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The Creation of American Myth through Humor

Every society has cultivated their own unique forms of mythology that were woven into their cultures. The Greeks, who have arguably the most well known mythological history, had Homer a poet of myth that exemplified their era. His poetic epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are filled with gods, kings and mortal heroes endowed with extraordinary abilities. With a love of the tragic, the Greek culture created dramas centered around war, honor, revenge and love. Following in the same vein, albeit with some notable differences, we Americans have our own Homer in Mark Twain as our most widely acknowledged author and perpetuator of myth. American culture has followed up the Greek myth with the installation of the tall-tale into the American collective conscious.

Myths have served many different purposes throughout time. They have been used as entertainment, oral stories passed down from generation to generation. As well as explanations to phenomena and as evolutions of partially accurate historical accounts. The paradox of myths is that they are not factually exact: they are false, not wholly true, or not true in that form but they have a power which transcends their inaccuracies. (Dowden 3) So, it follows that myths are not believed the same way that history is. It has been said that myth cannot exist without the most miniscule grain of truth and that no truth is entirely accurate; myth operates on this assumption.

The Greek style of myth, exemplified through Homer, is representative of their culture; as all myths are. The *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are told through a slow narrative pace in the typical Grecian stoic tone that seems to accept the fact that tragedy is inevitable and must be met and documented with dignity. Homer, as well as many of his contemporaries and predecessors, is known as a Cyclic poet because his two epics together tell the complete cycle of events, both before and after, the Trojan War (Dowden 9). They try to represent the entire picture in what

could be seen as a historical representation of myth.

There are certain characteristics of the Iliad and the Odyssey that are inherently Greek and in a broader sense can be seen as archaic techniques to storytelling. Such as the aforementioned slow pacing and detached, more subjective tone of the narrative during the epic. In addition the use of repetition, of the tell-tale traits that harkens back to the days of oral recitation of this work, is frequently employed throughout the entire set of poems. Descriptive titles preface names and lineage of the given character might typically follow after. For example the God Zeus is generally called “Zeus son of Kronos” and the Greek race in the epic as “flowing-haired Achaians.” The repetition and descriptive titles made it easier for the poet to recite the work and the audience to keep the story straight.

The American creation of myth greatly differs from Greek tradition in style and execution but the purposes of the myths remain the same, despite the incredibly large time period that had elapsed between the two schools of literature. Mark Twain imposes his original American style to create an integral part of American myth. Instead of a narrative that focuses on drama, the American myth utilizes humor. The one strong remaining Greek presence in Twain's style is that he saw storytelling as an art form that must be performed in just the right manner for the meaning to be presented accurately. He lays out the proper way for a tale to be told in his 1895 short story which was descriptively entitled “How to Tell A Story.” In this short story he differentiates between American, English and French comedic literature. “The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter.” (Norton 408) In other words, the American story does not depend on content but on the skill of the storyteller to captivate their audience.

Another fundamental difference Twain points out is that the “Humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he evenly dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard. Then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh

when he gets through.” (Twain 408) The American story is told in an understated way with the assumption that the listener or reader will be intelligent enough to catch the point. Twain’s sense of humor, as well as America’s, is more subtle and most definitely more ironic. The use of the “grave” tone of voice in storytelling has come to be called the deadpan, or the telling of something funny without any emotion. This literary tool works because ridiculous and humorous statements are spoken as solemn truth it becomes ridiculously humorous and is a technique Twain, among others, uses freely throughout this era of literature.

In one of his short stories *The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* he employs the techniques he would later lay out in *How to Tell A Story*. This work also showed the two newly opposed viewpoints within America at the time; east versus west, with the east being greatly influenced by the English style of civilization and literature. In the tale the very stiff and proper narrator calls on a man named Simon Wheeler, as a favor to a friend back east, to inquire about the man’s friend Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley. Wheeler cannot recall the man in question but goes off on a tangent about man named Jim Smiley which the narrator found an “exasperating reminiscence... long and tedious as it was useless.” (Twain 215) The narrator is oblivious to the artful storytelling being exhibited, to the joy that Wheeler gets from sharing the experience with him and the humor in the tale itself. The tale, or myth, also demonstrates a typical American characteristic, that of exaggeration or truth-stretching. For instance the protagonist would bet on anything, from how long a “straddle-bug” would walk, and he would willingly follow it to Mexico to find out, or bet on a man’s wife’s recovery from illness, “I’ll risk two-and-a-half she don’t” (Twain 216) Exaggeration is ever-present like an insistent character that pops up at every available chance to add its ironic brand of humor to the given situation. “The other quality, truth-stretching, fibbing or even outright lying that was commonly employed in Twain’s works was never meant to deceive but was simply the secret and distinguishing characteristic of the tall-tale—it was assumed that anyone with half a brain would know that they were lies” (Welsch 9). Readers had to employ common sense and read mythological or tall tales critically. Just because they were written in a more casual style of language it would be a mistake to write them off as

casual works without the need for analysis or as lacking in social commentary. In fact, the social commentary is more commonly accessible because of the style in which it was written.

The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County speaks to the way America, more specifically the western frontier of America, was perceived through the protagonist Jim Smiley's actions and interactions with his environment. The protagonist is representative of America, he is charismatic and "uncommon lucky" in any wager, and will accept any wager at any odds, which plays into the ideal of the American ego and the notion that they will always come out on top regardless of the circumstances. However we know this not to be true for when there is a bet someone has to lose and there are casualties in his path to greatness. Others, like the pathetic bull-pup who fought for him and eventually lost, suffered, "he gave Smiley a look, as much to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main defense in a fight, and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died" (Twain 217). There have been many loses suffered by others at the hands of Americans, for instance, African-Americans slaves who were emancipated in Twain's lifetime but upon whose back the South was built.

Instead of the religious themes of Greek myth, American myth focuses on Man and his conquest of nature. Americans did not need myth to explain religion or the creation of their world because they were a predominantly Christian nation who could look to the Bible for such answers if need be. So, American myth concerned itself with the creation of American archetypes. The Explorer of the west, The Soldier, The Indian and The Slave, among others; all became literary archetypes; extreme generalizations of generic figures in American history. Instead of Greek Gods who held power over man in myth Americans writers such as Twain gave man that power over their themselves and nature. Man became a larger than life figure; an exaggeration of himself just as the "West is an exaggeration, a pure version, the quintessence of the American experience as a whole and traits that characterize Americans in general become intensified west of the Missouri. Confidence becomes brashness, optimism becomes exuberance, casualness becomes recklessness." (Davis and Beidler 123)

Myth boils down to communication and perception in a given culture. Every nation needs heroes that they can claim as their own. Past greatnesses that they can feel nostalgic over and aspire to live up to in the future. Centuries after Homer's epics were recorded he is still hailed as a great poet. He himself is almost as mythic a figure in literary history as his epics are. Perhaps Twain too, with his humorous short stories and poignant novels, shall resonate as far into the future as a representative of America as Homer did for Greece. For Twain is one of the originators of making the first truly American style of writing popular and should be remembered for doing so. In most instances it could be seen that Twain seemed to be making his stories up as he went along, pulling things out of thin air, which is fitting as it is representative of an era of American history where the country itself was "making it up as it went along;" creating its own identity not only in literature but in politics and morality. Twain is America personified just as Homer was Greece personified.

Works Cited

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