Bashing Joseph Campbell: Is He Now the Hero of a Thousand Spaces?

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Abstract
Defends Joseph Campbell against recent attacks on his scholarship and personal beliefs.

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Since Brendan Gill’s critique of Joseph Campbell appeared in the September 28, 1989 New York Review of Books, it seems that students, critics and even passersby have an opinion on Campbell’s character, work and scholarship. Gill’s accusations that Campbell was a racist, an anti-semit, a sexist and that his scholarship is pablum, have found both friends and foes. Some have shot Campbell’s reputation so full of holes that he could be referred to as the “Hero of a Thousand Spaces.”

Unlike Gill, I never met Campbell, and can offer no opinion on his personal life. I know him only through his writings and public appearances, and dare say that the same is true for most people who recognize Joseph Campbell’s name. Though it may be a disadvantage to have never had the veil of Campbell’s personality through which to interpret his work, it is also an advantage in evaluating his ideas without bias.

Perhaps a personal anecdote would best illustrate this point. In college, I had known a professor only through his lectures and publications. Later, when I met him, he who had seemed a sage had much more of the taste of mace about him. I had invented a personality for him based on my perception of his work.

As a culture, we project our own personal images onto celebrities. We even elect public officials based on screen persona. Some of this has necessarily transferred to the intellectual forum which, like most other aspects of our culture, is increasingly televised.

Whenever we have a largely positive outpouring for a public person, the tabloids and their mud-slinging are never far behind. Today there seems to be a greater acceptance of this yellow journalism as evidenced by the lowbrow TV magazine shows, the deterioration of talk shows to shock shows, and biographies like those penned by Kitty Kelly. Perhaps even the latest bout of Kennedy bash- and the tarnishing of the Camelot years smack of this same flavor.

It is not surprising therefore that, when Joseph Campbell became the superstar of mythology with the PBS broadcast of The Power of Myth/Bill Moyers interviews, his detractors were not far behind. Previously, Campbell had been relatively unknown, except within the academic community. Consequently, any previous criticism had been directed toward his scholarship.

Since Campbell’s eclectic work bridges many academic disciplines, he was difficult to categorize as a standard mythologist, anthropologist, psychologist or literary analyst. As a result, some scholars in those fields felt that Campbell did not live up to their respective canons. Not much time was spent pursuing these points, however, because of the small audience affected by Campbell’s writings.

Many of these academic issues are raised by Robert Segal in the April 4, 1990 issue of the Christian Century and in his book Joseph Campbell: An Introduction. Segal voices both his appreciation of Campbell’s romance with myth, and his criticism of Campbell’s methods. He calls Campbell an “evangelist for myth” in both the most positive and negative connotations of that term. Among other faults, Segal notes that Campbell rarely analyzes an entire myth, and is dogmatic about his own interpretations of myth, especially as to its functions. Segal also observes that Campbell doesn’t acknowledge other theorists in his field, and discusses only the similarities of myths rather than their differences.

Segal is correct in these observations. It was rarely Campbell’s goal to catalog myths the way Sir James Frazer did. Campbell does define for himself the functions of myth as well as many other concepts he uses in discussing his work. It is true that he does not try to explain or justify these concepts, leaving it to the scrutiny of each reader to accept or reject them. This methodology grew out of the independent scholarship. Campbell developed when he abandoned his Ph.D. dissertation to study in the woods of New York state.

Similarly, while others were noting the very obvious differences between myths, Campbell chose to emphasize the more subtle similarities. Segal’s article may have appeared as a result of Gill’s diatribe, but Segal’s observations are much closer to the long-standing academic criticisms than to the personal attacks on Campbell made by Brendan Gill.

