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"Great reptiles loll unceasingly beneath the cloud-cloaked moon. And this night, this rainy wind-swept night, impatient humanity intrudes itself into the primitive region once more" (Wein & Wrightson, 1972, p. 1).
(See Schroll, "Mythology, Pop-Culture & Comic-Book Lore," pp. 100–104, this issue).

Mythology, Pop-Culture & Comic-Book Lore: An Invitation for Contributors to *Restoration Earth*, 2(2), 2012

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This article is incomplete. It is included here as an invitation to anyone who has an interest in expanding on and/or fleshing out the rough outline provided here. This new or revised article (either in collaboration with me, as a commentary, and/or an independent critique of what I have written) would be published in *Restoration Earth*, 2(2), November 15, 2012. Contact me if you are interested. Email: rockphd4@yahoo.com.

Introduction

Comic-book superheroes have continued to become increasingly more life-like in their cinematic presentation through improved computer generated imagery. Although this new technology is a contributing factor toward making the recently released *Avengers* (May 4, 2012) film one of the highest grossing films thus far, it is the stories of these superheroes that are providing the core attraction of its cross-cultural resonance. Asking why there is this cross-cultural fascination with superhero stories is a good question, yet providing a complete answer to this question exceeds the limits of this preliminary inquiry. Instead of answering this (and related) questions, this rough draft invites further inquiry into the archetypal significance of comic-book superheroes, and their relationship to the mythic lore found in every culture.

This invitation for further inquiry offers us the following. First, it provides a brief definition of what it is I mean by the word myth. Second, it briefly examines the character development of what a hero (or a protagonist) represents in literature. Third, it offers us a glimpse into comic-book lore not only as a resurgence of mythology within pop-culture, but as a pathway toward understanding how transpersonal ecosophy finds expression within pop-culture.

What I Mean When I Use the Word Myth

Normally when someone says a particular idea is a myth, we consider it to be something untrue, a falsehood, an idle tale, a legend, a fable, or an idea that is out of date (Watts, 1973). In its broadest meaning, myth should be understood as an invitation for us to conceptualize a vision of reality that extends over an indefinite period of history, whose worldview provides a culture with the explanatory power to make sense of how the universe works and what our place in it is (Watts, 1973). A. David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner agree with this use of the word myth, telling us: "Myths are . . . the models by which human beings code and organize their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions" (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 2).

Existential psychologist Rollo May considers the term myth as a "nonmaterial way of presenting dramatically a given truth, that then strikes the human being on all levels at once. Unconscious and conscious, group and individual, past and present" (May & Skinner, 1981). Crittenden Brooks (n.d.) tells us that Jung, who felt any theory was merely the subjective myth of its creator, held this same conceptual meaning of myth. Jung believed theories were nothing more than metaphors that help us to understand our universe.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) have further emphasized this close relationship between myth and metaphor in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. It is Lakoff and Johnson's contention that:

Myths provide ways of comprehending experience; they give order to our lives. Like metaphors, myths are necessary for making sense of what goes on around us. All cultures have myths, and people cannot function without mythology anymore than they can function without metaphor. And just as we often take the metaphors of our own culture as truths, so we often take the myths of our own culture as truths (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 185–186).

The importance of developing a personal mythology to keep our consciousness “attuned to the unending demands made upon it by a rapidly changing world by the ongoing psychological dilemmas life presents” is seen by Feinstein and Krippner as a “venerable source of psychological guidance in the complex choices faced by human beings across cultures and throughout time” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1983, p. 1). Feinstein and Krippner go further, telling us the scientific model most appropriate for understanding our personal mythology stems from the field of cognitive psychology, which provides the concept of cognitive–affective structures. “The concept of cognitive–affective structures can be defined as ‘internalized schemata’ which serve the functions of explaining, sacralizing, and guiding the individual in a similar way that cultural myths serve those functions for a society,” said Krippner in a 1984 workshop on “Myths, Dreams, and Shamanism.”

In spite of this expanded definition of the word myth, we continue to live in an age of science, which has its roots in the practical application of knowledge, thereby begging the question: How is it really useful to the quality of our daily lives to examine mythology? How, in other words, are myths necessary for making sense of what goes on around us? This is the question philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970) explored as the central thesis of his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Instead of using the word myth, Kuhn referred to humankind’s preoccupation with understanding how the universe works and what our place in it is as a *paradigm*. The word paradigm comes from the Greek word *paradigma*, meaning pattern. It was Kuhn’s insight to realize that the narrative constructions we use to make sense of

what goes on around us also form a pattern of meaning or, in other words, a paradigm.

