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## The Hero Who Was Thursday: A Modern Myth

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### The Hero Who Was Thursday: A Modern Myth

#### Abstract

Calls Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* a modern fantasy "that can effectively serve as an example of a true modern myth as seen through" Campbell's journey of the hero. The "novel contains many of the structure elements and conventions" of Campbell's monomyth while providing the reader "some particularly modern insights."

#### Additional Keywords

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces; Chesterton, G.K. The Man Who Was Thursday; Hero's journey in The Man Who Was Thursday

# The Hero Who Was Thursday

## A MODERN MYTH

RUSSELL CARLIN

**D** Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which looks at stories of the hero's journey and transformations through the mythologies of the world, states:

It has always been the prime function of mythology and ritual to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other human fantasies that tend to tie it back. (11)

Campbell contends that cultures of the past were held together by the functions of myth and ritual. These tools defined and helped hold people together in a community. Myth and ritual were aids to help people cope with their fears and help them to reason out their experiences. Today, however, community has become divided into individuals, and our amazement and glorification of the world around us has been explained away by science. Campbell writes:

There can be no question: the psychological dangers which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we ... today must face alone, or, at best, with only tentative, impromptu, and not often very effective guidance. This is our problem as modern, "enlightened" individuals, for whom all gods and devils have been rationalized out of existence. (104)

However, Campbell does not see our modern plight as being hopeless. He believes that changing our perspective is a beginning

... for the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant — or rather (phrasing the same principle the other way around) nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full maturity through the conditions of contemporary life. (388)

To Campbell, myths are not just stories that have been handed down generation to generation; tales that stand outside of us and are read at our leisure. The symbols and structures of Myths are a part of us, they are held in our unconscious and partly shape who we are, even today, as for the cultures who made use of them. The symbols of myth "are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears with it, undamaged, the germ power of its source." (4) Campbell discusses how these aspects of myth remain in us and have been "discovered" by modern psychologists:

Freud, Jung and their followers have demonstrated irrefutably that the logic, the heroes, and the deeds of myth survive into modern times. In absence of an effective

general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream. (4)

Since aspects of mythology remain within us, Campbell believes, it is possible to reap the same benefits that past cultures did of them

... for when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but 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. (382)

Modern man, however, is not without his own myths. The aspects of mythology — the fundamental stories, structures and symbols can be found in modern literature. *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Heart of Darkness* are all stories that could fit into the basic framework that Campbell offers as the basis of hero journey myths: Departure, Initiation and Return. These stories can be and have been called modern myths. But, the genre of modern literature that comes closest to tapping into the ancient stories buried away in our psyche; the stories that utilize more closely Campbell's framework are those of Fantasy Literature. Such Modern novels as *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Chronicles of Narnia* series and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* bring us closer to the primitive emotions that brought on amazement and awe to earlier cultures.

The perspective of fantasy literature enables a writer to let the reader enter worlds that contain mystery and terrors which the world we live in today has had explained away. Fantasy shows us aspects of beauty and marvels that our modern existence has lost touch with. Modern Fantasy, as well as other literatures, also has the luxury of being able to help us become aware of and contend with our "obsessions and requirements."

Fantasy literature is not all escapist literature, taking us to another world and returning to ours unchanged. Fantasy literature can serve the same functions as myth did for ancient cultures, and even more effectively than other modern genres. This is because Fantasy literature comes closest to containing the same elements of myth: journeys to other worlds, use of supernatural and magic, and confrontations with terrors that are mysterious and unknown. And, at the same time, Modern Fantasy can be written with a modern perspective that can more readily "speak to man today."

A work of modern fantasy literature that can effectively serve as an example of a true modern myth as seen through

Joseph Campbell's, studies is G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. This novel contains many of the structure elements and conventions mentioned in Campbell's book, while also giving a reader a reading that reveals some particularly modern insights.

*The Man Who Was Thursday* begins with what Campbell would call "The call to adventure." (49) He defines this:

This first stage of the mythological journey which we have designated the "call to adventure" — signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. The fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented ... but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds and impossible delights ... the adventure may begin as a mere blunder ... or still again, one may be only casually strolling, when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths of man. (58)

Gabriel Syme is the man who is called to adventure. At the beginning of the novel, before we know his real intentions, Syme seems to be lured "away from the frequented paths of men." Syme confronts Gregory, a man who calls himself an anarchist poet. He describes this title: "an artist is identical with an anarchist, because he prefers a great moment to everything." (12) Gregory views his world through one perspective — through the need for anarchy and chaos. Syme is like Gregory in that he also sees the world through one perspective. His perspective, however, is the opposite of Gregory's. Syme marvels at the lack of chaos in the world and is entranced by order:

... chaos is dull; because in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street, or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria, and lo! it is Victoria. (13)

Syme's seemingly chance meeting with Gregory brings him to the beginning of his journey. Gregory offers to take him to a secret meeting of anarchists, which Syme agrees to. They go to a restaurant and sit at a booth which suddenly descends through the floor and lands the two men in the world where the anarchists meet. From this point on, the novel enters the world of fantasy, which becomes more and more apparent as the novel develops. Syme has entered into "a zone unknown."

