losing their significance). Light is separated from dark, or conquers it altogether, a supreme being created or birthed other beings, a supreme evil is conquered or trapped. The Mayan people's creation myth held that the universe was created from the two beings, Tepeu and Gucumatz, who thought the earth into creation, and later made humans from corn, beans, and water (Leeming and Leeming, 1995, p. 19). There are even separate creation myths within cultures, as seen with the Apache people. Some hold that their people were birthed from the underground onto the surface. Others, that the Great Spirit created the world in four days, then other beings like himself, then animals, and then people (Leeming and Leeming, 1995, p.1). These inconsistent creation myths are still evidence of traditions that hold true across cultures—there are generally central figures (that can loosely be considered heroes) who are revered because of their power and status at the beginning of time and their role in creating or influencing the culture their myth resides in. These are the "heroes" that created the people of the earth, and are thus worshipped as bringers of life because they are the propagators of a culture. Across time, this motif is a prevalent example of how humans explain their own existence, and subsequently their perceptions of themselves as heroic figures.

The central figure in every myth and story, whether they are god, human, or otherwise, undergoes a transformative process. That central figure is the hero, and their journey guides the narrative and gives it a clear plot. Every culture has a different version of a "hero." The closest that research has come to declaring a true definition is from Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," in which he asserts that the hero is "the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (2008, p. 14). In the telling and retelling of myths, the journey of the hero is their struggle towards a form of fictitious deification that lends itself naturally to forming a good narrative.