Kuhn (1970) defined his concept of paradigm as a “super theory”, a generalized view of reality that encompasses the totality of existing data: a single body of knowledge that is both coherent and internally consistent. Paradigms provide the philosophical shape and form of our scientific model of reality; consequently paradigms serve as the brick and mortar that hold a particular worldview together. A paradigm assists us in the creation of our cultural constructs, because it is the guiding light that aids, directs, and interprets the nature of reality for those of us who adhere to its investigative parameters and its methods of inquiry. According to this view, the term’s paradigm and myth share the same function.

Myths and paradigms can be thought of as the lens or perceptual filter through which we see and interpret our universe. But (as those of us who wear glasses will tell you) there are times when the lenses we use to see the world no longer help us to clearly focus our vision, reminding us it is time to see the eye doctor and get a new prescription. Similarly, there are times when the perceptual filters we use to create our narrative constructions of reality no longer enable us to resolve the experience of our daily lives into a coherent vision or worldview. German philosophers have long been aware of Kuhn’s concept of paradigm. Summing up this idea of a comprehensive conception or image of civilization, the universe, and our relationship to it is the word *weltanschauung* (the root *welt-* meaning “world” and the root *-anschauung* meaning “outlook, perception, conception, intuition, and contemplation”). This particular attitude toward our interpretation of reality, or worldview, has been referred to by German philosophers as a *weltansicht*, where *-welt* means “world” and *-ansicht* means approval or opinion (Feyerabend, 1980).

Sketches of the Hero’s Character Development in Literature and Comic Books

Bringing this view of mythology to the hero’s character development in Western literature, according to Joseph Meeker (1997), one of the predominant protagonist’s role has been the tragic hero, represented by such figures as “Achilles, Oedipus, Antigone,

Hamlet, [and/or] King Lear” (p. 29). We can also conceive a very general depiction of the personality orientation of the tragic hero by witnessing these actions via cinema, dramatic plays, or through the literary representation of the good soldier who follows orders—and marches to the beat of technology’s drum. The character orientation of the tragic hero tends to serve as the dominant culture’s symbol of order, authority, and social coherence, whose heroic deeds represent a method of imposing this order onto the lives of ordinary citizens from the top down. Twentieth-century pop-culture and Hollywood have created their share of tragic heroes (or a more accurate description seems to be *establishment heroes*), such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America; these heroes are billionaires (like Batman) or a princess (like Wonder Woman) or symbols of our nationalistic loyalty (like Superman and Captain America). In every case they are symbols of nearly unobtainable goals (great wealth, high social status, and/or always representing the moral code without question).

The second predominant character or protagonist is *the rebel*, the politically conscious social deviant, whose actions represent a rejection of the dominant culture’s symbols of social conformity. This protagonist emerges from the ranks of ordinary citizens. Meeker (1997) associates this protagonist with “the comic hero,” which should not be confused and/or conflated with pop-culture comic-book heroes. By “comic hero” Meeker is referring to the *anti-hero*, or more precisely the *picaro* or *picaresque hero*. Meeker tells us the *picaro* has no classical literary pedigree, instead:

Scholars differ over its literary origins, its definition, and the kind of evidence that might be needed to interpret it. There is general agreement that the term derives from the Spanish *picaro*, “rouge,” and that this genre comprises tales about socially deprived people. The first clear example of the form is the anonymous little book *Lazarillo de Tormes*, which appeared in Spain in 1554. *Lazarillo* is the story of a young man’s adventures as he struggles to survive in a hostile world that seems bent upon destroying him. To endure, he must adapt himself somehow to the given

conditions of his environment, however many rules of decorum and ethics must be ignored in the process. The picaresque, at its origins, is a mode of survival against odds in a world that is hostile or indifferent. (p. 51)

The picaresque or antihero often find themselves standing up for the abolition of rigid social structures, and whose actions are intrinsically motivated to actualize a way of being that represents a transpersonal orientation of the self. Comic/anti-heroes become leaders not because they are seeking to perform heroic acts, but because they get caught up in situations that are beyond their control. In order to survive these situation, antiheroes (in the process) end up serving as a means of liberation for themselves, as well as others caught up in the same situation. Within Western literature Meeker (1997) associates the antihero with *Lysistrata* (“first performed in Athens in the year 411 BC” [Aristophanes, 1964]) and more recently Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s book *Catch-22* (Heller, 1955). The antihero can also be found within comic-book heroes such as Spiderman, the Incredible Hulk, Thor, Wolverine, Rouge, Swamp Thing, and Dr. Strange.

