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The Myth Ritual Theory and the Teaching of Multicultural Literature

DALE ALLENDER

Stories are not for believing or disbelieving; they are for understanding.” A friend shared this inspiration with me while explaining the metaphysical nuance encrypted within tales from the *Yoga Vasistha*, an ancient Indian text of stories within stories exploring yogic practice and perspective. I sometimes read “The Story of the Non-existent Princes” from this book with my high school students during our world myth unit. The memory of my friend’s words came as I grappled with the difficult task of helping my students differentiate between “myth” as a false belief or lie and “myth” as a cultural phenomenon

embedded in sophisticated systems of meaning and action.

Four goals for the world mythology unit help me explore this greater sophistication with my ninth graders. First, I want my students to see that, while common usage defines the word *myth* as a lie or a false belief, the idea of myth as story offers a more subtle, but expanded, understanding. Additionally, I want them to see myth as story dynamically embedded in a dialogic relationship with ritual and philosophy. I also want my students to have broader exposure to traditional folk literature than is typical of the student whose primary understanding of myth is based in Greco-Roman mythology. Finally, I want them to understand their own traditions in the above paradigm, not towering over or subservient to another.

It is no simple matter working through the negative baggage related to the idea of myth that many high school students carry. In *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, William G. Doty suggests that this negative view of myth is related to dichotomous thinking that favors the “rational” or scientific at the expense of the poetic, intuitive, spiritual, or literary; a Darwinian sense of progression that labels antiquity as primitive and unsophisti-

cated; belief in biblical mythology as history; and the primacy of Greek mythology in the study of myth. I assist students in processing and deconstructing these preconceived ideas before, during, and after reading stories from world mythology.

I begin this deconstruction by writing “myth” on the board and asking students to write down as many definitions of the term as come to mind without consulting a dictionary. My students typically respond with definitions that highlight the negative aspect of the term: “Something that people used to believe but no longer do,” “a lie,” “a belief or idea that people used to follow even though it wasn’t true.” As their list grows, conversation begins. They are amused by the similarity in their thinking. I note the similarity but highlight the breaks from the class norm such as one student’s comment, “Myths are stories; stories that are told and retold. Stories remind us of something every time we hear them.” This moves the discussion forward.

The Myth Ritual Theory and World Mythology

After noting the similarities and differences in my students’ definitions of the word *myth*, I pass out

four or five quotes from anthologies or articles defining mythology in a broader sense than the myth-as-lie understandings. For example, a quote from David Adams Leeming explains, “The English word ‘myth’ is derived from the Greek *mythos*, meaning word or story,” and Donna Rosenberg asserts, “Myths symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture. Every Society preserves its myths, because the beliefs and worldview found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture.” Occasionally I require groups of students to write paraphrases of the quotes. Most often, it is enough to read aloud and discuss the handout.

When I am comfortable with the class’s initial, intellectual acceptance of the word *myth* as story as evidenced by classroom discussion or written paraphrases of the quotes, I introduce the words *ritual*—an effort to recreate an emotion or experience through repeated action—and *philosophy*—a guiding principle or belief system. Admittedly, all three terms are defined in their broadest sense, partly to allow for classroom discussion and participation in this prereading activity, but also to allow for a broad application of how and where the terms work in relation to each other.

I continue by explaining to students that all three components—myth, ritual, and philosophy—are present in science and spirituality. Once we suspend the attachment to the belief versus disbelief dichotomy, this dynamic can be more fully explored. From science, we recall and list stories such as that of Ben Franklin harnessing electricity, the ritual of the scientific method, and belief systems about electricity and electronics. The ideal of objectivity in scientific thinking places it above folklore, legend, and myth. But whether we think of Mendel’s genetics, Copernicus’s physics, John Glenn’s lunar walk, or Dian Fossey’s gorillas, the stories are as well known as the scientific philosophy developed and refined from the scientists’ ritual experimentation.

To my surprise, Meredith, a student in my second period class, offers stories of Einstein and the theory of relativity and Newton’s apple as other examples. In terms of spirituality, students describe ceremonies that they participate in during Ramadan and Christmas. They recite stories of Muhammed and Jesus and discuss systems of belief from the Koran and the Old and New Testament that they have been taught by family or religious leaders. This information is recorded and charted on an overhead so students can see the relationships among a nar-

rative, a behavior, and a particular understanding of the world. Brainstorming moves to elaboration as students discuss the listed relationships. For example, Rachel notes the Jewish story of one day’s worth of holy oil lasting eight days, the present-day ritual candle-lighting on Hanukkah, and the teaching of the importance of dedication she learned from her father. And Michael talks about prayer and the idea of submission learned from his Muslim mentor. Thus story binds science and spirituality together in the myth ritual paradigm.

“Shango’s Rest”

After much discussion and sharing of personal and family traditions, I introduce Beatriz Rivera’s short story, “Shango’s Rest,” which begins with generous adaptations of stories about Shango, the Yoruba deity of thunder whose worshipers migrated during the transatlantic slave trade from West Africa to Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, and the United States. Stories are sprinkled throughout Rivera’s work to help frame the narrative about a devotee of Shango who falls on hard times and appeals to him for intercession. The primary myth conveyed in Rivera’s short story concerns Shango’s death as a human, where Shango kills himself in a complex moment of shame, frustration, and sublime sacrificial insight. The significance of the sacrifice is revealed in the larger narrative.

