

ENGLISH 1102M

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Mythology as a Means of Understanding in Al Young's "Somebody Done Hoodoo'd the Hoodoo Man" and Leslie Marmon Silko's "Call that Story Back"

According to Joseph Campbell, one of the great theoreticians who has dedicated his studies to mythology and its role in literature, the main purpose of mythology "is to awaken in the individual a sense of awe, wonder, and participation in the inscrutable mystery of being" (6). In "The Power of Myth," Campbell says:

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. (1)

This is an insightful and remarkable practical observation, and it is with these claims in mind that we look at two different works: "Somebody Done Hoodoo'd the Hoodoo Man" by Al Young, and "Call That Story Back" by Leslie Marmon Silko. The first is a non-fiction autobiography, and the latter a poem, yet the two genres share a strong presence of Campbell's idea of mythology in very different ways, Young and Silko seek their own experiences of being alive and, in the process, thus provide overwhelming support for and clearly illustrate Campbell's deep insight into the purpose and power of mythology.

In order to understand fully the subject of mythology, one must understand the word in and of itself. The Miriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines myth as "a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon" or "a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence." According to these definitions; a myth is used to explain the unexplainable and is not necessarily real or true. Interestingly enough, both Young and Silko's works encompass both these definitions and Campbell's quote, even though their pieces are so vastly different. Young's autobiography makes actually very little reference to mythology; however, he proves support for Campbell's reflection. Silko's work is purely mythological but has its own underlying message on the importance and power of myth that also reflects Campbell's observation. There is a strong, core distinction between these two works. Young, in his autobiography, challenges the conventional idea of myth; he presents mythology on a human scale and reminds us that the connotation of ancient Greece is not necessarily always true. Silko, on the other hand, presents mythology on a social scale; she shows how myth can explain the unexplainable and force a culture into an alternate reality.

Although the ultimate function of Young's piece is to reveal the force behind his passion for poetry, his words reflect amazingly well Campbell's own. Young tells the story of the first time he was exposed to his grandmother's use of myth. His grandmother uses "hoodoo" to explain their dog's strange behavior; Young asks her, "Well, how come you say that man done

hoodoo'd Claude?" and she responds, "Cause that dog ain't got no business layin up and letting that Negro pet him like that. Didn't bark, didn't even budge hardly" (32). Young repeatedly tries to find logical, rational explanations for the dog's reactions. Although his grandmother concedes her inability to explain the dog's reactions, she refutes them with "hoodoo." This particular incident created a mythological atmosphere which spawned Young's interest in (and perhaps even need for) poetry; he writes, "it was in such settings that poetry began for me" (32). Campbell mentions the need of "awe" for mythology; Young's awe is "hoodoo." Myth exists to explain the unexplainable, which is precisely what Young sees when his grandmother resorts to "hoodoo."

Although it is not directly stated, we can make a connection between this inspiration and Campbell's claim. Myth is a means for humans to explain what cannot be understood and, for Young, poetry was his way of understanding and explaining. While his grandmother used magic to explain, Young's response was poetry. He writes:

I know for certain that, unlike most people, I never outgrew the need for magic or the curative powers of language. The quiescent greenness of those pastures in which I pictured myself lying down is more vivid than ever, and I can see the shapes of cloud and sky reflected in those still waters. (32)

Through language, Young feels "the rapture of being alive" that Campbell speaks of (1); the effect of language on Young reflects Campbell's words so clearly that we can argue that words and poetry act for Young as mythology acts for Campbell. Moreover, the "still waters" of which he speaks have significance. Whereas language is the medium through which Young has been able to make sense of the world, the still waters are the medium through which he can see the "cloud and sky." Essentially, the only way that Young can truly *see* the clouds and the sky for what they are is by looking at the reflection in the water; the only way that Young can truly see the world for what it is, is through language.

Furthermore, language has helped Young understand that "inscrutable mystery of being." He writes:

I would become aware of the Kenyan proverb that goes: "Talking with one another is loving one another." For then it was enough to take delight in the pictures and emotions that flooded my imagination as I went about learning, by ear and by heart, the nature of the world that lay beyond my childhood walls and fields. (31)

Even at an early age, the talking and storytelling that Young grew up with brought clarity to the obscure "nature of the world" (31). Poetry allows Young to concretize his experiences, understand the world around him, and truly feel the experience of being alive, which is amazingly similar to Campbell's claims of wonder, participation, and a feeling of being.