Brendan Gill’s column makes broad reference to Campbell’s racism, sexism and anti-semitism, yet for such serious charges, the article is surprisingly devoid of concrete examples. Perhaps this was governed by space restrictions, but sentient readers can not help wondering why such persuasive arguments would be the items left unprinted. Gill’s assessment of Campbell’s character is based on meetings at the Century Club in New York which, by Gill’s own admission, were essentially debates.
Gill relates that Campbell delivered a lecture at Sarah Lawrence on December 13, 1941 entitled "Permanent Human Values," that argued artists should remain faithful to their art rather than diving into the politics of the moment. Campbell apparently sent a copy of this lecture to Thomas Mann, who at the time, had stepped away from his writing to fight the rising power of the Nazis. Gill sees this communication with Mann as an indication of Campbell's right-wing politics, and as a sign of support for Nazism.

A further supposed incidence of anti-Semitism is Campbell's preference of Jung over Freud. To quote Gill, "[Campbell] despised Freud, and it appeared from our talks that he did so in large part because of the fact that Freud was Jewish. He approved highly of Jung and not least because Jung wasn't Jewish."

Such specious reasoning in these two arguments discredit themselves and has earned no further comment. Indeed, one could argue a better case of discrimination against Gill, who from his own line of reasoning, seems to believe that Jewishness or its lack is the only way in which one can evaluate a theorist.

No incident of racism is given in the article, rather only the loose remark that Campbell disapproved of the policies of Sarah Lawrence, a politically liberal school during Campbell's tenure. Presumably there were race-related issues during this time, which we are to assume from Gill's references Campbell must have fought against.

Neither is sexism attacked directly in Gill's article though this theme is picked up in the books The Demon Lover by Robin Morgan and The Heroine's Journey by Maureen Murdock. Both of these works have similar perspectives on Campbell in that he most often focuses attention on male myths. Also, the female in Campbell's Heroic Cycle is defined as the hero's feminine side rather than as a full entity unto herself.

While true as far as it goes, Campbell can not be personally held responsible for patriarchy throughout history. He does on occasion deal with female heroes in mythology. In episode three of the Power of Myth, Campbell describes a Blackfoot legend in which the chief's daughter ventures into the land of the buffalo for her tribe. Gill sees this communication with Mann as an indication of Campbell's right-wing politics, and as a sign of support for Nazism.

The Heroine's Journey in particular seems to deal with the notion of "Follow your bliss" as a mandate to be aggressive in a career-oriented world. Murdock observes that many successful women have patterned their careers on this male hero cycle and, after achieving their goals, find they have something they don't really want. This is perfectly true and equally unfortunate. What Murdock does not mention is that the same phenomenon is present in men. So much so in fact that "Follow your bliss" is, in effect, a warning against pursuing what everyone else believes you should want, and instead pursuing your own deeply felt satisfaction.

Gill also picks up on the fuzziness of the phrase "Follow your bliss." He asks:

For what is this condition of bliss as Campbell has defined it? If it is only to do whatever makes one happy, then it sanctions selfishness on a colossal scale — a scale that has become deplorably familiar to us in the Reagan and post-Reagan years. It is a selfishness that is the unspoken . . . rationale of that contemporary army of Wall Street yuppies, of junk-bond dealers, of takeover lawyers who have come to be among the most conspicuous members of our society. Have they not all been following their bliss?

No.

Apparently in his extensive conversations with Campbell, and his in-depth research into Campbell's ideas, Gill never came across the definition of bliss as outlined in Campbell's December, 1975 Psychology Today article. Here Campbell discusses the seven levels of Kundalini yoga and the purifications of each successive one. It is at this seventh level that the searcher encounters "unconditioned rapture" or "pure bliss." The purpose of this yoga is to rid oneself of the bonds of materialism, including those inherent in the body. It is clear therefore that bliss in not indicative of physical or material fulfillment, but rather a spiritual, transcendental one.

A more realistic fear in terms of the "Follow your Bliss" aphorism is that the Ted Bundy's of the world might see this as feeding into their own sick spiritual systems and therefore blissfully blow people away. Though a misinterpretation, this is at least one based on something Campbell actually said.

Perhaps all of Brendan Gill's observations need to be scrutinized with the knowledge that he is authoring a collective work, reportedly dismembering the reputations of such late luminaries as Joseph Campbell, Mary McCarthy and Dorothy Parker. Presumably, a Kellyesque sleazography would sell less well if it dwelt on the positives of either Campbell's character or scholarship.

