# MYTHOLOGY

## THE VOYAGE OF THE HERO

THIRD EDITION

DAVID ADAMS
LEEMING

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DAVID ADAMS LEEMING

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# PREFACE

The subject of mythology is much too complex to be covered in a single book, and no attempt has been made to do so here. There are as many mythic stories as there are dreams, and numerous ways in which these stories might be arranged for study. There are as many mythic traditions as there are races, tribes, or villages; and equally many ways to experience myth.

This book is arranged in sections according to theme. Each section ends with a commentary that is designed to assist the reader in the discovery of the basic myth that underlies the stories of the section. The purpose of this inversion of the usual pattern of introduction followed by literary text is to encourage the reader to develop insights before reading the commentaries, which then may serve as catalysts for deeper understanding. A brief headnote precedes each story, supplementing the commentaries, outlining essential motifs, and suggesting connections between the stories.

Since its original publication in 1973 *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero* has been used successfully as a textbook for courses in mythology. It has also been used as a freshman English text, as a supplementary text for anthropology, religion, and upper-level English courses, and as a general reference book on world mythology.

The changes made in this edition include the addition of several heroine myths, an updating of the bibliography, and the elimination of appendices on subjects more fully covered in my *The World of Myth* (Oxford University Press).

The book is directed, finally, to any reader with an interest in the study of human nature. The record of that nature is reflected in the myths collected here, and to study those myths is to study the quest for self that concerns us all.

David Adams Leeming

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Meaning of Myth

*Myth* comes via *mythos* from the Greek root μυ *(mu)* meaning to make a sound with the mouth and is thus basic to human existence as we know it: "*In* the beginning was the Word." To the orthodox believer what we call myth is the word of God—the metaphorical, symbolical, or direct expression of the "unknown": "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

If we put aside the commonplace definition of myth as story with no basis in fact, we will have made a necessary first step toward a meaningful definition of our subject. The next step involves the choice of a path. Individual temperament and inclination will be the major factors in this choice. No longer is mythology approached primarily in conjunction with the study of classical or other literatures. Mythologists are now anthropologists, philologists, etiologists, ethnologists, and perhaps most of all, psychologists. And crossing these disciplines are ritualists, diffusionists, structuralists, Jungians, Freudians, and culturalists, who, in turn, are not always mutually exclusive. The modern student of mythology might be helped in the choice of an approach by seeming aware of some of the major theorists and their theories. A brief review here will serve as a beginning.

E. B. Tylor *(Primitive Culture),* Sir James Frazer *(The Golden Bough),* and AdoIf Bastian with his theory of "elementary ideas" common to all mankind were major pioneers in the modern study of myth. Each believed that the comparing of myths from various cultures would reveal certain laws of human life. Few mythologists now would disagree with this general assumption, but just as few would agree on what to do with the assumption. There are the culturalists—Emile Durkheim, Franz Boas, and Bronislaw Malinowski, for example—who see society as the shaping force behind the mythology of a given culture. Diffusionism is more popular today. Its father is Leo Frobenius, and its essential tenet is that certain vast areas of the world are united by cultural affinities and that the explanation for this fact lies in the diffusion of cultures, including myths, from certain "mythogenetic zones." Others—perhaps they should be called parallelists or in some cases Jungians, after C. G. Jung—have stressed cultural similarities which appear to be the result of neither society nor diffusion. The argument here is that just as certain physical traits are common to humans wherever they live, so are certain psychological ones. Humans eat because they have to; they have myths of survival after death for the same reason.

There are those who would say that as far as mythology is concerned, all

of these approaches are false. Claude Levi-Strauss, who has been called a "structuralist," finds meaning in the structure of a tale—in the relationship between its various components rather than in the components themselves. Earlier, Sir James Frazer saw in mythology simply an attempt to explain the natural world. His followers—particularly Jane Harrison *(Themis)*—*became* known as the "Cambridge school" or the "myth-ritual school." For them myth was the narrative correlative of the ritual act, meaningful only when considered in the context of the ritual. One valuable result of the work of this school was the development of the theory of the ritualistic origins of drama. Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in their controversial *Hamlet's Mill* see myth as an ancient astrological language.

