

The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell

Feminist Theology
19(2) 182–193
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permission: sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0966735010384331
fth.sagepub.com


Sarah Nicholson

Abstract

Through the frame of the Sumerian myth of Inanna, this essay explores Joseph Campbell's body of work on the hero's journey and living mythology. Particular focus is placed on examining both the place of woman as hero and the symbol of woman for the (male) hero in Campbell's work. This essay suggests that Campbell's theories present both possibilities and problems from the perspective of feminist analysis for the representation of woman as hero.

Keywords

Inanna, Joseph Campbell, mythology, perennial philosophy, women and myth, woman as hero

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

Trans. from the Sumerian (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 52).

The journey begins with a call: a cry...a whisper...a question...a moan... This is the summons to awaken from our slumber. This is a call that requires a response, a brave stepping out, a leap of faith. For on the other side of this threshold is a door. A door that opens wide onto vast, alive plains, that are, to us, unknown.

Around four thousand years ago temple scribes in Sumer, using the wedged-shaped symbols of cuneiform, created the earliest traces of writing. They began to record their people's sacred texts onto clay tablets. One of their stories was of the death and resurrection of a beautiful goddess, the much revered and powerful Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, who explored the deepest mysteries of embodiment in human form. This narrative is one of the earliest written Mythic tales.

Corresponding author:

Sarah Nicholson

Email: sass.e.nicholson@gmail.com

Despite inhabiting a land described as ‘arid, wind-swept, and unproductive’ (Kramer, 1963: 3), around 5000 BCE the Sumerian people laid the foundations for cultural and agricultural innovations that transformed a fundamentally inhospitable environment into a land of abundance. Over time this land came to be referred to as the Fertile Crescent. Nestled between and around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, this ‘cradle of civilisation’ roughly constitutes what is today the war-torn land of Iraq.

The Sumerian story of Inanna’s descent begins with a call, out of range to the reader, heard only by the goddess. The story thus begins, ‘She opened her ear to the Great Below’. It’s an odd phrase. What does it mean to open one’s ear? I believe it is the process of inquiry; opening both to the question of what is heard, to hearing, and to the nature of the subject of hearing herself. One of the classic koans in Zen Buddhism echoes just this, in asking ‘Who is hearing?’ In this context we might ask, ‘Who is calling and who called?’

For Inanna, her willing answer to the call becomes a deep and arduous journey of relinquishment. The goddess abandons her temples, her powers, all the aspects of her identity and life, to travel into the dark face of the unknown. Passing down through seven gates she enters into *Kur*,¹ the Great Below.

Here the transformation undertaken is painfully direct. Confronting her sister Ereshkigal, Queen of Kur, she is killed and becomes ‘a piece of rotting meat...hung from a hook on the wall’ (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 60). Her journey continues: Ninshubur, the high priestess of Inanna, calls upon the god Enki, Inanna’s father, to rescue her. Deeply concerned for her wellbeing, he forms two tiny creatures from the dirt under his nails. These creatures are able to enter Kur undetected. Once there they gain Ereshkigal’s favour and sprinkle ‘the food’ and ‘the water of life on the corpse’. Thus ‘Inanna arose’ and was able to begin her ascent to the upper world (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: 67).

Joseph Campbell and the Hero’s Journey

In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell interpreted the mythological journey as a symbolic map. He proposed that deeply embedded in this journey, both outward and inward in nature, was an inquiry into humanity and divinity. For Campbell, the hero’s journey, as illustrated by the story of Inanna’s descent, was a symbolic injunction to spiritual experience. At its most sublime, this adventure produced the core realization of the most profound human questions: ‘Who am I?’ ‘What is it to be human?’ ‘From whence am I born?’ ‘What happens when I die?’ These realizations, he insisted, were of central importance to human life.

Campbell drew his picture of the monomythic cycle of the hero from wide-ranging sources which traversed the distance from Grimm’s fairy tales to the Upanishads. His material comes from the wealth of Greek, Roman, Persian, Melanesian, Korean, Celtic and Egyptian myths, from the Bible, from Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu texts, from the Quran, from shamanic Siberian tales, from James Joyce and Shakespeare. He deliberately

1 This term is variously translated from the Sumerian; it remains unfixated.

loosened the boundaries between religious text, sacred recollection, mythology, literature and folklore, as he posed the hero's journey as hermeneutic; in both psychoanalytic and spiritual terms, a journey of the self.