In Silko's poem, we see myth used to explain the unexplainable again, but on a social scale. She takes a society and shows how their pain and frustration created myth. Sherman Alexie, a well-known and respected author of Native American literature, said in an interview to describe the mind frame of this society, "we have no economic, political, or social power. We have no power to change our lives. We are powerless" (159). He also touches on the humiliation and shame that Native Americans feel as a people (155). This powerlessness and humiliation is felt through the piece and brings home the necessity for mythology. In the poem, two Native Americans explain the existence of the "white-man" with a mythological story where a witch attending a conference of witches tells the story of the "white-man". As she tells the story, it

comes to life, and once told, the “white-man” exists and cannot be taken back. In “The Power of Myth,” Campbell emphatically agrees to Bill Moyers’ question about the reason for the story; he asks, “So we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality?” (2), and Campbell answers, “I think so, yes” (2). “Call That Story Back” differs from “Somebody Done Hoodoo’d the Hoodoo Man” immensely, yet myth helps make sense of the mystifying events that encircle us and the power of storytelling and language. Because the Native Americans cannot justify the “white-man,” they use myth to explain their existence. The “white-man” is so foreign (they disrespect what the Native Americans respect, etc.), that Native Americans need myth to come to terms with what has happened.

Silko’s text is structurally more complex than Young’s; there are essentially three different parts that are demarcated both by content and by form. These three sections define the different levels of mythology in the piece. The first part is prose, and it takes place in the present; two men are talking about and pondering their unfortunate situation as Native Americans. The second part of the poem is marked by the change from prose to poetry; this is the man telling the story of how the “white-man” was c

also share very similar opinions about where this power comes from: words. However, they emphasize the power and the importance of words in different ways and on different levels. Young directly highlights his relationship with language; he begins with, “I do not take John lightly when he declares, ‘In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’” (33). He underlines the extent to which words give value; something gains power only when it has been named, when it has a Word. He then writes, “Sustained and intensive personal experience and involvement with language has opened both my ears and eyes to the magnitude of the Word and its power to transmute perception and consciousness: reality, if you will” (33). Language has allowed Young to make sense of his world; he acknowledges this intense power as he argues that words can change reality, just as Campbell argues myth can change reality on a physical plane. He finishes his piece with a final note that sums up the power of language, both written and spoken: “All my life I’ve been trying to hold onto and expand the joyous purity of those early moments and the magical talk that nourished it. Word by word, line by line, season upon season, poetry keeps teaching me that the only time there is is now.” (33). While Campbell argues mythology is our way of dealing with the overwhelming idea of existentialism, Young finds that comfort in language and depicts mythology on a human level in the life of a person.

Silko, in her own way, also emphasizes the power of language in her piece. Already through the title, we can make this connection. However, the point is truly outlined in the last few stanzas. The moment the witch finishes her story, the other witches answer with, “what you said just now / it isn’t so funny / it doesn’t sound so good / we are doing okay without it / we can get along without that kind of thing / take it back / call that story back” (537). The witch, however, responds, “it’s already turned loose. / it’s already coming / it can’t be called back” (537). This idea that once spoken, once told, the story becomes reality overwhelmingly proves the importance of storytelling and myth. Once it has been told it becomes reality, even if not necessarily *the* reality. This reflects the effect of myth; once told, the myth becomes reality.

The power of the word seen in both texts leads into the final message: myth is powerful. Although there is evidence enough to support this claim, there is one final structural piece of proof that we see in both works, used by both authors, that truly transmits the extent of this power. The contrast of prose and poetry emphasizes myth in both “Somebody Done Hoodoo’d the Hoodoo Man” and “Call That Story Back.” For Young, poetry acts as myth acts for others. As a poet, he uses this genre to put his thoughts, feelings, and questions into words. In this piece, however, he turns to prose to explain this power, which is striking coming from a poet. Silko uses similar means to emphasize this power. Whereas the actual mythological story is in the form of poetry, the part where she indirectly expresses her feelings on myth are in prose form. The Native American man makes the most profound revelation of the piece in this form. It is thereby in this form that both authors affirm Campbell’s thesis with their own words.

Myth is powerful: This is the ultimate message of Young, Silko, and Campbell. It is fascinating that these three scholars can share so strongly this claim despite such differences in medium and even subject. Campbell’s statement is profound and left fairly open. Although he speaks of mythology, his comments, as we see through Young and Silko, can be put in different contexts and maintain their power and insightfulness. While Young reflects this claim on a personal level, Silko emphasizes society in general. As Campbell says, we are searching for a satisfying answer and a feeling of being alive. Young and Silko have found this through myth,

language, and discovery, and they are left with a feeling of “awe, wonder, and participation in [this] inscrutable mystery of being” (6).

Works Cited

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