



The Riddle of the Sphinx: Teaching Ancient Myths to Modern Students

Author(s): Laimdota Mazzarins

Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 2, CEA Increment (Spring, 1979), pp. 145-148

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111264>

Accessed: 13-04-2016 00:14 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Literature*

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX: TEACHING ANCIENT MYTHS TO MODERN STUDENTS

Laimdota Mazzarins

The question of “relevance” which preoccupies us as teachers of literature is not a new one. We all know the Greek myth of Oedipus, the mythic student of life whom the gods lead on, step by programmed step, toward a momentous lesson. In his fateful encounter with the riddling Sphinx, Oedipus, like many a modern student, receives a broad hint concerning the nature of his own existence and manages to smugly miss the point. The Sphinx’ question, which a series of hapless heroes have failed to answer, is: “What walks on four feet in the morning, two at noontime, and three at night?” Oedipus, proud of his quick intelligence, gives the obvious answer, “man,” and receives from the grateful Thebans the throne of the city and the hand of its queen . . . Jocasta.

What Oedipus has failed to see is that the riddle has *two* answers. The three stages of human life correspond to Oedipus’ own past, present, and future. He was the baby abandoned on the mountainside; he is now the self-made monarch standing at the pinnacle of worldly success; he will soon be an outcast from the human community and the old religious certainties, blindly tapping his way with a stick.

I offer this story because it seems to epitomize the problem faced by the typical college student on first reading the myth-saturated literature of the ancient world. He has been led by curiosity about the distant past to enroll in a course in ancient literature; he has sufficient common sense to accept in theory the universality of the myths he reads there; but when it comes to putting this universality to the test of personal experience, the student will often hesitate. As the tale of Oedipus reveals, there is inherent in human nature a self-protective intellectual inertia, an emotional resistance to new ways of looking at oneself—and with good reason, for the new insights may throw into confusion all that we have previously cherished about ourselves. It is this last frontier of resistance to which we as teachers need to address our efforts, because it is only when the circuit runs without a break, from the particular mythic narrative to its universal significance to the reader’s individual experience, that the spark is lit which enables us, like Oedipus, to *see*.

The goal, then, of the process of teaching literature in general and mythology in particular, is self-recognition: those moments of closure when

a mass of data representing vicarious as well as direct experience finally enters into a new pattern of relationships hitherto unseen. The teacher's job is to do whatever is necessary to enable such enlightenment to strike. In practice I find that my teaching of mythology falls roughly into three areas of concern: the definition of myth in general, recognition of contemporary myths, and finally the study of the ancient myths themselves.

My working definition of myth is, as one might expect, psychological and functional: a myth is a symbolic structure that expresses inner drives, fears and fantasies and endows human experience with order and meaning. Viewed thus, myth becomes central to man's efforts, collective and individual, to understand and control his environment and his inner nature, explore his potential and come to terms with his limitations. A myth is therefore something dynamic—a model, a means of coping, a strategy.

With this definition, it should come as no surprise to our typical student—though of course it usually does—that he has been living with and using myths throughout his life. The myth of the abundant, infinitely exploitable frontier, for instance, has died hard in this country, only to be replaced in some quarters by the equally fanciful myth of retreat to the simple life untouched by civilization. The myths of capitalism are alive and well and virtually inescapable: if you buy the right magical objects, from Lemon Pledge to an Alfa Romeo, you will be envied, admired and loved. Myths of romantic love, of political sin and salvation, above all the national religion of scientific objectivity and technological solutions to human problems, function in American society as subliminal myths, so thoroughly internalized that it is only by a prodigious mental effort that we can view them with detachment. But the effort is worth making, nonetheless. To sensitize my students to the subtle manipulation practiced by the popular media, I have asked them to bring into the classroom for close analysis examples of the mythic images that are our daily fare in the form of advertisements, campaign rhetoric and diplomatic jargon, film plots, folk heroes and heroines, daily news articles and headlines, and pulp fiction. Demystifying these images and breaking their hold on us can be an exhilarating experience.

Having laid this groundwork, we can begin to analyze the myths of earlier times. Three approaches, used separately or in combination, have proven most fruitful: first, drawing on the psychological insights of Freud and his successors (surely the best thing that has happened to the study of myth in the twentieth century); second, seeking modern parallels; and finally, assigning in-class "reaction papers."