Much has been done—especially through the psychological approach—to make myth relevant to modern people. Sigmund Freud (*Totem and Taboo*) applied the principles of psychoanalysis to myth and found parallels between myth and neurosis. He and others—Norman O. Brown, for example—have done a great deal with the connection between language and myth as they relate to human psychology. Jung, following Bastian, contributed his theories of archetypes and the collective unconscious and his belief that myth could better be associated with the process of education—of individuation—than with neurosis. Jung has had many followers and associates who have made major contributions. The work of Paul Radin on the Trickster myth owes something to Jung, as does that of Mircea Eliade, who has done so much to relate myth and ritual to modern man. Erich Neumann, too, has been influenced by the theory of archetypes. Most of all, Jung broke the path into regions scientists had feared to explore—regions which had been labeled "mystical" and therefore unworthy of attention. He provided a certain respectability for those who, like him, carried myth into the realm of metaphysics, thinkers such as Alan Watts and Ananda Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy could go so far as to see in myth "the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection. The mythical narrative is of timeless and placeless validity, true nowhere and everywhere."[1]

The list of mythologists by no means ends here. A. A. Aarne and Stith Thompson have done invaluable work in the indexing and classifying of mythic themes and motifs. Robert Graves, C. Kerényi, Theodor Gaster, S. N. Kramer, Rex Warner, and others have collected the myths. Many literary critics have become mythologists. Northrop Frye especially has applied myth to literature with great perception and has, therefore, added significantly to our understanding of myth.

In this long list I have not yet mentioned Joseph Campbell, who has perhaps done more than anyone else to revive the study of myth with his now standard works, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and the four-part *The Masks of God.* Campbell is particularly important because he makes the next step in our approach to mythology much simpler by demonstrating that mythology is the property of no single theorist or theory. It finally does not matter whether one is a diffusionist or a Jungian or a structuralist. Any honest path will lead to the beginning of an understanding of mythology.

Campbell has written, ". . . when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age."[2]

What follows here is necessarily one individual's path, and it must be stated at the outset that his views have been colored by the works he has found most compatible and, therefore, most useful—those particularly of Jung, Campbell, Eliade, and Coomaraswamy. The search which forms the body of this book is of a general enough sort, however, to be of interest to the student of mythology, whatever his views on the subject. The basic questions we must ask are: What makes something mythic, and what do mythic events and narratives have to do with us?

C. G. Jung wrote: "the primitive mentality does not invent *myths,* it *experiences* them. Myths are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings. . . ."[3] The point is not to search for the physical or historical correlative of myth, but for the meaning which is intrinsic in the myth itself, for myths, like dreams, are psychically real. Indeed, myths might be called the dreams of mankind. Dreams serve as escape valves for individuals. They represent wishes and fears. Myths serve whole societies and, as we shall see, many societies at once in much the same manner. The priests or medicine men or shamans who feel and convey the myths are, as Geza Roheim has written, "the lightning conductors of common anxiety. They fight the demons so that others can hunt the prey and in general fight reality."[4]

Most of us have had dreams of falling from a great height, dreams of being lost or left behind, dreams of conquest—sexual, athletic, or whatever. Nearly every society has myths which express these themes on the group level. To be sure, dreams are in part products of the individual's personality and environment, but Jung has shown that the individual's psyche cannot be divorced from the psyche of the human race as a whole. Dreams are also products of inherited themes that are buried in the very depths of the human psyche. These are themes—archetypes—which, when we come across them, in literature, for instance, "strike a chord" for no apparent reason. So myths spring from the particular problems and concerns of a given race or tribe, but on a deeper level their source is the universal soul of the human race itself. The myths of the Aztecs reflect the particular reality of Mexico—the veil of a culture—but when seen in conjunction with the myths of Iceland or Egypt or Greece, the Aztec myths reveal concerns which are common to all of us as a species. Whether a man's dream is the result of the way his parents treated him or of a neurosis is of limited importance. Whether a myth of the Aztecs was inherited from the Japanese is of secondary importance to the fact that the Aztecs incorporated the Japanese theme because it "struck a chord" already present in their group psyche.