One particularly interesting idea within pop-culture—comic-book heroes that deserves further exploration is the continual metamorphosis of tragic heroes into picaresque or antiheroes. For example, Wonder Woman rebelled against her uniform in issue #179 of *Wonder Woman* and wore street clothes until issue #203. Issue #203 was the Women’s Liberation issue. This all took place during the rise of feminism in the late 1960s, and it was during this time that Wonder Woman explored different costumes until in issue #204 when she returned to the original costume. Wonder Woman’s feminist awakening was a positive influence on me. She was a DC Comics hero, and most DC comics heroes at this time tended to be establishment role models who lived perfect lives (i.e., Superman and Batman). On the other hand, Marvel Comics heroes (such as those first created by Stan Lee) gave us an insight into the existential angst and personality flaws of ordinary people, portraying their lives as superheroes through circumstances beyond their control where they were called to be heroic. It is therefore my thesis that it was the influence of Stan Lee’s Marvel Comics characters, combined with the 1960s counter-cultural revolution, which

spilled over into the DC Comics universe—hence Wonder Woman’s rebellion against her costume, as well as her rebellion against the need to have a “man” telling her what to do—exit her boyfriend Steve Trevor—and enter an old Chinese martial arts guru as her sidekick, whose name was “I-Ching.” *I-Ching* refers to the book of changes and, hence, introduces a distinct Eastern psychological influence that predated the transpersonal psychology movement.

The Saga of Swamp Thing

The darkness cries—a long mournful wail that writhes through the snarled cypress branches like a breath of Hades’ wind, skipping over the placid surface of the stagnant mire below. This is Bayou country: A swampy, desolate marshland forsaken by civilized man—and now inhabited by far-less demanding creatures. Screaming herons stretch their sleek wings toward the angry heavens. Mottled bull frogs ring their croaking night-song in eager anticipation. Great reptiles loll unceasingly beneath the cloud-cloaked moon. And this night, this rainy wind-swept night, impatient humanity intrudes itself into the privative region once more. (Wein & Wrightson, 1972, p. 1)

One of several examples of the transpersonal ecosophical perspectives’ representation in the pop-cultural genera of comic books is the saga of *Swamp Thing*. Swamp Thing was a protagonist in DC Comics created by writer Len Wein and artist Berri Wrightson. Swamp Thing made his first appearance in the horror comic *House of Secrets* #92 in July 1971 and with the success of this short story it was revised and transformed into its own series in October–November, 1972. The story begins by introducing us to Dr. Alex Holland, a happily married man, deeply in love with his brilliant partner and fellow scientist, Dr. Linda Holland. They were working on a bio-restorative formula in a top-secret government laboratory deep in the Louisiana swamp that would be able to both rapidly and miraculously regenerate cell structure. I was also deeply influenced during my adolescent development with this character image of a female partner

who shared my scholarly interests, and who was also my intellectual equal.

“I hate to be proven wrong” (Wein & Wrightson, 1972, p. 5), said Linda Holland, in reference to the research she and her husband Alex were working on. Without going into the background story in anymore detail, except to say someone attempts to steal this formula and this conflict results in an explosion. Linda Holland escapes the blast, but her husband Alex suffers the following ordeal:

Imagine pain—so intense it defies description—as countless unclassified chemicals seep deep into throbbing, flame enveloped flesh. Imagine what such terrible suffering can do to the fragile mind. . . as it drives the stricken body forward clawing desperately at the cool night air in hopes of some small comfort. . . Imagine reformed as the smoldering man-shape reaches the soothing waters of the ever-present bog. . . then disappears soundlessly beneath its bubbling surface (p. 13). . . . A muck encrusted shambling mockery of life. . . . A twisted caricature of humanity that can only be called swamp thing (p. 15).

In brief, Swamp Thing’s superpower is to become one with Gaia itself, possessing the regenerative power of plants—a twentieth-century, scientifically created embodiment of the Green Man of Pagan lore. It is this concept I want to explore in more depth as a further means of investigating the philosophical orientation and mindscape represented by the transpersonal ecosophical vision.

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