Campbell describes the hero's adventure from this point as being "always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with competence and courage that danger fades." (82) The power that watches the boundary for Syme is the meeting of the anarchists. Syme manages to pass the boundary by using both competence and courage: he tricks Gregory, by revealing to Gregory that he is a detective, Syme forces Gregory to decide, as he stands before the assembly of anarchists, that:

... his best chance was to make a softened and ambiguous

speech such as would leave on the detective's mind the impression that the anarchist brotherhood was a very mild affair after all. (32)

This allows Syme to step up and denounce Gregory after his speech, accusing him of not being a true anarchist. The assembly then decides to vote Syme to take the post that Gregory was bidding for: the post of becoming "Thursday" in the Central European Council of Anarchists. Syme moves beyond this boundary very craftily and completes the aspect of the mythological journey called "Departure."

Most of *The Man Who Was Thursday* from this point follows along the phase of the journey that Campbell calls "Initiation." This involves the confrontation of obstacles and moving past them. Campbell says:

... once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. (97)

Syme acts as a hero in that he confronts each trial with trepidation and fear, but moves past them with what could be considered courage. In the story, Syme comes to find that each secondary member of the council — this is everyone but Sunday — is also a detective who has been assigned by the same mysterious man.

Upon meeting the council, Syme finds something inhuman and fearful in each member. He says,

each man had something about him, perceived perhaps at the tenth or twentieth glance, which was not normal, and which seemed hardly human. The only metaphor he could think of was this, that they all looked as men of fashion and presence would look, with the additional twist given in a false and curved mirror. (58)

But, as Syme unmasks each, he discovers that they are all as human as he is. Syme asks Dr. Bull to take off his dark glasses, which had caused Syme to believe that "he might be the wickedest of all those wicked men. Syme even had the thought that his eyes might be covered up because they were too frightful to see." (60) But, after removing the glasses, Dr. Bull is revealed to be "a very boyish-looking young man, with very frank and happy hazel eyes, an open expression ... and an unquestionable breath about him of being very good and rather commonplace." (102).

As the novel draws to a close, an aspect of the "return" in myths, called the magic flight, slips in before Syme actually returns to his world. Campbell describes the magic flight:

If the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion. (197)

This is the description of the pursuit of Sunday. The six detectives chase Sunday, who escapes in a horse-drawn cab, then hops onto a fire-engine, runs into a zoo and steals an elephant, riding it through the streets of London and finally flies off in a hot air balloon.

Campbell also describes another aspect of this part of

a myth: "another well-known variety of the magic flight is one in which a number of delaying obstacles are tossed behind the wildly fleeing hero." (201) Part of this aspect is present in the detectives' pursuit of Sunday. Sunday, instead of the hero Syme, tosses notes that serve as obstacles. Each note mysteriously ends up in the possession of the detective it is addressed to. Syme receives one that seems to have been written from an adult to a child: "but for the last time, where are your goloshes? the thing is too bad, especially after what Uncle said." (156) Sunday seems to have insight into the personalities and histories of each of the detectives, that one would think he would not know. Sunday seems to know that Syme grew up in a bizarre family; he had an uncle who would go outside with only a hat on.

The culminating experience in the section of *The Man Who Was Thursday* that is called the "initiation" is the final meeting of the six detectives with Sunday. Sunday is revealed to have been the person who assigned each of the men to their assignment. But, Sunday is also revealed to be much more.