In the same way a Christian or a Jew or a Buddhist need not feel threatened upon being told that his religion—his ritual or mythology—resembles that of the worshipper of Osiris or Attis. Rather he might find satisfaction in the thought that the myth he has experienced has been experienced

universally. Myth is as real as human concerns are real. It is when we lose our ability to feel the mythic that we lose contact with that which is most basically and universally human. In a real sense a society loses its soul when it can no longer experience myth. And as we interpret dreams to gain insight into the individual psyche, we can study myths to better understand the human psyche.

We must move now from the general to the specific. How do we approach the particular story or tale? How do we determine what is myth and what is simply local color or "fill"? We make use of comparison—of comparative mythology. We search, as we do in dreams, for recurrent themes and patterns. We attempt to take the myth out of the context of Egyptian or Greek or Norse society and try to consider it in the context of human society as a whole. The Grail legend is a good example of a story which has been told in many forms and which is clearly a mixture of essential myth and local or national elements added in innumerable retellings. When Jessie Weston conducted her now classic search for the true Grail myth *(From Ritual to Romance),* she made use of the comparative method and discovered that vegetation myths and rituals—those of Tammuz, Osiris, Attis, Adonis, and even Jesus—could tell us much about the Grail hero and the Fisher King. She found that what was basic to the Grail legend was not the personality of Percival or the many exploits of Galahad but the hope of regeneration that is common to all the stories of the hero in relation to the Fisher King. Here lies the myth, as the ritualists would say, the correlative to the ritual, which is essentially the same ritual enacted around the ancient god-heroes mentioned above.

Doubtless there are those who will still ask what all of this has to do with us. The answer is that it has everything to do with us. The journey of life is the search for the self—for the personal myth which is veiled in the local and the immediate but which, on a deeper level, is but an expression of the world myth. James Joyce, Joseph Campbell, and others have called this myth the "monomyth." To understand the monomyth—to relate to it meaningfully—is to create a mythic consciousness and by so doing to rejoin the real forces from which our modern age of reason and technocracy has done so much to remove us.[5] As individuals and groups we need to put our personal myths into proper relationship with the human myth. We need to rediscover the magic or "unknown" in life.

The monomyth itself is an expression of the journey of the hero figure, of our own journey through physical and psychic life, and of the evolutionary path of humanity to full consciousness. "The hero," writes Joseph Campbell, "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."[6] The hero does what we would all like to do; he literally "finds himself." For Campbell:

> the agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of

> ever-expanding realization. As he crosses threshold after threshold, conquering dragon after dragon, the stature of the divinity that he summons to his highest wish increases until it subsumes the cosmos.[7]

We must go with the hero through his rites of passage. We must lose ourselves to find ourselves in the overall pattern of the cosmos. We must discover the image of man within the self. To study myth is to listen to "the wonderful song of the soul's high adventure."[8]

This book of myths is built upon a simplified form of the monomyth. The monomyth is divided into eight basic events, which will be considered individually. They are supreme mythic events in the life of the hero. Admittedly this is not an ideal arrangement, as myths found in one section might be applicable to another as well. The story of the Buddha and the Tree is a myth of withdrawal and meditation, but it is also a quest myth and in some ways a descent myth. The story of Gawain is a quest myth and a rebirth myth. In a large mythic event elements of many or all of the basic rites of passage are apt to be found. The story of Aeneas's descent to the underworld itself moves from initiation to a descent to a kind of rebirth. And in a sense all mythic events are initiatory. The events of the monomyth, as I have arranged them, are not meant to be final. They are isolated here to be studied before being released into the cosmic flow which is their natural habitat. Hopefully, the isolation of similar myths from various cultures and the implicit and explicit comparing of these myths will make the essential reality and importance of mythology obvious.