Let me illustrate the first technique by reference to Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Sexual symbolism runs rampant throughout the play, and indeed the fundamental theme is the conflict between the repression and the release of sexual impulses. When we read *Hippolytus* we focus on key images such as horses, the hunt, the inviolate garden of Artemis, and we

compare them with the dream imagery in psychiatric literature. What emerges from this process is the gradual realization that the structural relationship between the main characters in the play (Phaedra, Hippolytus, and the Nurse) is none other than Freud's well-known triad of the id, the super-ego and, between them, the ego, laboring to satisfy both masters and adjust as best it can to external reality. Freud's schema is of course itself a scientific myth, carefully constructed to serve the same interpretive function as more traditional myths.

The second technique, that of transposing a mythical character into a modern situation (or sometimes a modern one into an ancient setting) requires not so much information as imagination. I'm referring, for instance, to the kind of creative mental leap that allows Army veterans in my classes to envision Achilles in a trench in Vietnam as he comes to the painful realization of the ultimate waste and futility of war. The analogies that spring to students' minds are often startling, such as one inner-city woman's remark that Achilles, for all his insight, is basically a *kudos* junkie, hooked on honor and renown, who couldn't stop fighting if he tried.

The third technique is the inverse of the previous one, namely the in-class reaction paper, which enables the student to empathize with a character and thus become emotionally involved with a literary text. In this exercise the student writes nonstop for five or ten minutes after I set the relevant scene and invite the student to project himself into it. For example: "You are Hector, at long last facing your bitterest enemy, the great Achilles. He is bearing down on you now, his gigantic shield blazing. Your parents are watching from the walls of Troy. Athena has deserted you. Will you beg for mercy—or go down fighting?" In most cases this exercise produces surprisingly vivid and coherent writing, even from students who would have trouble writing a formal essay on the same subject. I suspect the reason is that role-playing thrusts upon the writer a sudden shift in perspective that allows him to bypass his intellectual preconceptions and draw on those emotional reserves that enable us to deal with new situations. As with "method" acting, the writer is forced to seek within himself for usable analogous experience.

I would like to close with four general conclusions. First, the strategies outlined here are applicable to the teaching of any literary text. The enduring themes are those which point to universal human experiences, and such themes serve as the points of contact between two sets of particulars—on the one hand, the plot, characters, and formal elements of the literary text; on the other, the individual reader with his unique accumulation of life experience. Locating these points of contact is his task as a reader. The themes of great works of literature are by definition "relevant."

Second, it is not so much the specific insights yielded by particular myths that have lasting value for the student as it is the habits of introspection and

critical thinking that he develops as a direct result of the search for meaning. It is no coincidence that so many mythic plots are organized around a search or process of discovery, a voyage into the interior. Often the hero never finds at all the original object of his quest, or finds it only to lose it. Gilgamesh lets a snake steal the magic plant that gives everlasting life; Telemachus never does learn the whereabouts of his father. But by the time they return from their travels, Gilgamesh has learned the wisdom of resignation and Telemachus has grown into his true identity as Odysseus' son. As the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy observed of yet another adventure:

Ithaca gave you the splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.

Third, perhaps the most valuable of all learning experiences occurs when the student confronts a text that conspicuously generates more questions than answers. *The Book of Job* is one instance; another is the *Aeneid*, both an homage to, and a questioning of, the blessings of civilization. In the give-and-take of discussion, each class invariably sorts itself out into a wide spectrum of positions, and the individual student is forced to uncover and reexamine the basic assumptions that he brought to bear on his own reading of the text. In the sheltered environment of the classroom we have the opportunity to gain Oedipus' insights without paying his terrible price—that is, to confront our own errors and self-deceptions and go beyond the pat answers that ordinarily satisfy us. At the same time, we come to realize that multiple valid interpretations of a given text may be possible, depending on the philosophical assumptions of the individual reader. Whether his original convictions are challenged by the process of dialogue or ultimately confirmed, the confrontation with other points of view will, one hopes, sow the seeds of a tolerance for ambivalence and complexity, in literature, in his own make-up, and in the larger world.

My final point is a simple one, implicit in all I have said so far—that the boundary between art and life is a permeable membrane rather than an impenetrable wall. In teaching literature ancient or modern, our purpose should be to open the student's eyes and send him back into his own life with a better grasp of its diverse meanings and a keener appreciation of its limits and possibilities. Like Gilgamesh and Odysseus, the reader finds that every marvelous voyage leads him back to his own front door. Or, as the modern mythmaker T.S. Eliot puts it,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.