Each of the detectives is asked to dress in a costume that gives a visual representation of the day of the week he is, in relation to the days of creation. Syme is dressed in a

... long peacock-blue drapery, rather of the nature of a domino, on the front of which was emblazoned a large golden sun, and which was splashed here and there with flaming stars and crescents. (174)

This represents "the fourth day of the week which is associated with the creation of the sun and moon." (175) Sunday, the day of rest, is dressed "in a pure and terrible white, and his hair was like a silver flame on his forehead." (178)

Sunday reveals that he is not completely evil, contrary to what the detectives have supposed. He says, "I am the peace of God." (180) Sunday's revelation, that he, just as all of the other members, is not what he has appeared to be, helps Syme to make a revelation. Syme recalls looking at the back of Sunday's head and being afraid. But — when he confronted him — he found him beautiful. Syme says, "when I saw him from behind I was certain he was an animal, and when I saw him in front I knew he was a god." (169) Syme concludes from this:

Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. This is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front. (170)

Syme learns that nothing is all black or all white, nothing is all evil or all good. We are susceptible to projecting first impressions, based on our fears or hopes, onto something and not letting go of these impressions. Each unmasking of the detectives, and the final unmasking of Sunday, reveals to Syme that to view something from only

one perspective is limiting. It is important to be able to let go of our first impressions — being unable to do that is how prejudice starts. This is made evident in the appearance of Gregory, who still maintains the singular perspective of an anarchist. He has also limited his view to only himself, ignoring anyone else's perspective: "I could forgive you everything, you that rule mankind, if I could feel for once that you had suffered for one hour a real agony such as I." (182). Syme refutes this. He shoots down the accuser's argument by pointing out that they, too, have felt agony:

It is not true that we have never been broken, we have never descended into hell. We were complaining of unforgettable miseries even at the very moment when this man entered insolently to accuse us of happiness. I repel the slander; we have not been happy. I can answer for everyone of the great guards of Law whom he has accused. (183)

At this point, Syme is returned to the real world again. His initiation is complete. He no longer looks at the world in one direction; he can see more. This leaves Syme feeling the opposite of the agony and fear that he felt during the journey:

Syme could only feel an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did. He felt in possession of some impossible good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality. (184)

Syme has completed his hero's journey. He has gone through the Departure, the Initiation and the Return like many mythological heroes before him. He has received, in the end, the fruits of a successful return — "the ultimate boon":

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 realizations. As he crosses threshold after threshold, conquering dragon after dragon, the stature of the diversity that he summons to his highest wish increases, until it subsumes the cosmos. Finally, the mind breaks the boundary sphere of the cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form — all symbolization, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void (190)

Syme believed in a world of all or nothing. He believed in the impressions that he would first receive from a person or a place and he let these hinder his ability to see beyond that impression. Campbell states that:

the goal of the myth is to dispel the need for such life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will. And this effected through a realization of the true relationship of the passing phenomenon of time to the imperishable life that lives and dies in all. (238)

Syme's experience is spiritual because of his realization. He has made a connection with the rest of humanity that

he hasn't felt before. And this connection extends beyond humanity to the world around him. He has an awareness beyond himself to the "universal will": "the aim is not to see, but to realize that one is, that essence; then one is free to wander as that essence in the world." (Campbell 386) This is Syme's feelings of "unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind."

Syme also realizes that his whole journey was necessary to make his realizations, just as it is necessary for everyone to make their own journey. A person cannot go through life passively, one must be active, even aggressive, and face his or her own challenges. Syme says

why does each small thing in the world have to fight against the world itself ... for the same reason that I had to be alone in the dreadful Council of Days. So that each thing that obeys laws may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist. so that the real lies of Satan may be flung back in the face of this blasphemer, so that by tears and torture we may earn the right to say to this man 'you lie!' (182-3)

Syme realizes that in order to change oneself and one's view on life, one must undertake a process similar to Syme's journey — the hero's journey. Campbell also calls this process a rebirth: "Within the soul, within the body social, there must be — if we are to experience long survival — a continuous 'recurrence of birth.'" (16) This rebirth allowed Syme to no longer be an isolated individual. He suffered, just as Gregory had suffered, so he could be justified in telling him "you lie!" And, finally, Syme would be able to answer "yes" to the question that he hears as he leaves the world of the anarchists: "can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" (183)

Syme's journey through the fantastic world of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in the end, proved not to be a story of a man trying to thwart an uprising of anarchists, but to be a story of Syme's journey to gain a new perspective on his life. It was a journey that not only changes his angle of view on life, but also changed him spiritually. Once again, this is also the underlying motive of myths. It is the attempt to give the reader or listener a look at the psychology of the hero and thus, of themselves. And Fantasy literature proves to be a perfect vehicle to carry this motive:

... it is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and 'unreal': they represent psychological, not physical triumphs. (Campbell 29)

And Syme's journey through the world of the fantastic is not physical; in the end it is psychological.

G.K. Chesterton may not have intended to write a story that could fit into the framework of a hero's journey like those of ancient myths. But the structure and conventions of these myths sat in his psyche as it sits in all of ours. And, by tapping into the creative well of his mind, he brought up the unconscious remnants of our past and fused them with the story he wanted to tell.

## Works Cited

- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.  
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