The monomyth is arranged here as follows: In Part 1 the hero (and each of us) begins his "high adventure" by being born. The conception or the birth or the events immediately following the birth (or all three) are miraculous or unusual in the extreme. This is not surprising. For all humans birth is the first experience of trauma and the first miracle of life. For the hero who will burst through the limitations of the local and historical, this first event, like all the events in his life, must be special. Part 2 is childhood—a stage of basic initiation. The child is suddenly aware of forces infinitely larger than himself which he cannot fully comprehend. In myth this is expressed by struggles with wild animals or with giants (in a sense, to little children, all adults must be giants, friendly or cruel). To get through this stage the child often requires outside assistance—a sense of security based in a more powerful being. Mythically this often becomes the divine sign. The modern individual seeking to achieve a mythic consciousness must work through this primitive but idyllic stage of existence.

In Part 3 the initiated hero withdraws for meditation and preparation. Anyone in search of personal destiny must use intellect and spirit to find the god within the self. This is a major step in the losing of the self to find the self. Often the hero, like any individual in this stage, is tempted by "the world," which is represented mythically by a devil figure who attempts to disrupt the lonely vigil. Next, in Part 4 comes the quest or trials—the agony and rewards of adult life. For the hero this might be a quest for a Golden Fleece or a Holy Grail, or it might be the labors of a Heracles or a Christ.

The source of these myths is man's need to cope with the externals of life, as he has coped with the internals in his stage of meditation.

The labors or the quest continue essentially in Part 5, where the hero must confront physical death. For the hero, death, like birth, is miraculous or unusual. As his birth is definitive in the extreme, so is his death apparently so. Often he is dismembered. In death the hero acts, psychologically, for all of us; he becomes a scapegoat for our fear and our guilt. Of course he also serves as a reminder that we all must follow. In any case it is important that his death be memorable—especially when we consider what follows.

In Part 6 the hero continues in his role as scapegoat and in his role as quester or laborer. He is now the representative of the wish that death might somehow be known and understood. So he descends to the underworld to confront the forces of death. Sometimes he goes as one who has suffered physical death, sometimes as a living being who in his descent suffers a symbolic death. In a sense this stage is a more dramatic expression of the withdrawal stage. It is the final confrontation of the self—now on a cosmological level—with its depths. But the dismemberment and the descent into the earth hold promise of a new life. Fertility and death are inseparable in the cycle of nature, whether that cycle be expressed by the seasons, the moon, or the sun. And logically enough the hero, usually with the help of a woman—woman representing both fertility and the hope of the eventual union of all things—ascends from the underworld and, in Part 7, continuing in his role as scapegoat, rises from the dead. He thus acts out humankind's most elementary desire—he overcomes death physically and is united with the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

In Part 8 the hero reflects a later desire, to be given special treatment by being taken out of the cycle and placed in a permanent state in relation to the cosmos and to the creator-father god. Man longs for eternal life, for immortality. Thus the hero in Part 8 ascends to heaven, achieves atonement, or is made a god himself if he was not one already. In a purely psychological sense this is the individual's final step. Having dealt with his childhood, his inner self, his adult life, and the problem of death, he is prepared to discover God once and for all. The "wonderful song of the soul's high adventure" is complete.

Mythology, then, as the term is used in this book, is the expression in symbols and images of the most basic level of the human psyche. That we be concerned with this level is of crucial importance. As Jung wrote, "it is possible to live the fullest life only when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them. It is a question neither of belief nor knowledge, but of the agreement of our thinking with the primordial images of the unconscious."[9]

1. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism,* p. 6. See the bibliography for complete documentation of this and all footnotes.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* p. 382.
3. Carl Gustav Jung and C. Kerényi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* p. 101.

4. Geza Róheim, *The Origin and Function of Culture,* p. 51.
5. See the appendix on Jung.
6. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* pp. 19–20.
7. Ibid., p. 190.
8. Ibid., p. 22.
9. Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* p. 129.

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# 1

# THE MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION AND BIRTH AND THE HIDING OF THE CHILD

The modern "great mother," appropriately oversized, points as madonnas of the past do to the child miraculously visible in a mandalic womb. By so doing she reminds us that the child hero—the Self within—can provide meaningful focus to the otherwise disparate activities of a distorted world. [Marc Chagall, Maternity (1913), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, on loan from Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. © 1998 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.]