In addition to the retellings of myths, the author references and describes rituals practiced by Nicolasa, the protagonist of the story. For example, when Nicolasa’s son is in the hospital near death suffering from multiple stab wounds, she performs ritual sacrifices and prayers in the hospital to help her son recover. While the healing ritual is successful, she must live without Shango’s assistance for three years by decree of Obatalá, the kindly father of all humanity. When the three years are up, she has a special cross ritually prepared for Shango to come and inhabit in order to ensure his protection and guidance. “Shango’s Rest” is a beautifully written story, but its primary value for our purpose is that it introduces a paradoxically widespread and marginalized religion. The cosmology revealed in the story is similar to many students’ belief systems, even while it is cloaked in very different outer garments. Additionally, the larger narrative vividly communicates the myth, ritual, philosophy tapestry.

Often, students have the most difficulty constructing the philosophical perspective expressed in

the embedded stories and rituals described or referenced. While following a complex plot of stories embedded in larger narratives or isolating rituals and ceremonies from the plot may cause readers to attend to the text in ways they may not be used to, building an understanding of the relationship among myth, ritual, and the larger narrative can be especially challenging. Admittedly, it would be far easier to simply let them express an opinion about the story without such attention to detail, but the goal of my unit is not solely self-exploration; it is also cultural exploration and critical reading.

I ask students to relate sacred or secular stories that are bound to holidays or other cyclic events and to describe ritual activities that occur during these occasions.

To assist the students in this process, I introduce several short selections that explore the character of Shango more explicitly alongside the short story. For example, we read *Black Gods—Orisha Studies in the New World*, where Gary Edwards and John Mason describe Shango as quick-witted, persuasive, and influential. He punishes those not doing their jobs and warns others to work vigorously and consistently, simultaneously as if by a flash of lightning. He represents courage and fertility. He is immersed in the day-to-day fight for existence and survival. We read further in *Powers of the Orishas*, where Migene Gonzalez-Wippler says that Shango is noble, hard-working, and courageous. In light of these readings, I ask the students to consider what aspects of Shango are present in the story either overtly or implicitly.

We begin by listing some of Shango's characteristics on an overhead or the chalkboard. There is usually much discussion as we refine meanings of terms and visualize the related myths referenced in the additional readings. When we have a healthy list, we go back and read Rivera's story a second time. During the second reading, we are less interested

in the plot as a whole than we are in the attributes associated with Shango that appear in the story. For example, we see Nicolasa working hard to care for her many sons, daughter, nephews, and nieces and think about Shango's role in fertility and hard work. Or we note Nicolasa's willingness to give up three years of Shango's protection for her son's life and health and think of Shango's nobility. We continue this way, noting and discussing the relationships among myth, ritual, and philosophy in the mythology of this West African deity.

Ultimately, the students use this general lens to view their own life experience by writing an essay about family or religious stories, rituals, and philosophy. I ask students to relate sacred or secular stories that are bound to holidays or other cyclic events and to describe ritual activities that occur during these occasions. Students still express some difficulty when it comes to the philosophic component. They are asked to express the ideas for living that parents, relatives, mentors, or religious leaders have provided in relation to these events and stories. The goal of the assignment is for them to see an underlying structure that connects them to others, while coming to understand the profundity and richness of their uniqueness. Of course, the traditional requirements for a well-written essay are attended to, but just as the mythic reading they explore requires application of a cultural studies perspective and synthesis and analysis of multiple texts, students are also required to engage higher order thinking in their writing by applying a theoretical lens to writing about literature and life.

Conclusion

It is not the instructional unit alone that assists students in broadening their understanding. World myth needs to be drawn upon as a recurring theme in the exploration of literature, history, and current events. By continually exploring myth within the contexts of larger narratives and noting the allusions to world myth in popular culture and science, students begin to see myth as more than falsehood. They do not let go of the use of the term to describe fallacy and common misconception. Rather, they see that myth as story and metaphor is an expanded use of the term. They can now speak with a broader understanding and refined vocabulary. They can discuss literature and life, film and music, science and history with new tools and insights.

Teachers have said to me with complete sincerity that they absolutely must teach the *Odyssey* because of the many allusions to the text elsewhere. They feel that their students will not be “culturally literate” without such formal instruction in this Greek classic. I point out the allusions to Tonnantzin, the Aztec Goddess, in murals in San Francisco and the deference to Pelle observed by many vacationers to the Hawaiian Islands. I note the allusion made to Elegba, the West African trickster god, during a report about the Elian Gonzalez fiasco on CNN, and the invoking of Brer Rabbit, that classic African American trickster, on *Star Trek* as just a few examples of similar allusions that will be lost on students if they have not been exposed to a broader canon of folk stories and their representative world views.

Myths are active sign systems. They are part of a cultural dynamic that continually demonstrates itself through human behavior and creativity. While some mythic sign systems are privileged above others, this unit helps students begin to see beyond privilege and engage the dynamic by drawing on and synthesizing a variety of texts: student, short story, and individual myths embedded within and sepa-

rate from the short story. Most importantly, the unit helps students to locate themselves within this cultural dynamic.

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EJ 60 years ago

The Universal Language of Literature

In this way the peoples of the Americas have come to believe that cultural forces should be allowed free play in the task of making these large communities harmonize their spiritual aims with the practical one of pooling their natural resources, so that perfect team work will result in resisting aggression against a common enemy. The exchange of representative works of our literatures will make a forceful contribution to that effective interrelationship. A novel or a poem, like any other piece of true artistic value, is a magic mirror reflecting the inner life of a people with absolute candor and a communicative sympathy. No misgivings as to the wiles of propaganda need hold back the reader, the sincerity and disinterestedness of art being the best guaranty of straight dealing. In the last analysis creative literature may prove the best means to real understanding among distance peoples, if one consider that a too perfect symbol of a foreign nation will never touch our heart as does the intimate knowledge of real human beings, with their failings and shortcomings which make them so much like ourselves.

Ernesto Montenegro. “Latin America Reveals Itself in its Literature.” *EJ* 31.5 (1942): 347–57.
