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Session Notes

Stories That Survive: Exploring the Role of Myth in Literature

Paula M. L. Moya, associate professor of English

Ramón Saldívar, Hoagland Family Professor of Humanities & Sciences and the
Milligan Family University Fellow in Undergraduate Education

Ramón Saldívar

Thinking, talking and reading about literature is both a job and a joy. Recorded history is the key to understanding people's place in the world. Stories are the explanations or justifications of our origins. Ancient myths answer questions about the everyday that go beyond common experience.

Literary critic Joseph Campbell asserts that "Mythic stories touch on the interface of what we can and cannot do."

There are patterns of repetition in stories, which explains how ancient myths are passed down through the generations and why stories become so ingrained in social consciousness. Myths present us with the idea and give us suggestions on how we can use the ideal in our lives.

Tragedy shows how things fall apart. It's traditionally represented through massive destruction or death. High mimetic tragedy can involve a noble or heroic character; low mimetic, an ordinary human; and ironic, a pitiable person. In mythic tragedy we find the death of a hero or heroic figure. Tragedy plots are seasonally influenced, as they relate to the natural rhythms of human cycles.

Comedy tells us about the way things come together or are built. Comedy, typically, ends with marriage or another union. In mythic comedy, we often see the acceptance of a lower god or a highly heroic human into the society of gods.

Romantic comedy integrates nature. High mimetic comedy involves a strong protagonist who constructs his own society, while low mimetic involves social elevation and almost always ends in marriage. Ironic romantic comedy follows a wise protagonist who is destroyed by society and must somehow establish himself outside of that society.

Myths are not just the free effusion of the imagination; rather, they are attempts to answer questions about life in unconventional ways. Myths can be seen in a variety of ways:

- as a puzzle that prompts our minds toward some fundamental truth;
- as a general aesthetic orientation of the world that helps us understand the world.

Myth and rationality reinforce and relate to one another, despite somewhat fantastic capacities. We fear an inability to explain the unknown, and this prompts the creation of mythic stories that provide consolation and comfort in the search of truth.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* can be read as a modern-day manifestation of Homer's *The Odyssey*.
Paula Moya

The myth of Coyolxauhquí is an Aztec tale of defeat and dismemberment. It's an origin story. The goddess of the moon mysteriously becomes impregnated with the sun god. Her daughter plots to murder her and the baby, because she feels threatened by the unknown masculine presence. After the plot is revealed, the newborn sun god punishes his older sister with dismemberment and scatters her parts throughout the sky. These parts became the stars.

The story deals with the following complex issues and attempts to explain them:

- familial ties;
- betrayal;
- masculinity and femininity; and
- natural cycles of the sun and the moon.

The myth survived the almost genocidal Spanish conquest. It was a mostly oral tradition and today remains known at some level in Mexican folk beliefs.

Coyolxauhquí is an allegorical struggle between the moon and the stars (the feminine realm of night) and the sun (the masculine space of day). It also explains why the moon disappears in increments.

The myth can be interpreted as a grand-scale representation of kinship relations.

There is a stunning cultural resonance of Coyolxauhquí in Helena Maria Viramonte's highly anthologized fictional short story "The Moths," which includes prominent symbolism of the sun and the moon as well as strong mother-daughter relationships.

My reading of "The Moths" in reference to Coyolxauhquí is that the story moves into a mythic temporality as the day transitions into night. The end of the story enacts the young protagonist as child and mother in one. Through remembrance, the Aztec myth of physical dismemberment is somehow reconciled, as forgiveness, reunion and love figure as interdependence and care; they reinstate and rebuild.