In terms of the debate over Campbell, his personality and his work, it is bound to continue for years to come. People who knew him personally come forward on both sides of the issue. For those of us who will never be able to judge for ourselves Joseph Campbell the man, he will never be our buddy Joe, but perhaps we can thank Brendan Gill for reminding the less attentive of us to look at Campbell carefully, so that he neither will be "St. Joseph of Mythology."

Whatever his strengths or faults, Campbell was undoubtedly human and thus imperfect. He's dead, and his work must speak for itself. And speak it does, with a validity that is independent of the man Joseph Campbell was. For if Gill's accusations did apply to Campbell's
writings, everyone would be aware of them already, and Gill’s comments would be even less needed than they are now. If we are to know Campbell only from his scholarship and TV persona, then this is the basis on which we must judge him. Whatever hurtful attitudes he may or may not have had during his lifetime, they can hurt people no longer because they have not survived him in his work.

Notes
5. Gill, op. cit., p. 16.
7. The Heroine’s Journey, Maureen Murdock, (Boston: Shambala, 1990.)

Chronology of Pertinent Articles in the Debate over Joseph Campbell
Psychology Today, 12/75, “Kundalini Yoga: Seven Levels of Consciousness,” Joseph Campbell, p. 76-8. While talking about Kundalini, Campbell explicitly defines the type of bliss that is used in the phrase “Follow your bliss.”


Motor Boating & Sailing, 2/89, “Follow Your Bliss,” Peter A Janssen, p. 23. In the free spirit of boating, Janssen challenges people to find bliss and especially to look for it on a boat.

Commonweal, 4/21/89, “God’s True Brew: Some Soups Can’t Be Watered Down,” by John Garvey, pp 231-32. Draws a distinction between Christian myth and other myth from around the world in that Christians know that their myths are true, that they happened in history.


Christianity Today, 7/14/89. “Books: Myth: Interface with the Unknown,” pp. 61-2. In reviewing the book version of The Power of Myth, Campbell’s ideas are explored in a friendly but critical light. Concludes that this book is beautifully presented but doesn’t necessarily take the reader very far.


Utne Reader, November/December 89, “Taking Another Look at Myth,” by Keith Thompson, pp. 102-5. Describes the basic tenets of many of Campbell’s books and also some of the books which attack Campbell’s stance like The Demon Lover by Robin Morgan.

People Weekly, 11/27/89 “Bill Moyers Angrily Defends Joseph Campbell Against Charges That His Wisdom Was Only a Myth,” by Andrea Chambers and Maria Spiedel, pp. 64-6. Moyers and Gill face off over the validity of Campbell’s views in light of alleged biases. Gill’s intention to write a book on several dead celebrities a la Kitty Kelly surfaces. Fellow professor Huston Smith concludes with the observation that Campbell’s personal views no longer matter now that he’s dead; his writings speak for themselves.


National Review, 3/19/90, “Paganism, American Style” by John Wauck, pp. 43-4. Equates Campbell’s universal views with other new age philosophies. Specifically criticizes the aphorism “Follow you bliss” without adequately exploring its background.

The Christian Century, 4/4/90, “The Romantic Appeal of Joseph Campbell” by Robert A. Segal, pp. 332-5. While citing the positive reasons that Campbell has romanticized myth and therefore his own popularity, Segal objects to Campbell’s dogmatism and differences with other myth theorists.

Utne Reader, March/April 1990, “Unmasking Joseph Campbell: Hero or TV Charlatan?” by George Rebeck, p. 38. Recaps Brendan Gill’s article and the ensuing debate concluding with the caveat let the disciple beware.

American Scholar, Summer 1990, “The Myth of Joseph Campbell,” by Mary R. Lefkowitz, pp. 423-34. Evaluation of some of Campbell’s critics, his views on universalism and its derivation from Jungian psychology. Conclusion is that there are things to be learned from Campbell but that he doesn’t have all the answers.