Upon surveying the global dimensions of the mythological tradition, Campbell suggested the existence of two orders of mythology. The first, 'the Village way' emphasized a heritage of orthodoxy and cultural norms. It was the way of the multitude who, choosing 'the less adventurous way of the comparatively unconscious civic and tribal routines' (Campbell, 1949: 23), walked village pathways ruled by obedience, fear, faith and desire (Campbell, 1986: 22). By way of contrast, 'the hero's journey' was the ideal of a life lived in pursuit of realizing one's inborn potential. Campbell's second order of mythology, 'the forest adventure', could not be embarked upon without breaking free from the boundaries of social dogma, authority and tradition. The forest path emphasized the embodiment of the highest creative possibilities of life and was, Campbell wrote, the hero's journey.

The call is the prompt for the hero to rise from the dream-state of village life into active experiential awareness and inquiry. Having passed the threshold of departure, the hero is both beset by tests and ordeals, and assisted by an array of helpers and supernatural forces. Venturing into the heart of the unknown, the hero is swallowed, lost for a time (out of time) in transit in the bardo-like depths of this other land. Here, he or she undergoes a process of intense initiation. Transformed by experience, the hero returns to the community with 'gift-bearing hands'. This gift is the sharing of knowledge gained; creative potential released 'into the body of the world', the means of regenerating society as a whole (Campbell, 1949: 37-40).

Mysticism and Mythic Symbol

While Campbell has been criticized for 'oversimplification and ahistoricism' (Keller, 1986: 54), 'freeze-dried reductionism' and 'logocentric oneness' (Doty, 2000: 146) in his reading of mythology, his proposal of the heroic monomyth does not disregard other meanings embedded in mythology. In fact, he consistently indicates that mythology contains multiple levels of meaning which may include specific local, cultural and historical references. He acknowledges that myths may refer to historical personages or events, and that they are coded with cultural lore, but his central concern is with the *philosophia perennis* of myth; the mystical reading which is of 'neither past nor future but transcendent of time and eternal' (Campbell, 1972: 264). Forming a comparison with Bastian's 'elementary ideas' and Jung's 'archetypes', he suggests that the metaphorical heart of mythology is one (Campbell, 1986: 19). Read properly, he writes, these 'symbolic texts open into the heart of the human condition'; they refer 'to the inward potentials of our species' (Campbell, 1972: 264). On this topic Campbell quotes Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who writes that the true symbol 'does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself' (Merton in Campbell, 1972: 265).

Campbell suggests that the key question: 'Can the ego put itself to death?' is symbolically rendered through initiation at the centre of the journey (Campbell, 1949: 109). The mystical experience closes the gap between our self as subject and the object of the world

as other. It dissolves ego boundaries and finds union with the Divine. Such experience, by its very nature, must strain beyond the limits of language. Thus as a representation of mystical, transpersonal experience the hero's journey must be 'both continuous and discontinuous with language: continuous in that it must be communicated through language, and discontinuous in that it handles material that lies in some way out of the reach of language' (Lauter, 1984: 2). As Hatab describes it, the powerful experiences of mysticism 'at this outer edge of language, beyond the conceptual mind' exist in a state of sublime tension with the necessity of expression (Hatab in Doty, 2000: 76). Unable to be fully expressed through the discourse of the rational, its transmission requires symbolic elaboration through artful means, such as symbol and poetic affect, to bridge the gap. The symbolic language of myth is used to point beyond itself, using metaphoric affect to say and unsay, with the aim of bringing the audience into a direct relationship with, and realization of, the transmitted experience.

The Hero's Journey as Perennial Philosophy

The hero's journey, which appears across cultures and times, is understood as a symbolic expression of an experiential relationship with that which is variously called: the Divine, the Higher Self, God, the Goddess, Allah, Jehovah, Brahman, the Supreme Being, One, Spirit, or the Absolute.² In essence, Campbell distinguishes between the exoteric and the esoteric by reading the multiplicitous manifestations of the journey of the hero (in myth and religion) as the 'many faces' of the one perennial philosophy, its dictum contained in an oft-quoted passage from the Vedas, 'Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names' (Campbell, 1949: viii).

Advocates of the theory of perennial philosophy suggest that 'the core teachings of every major spiritual philosophy are identical, even though the traditions are separated geographically, culturally, and by vast periods of time' (Thackara, 1984: 1). Drawing on the work of sixteenth century theologian Steuch, the seventeenth century German mathematician and philosopher Leibniz was the first to elaborate a philosophy of perennialism. The perennial philosophy was, he suggested, to be found through a philosophical process of analysing ancient and modern religious philosophies such that 'one would draw the gold from the dross, the diamond from its mine, the light from the shadows; and this would be in effect a kind of perennial philosophy' (Leibniz in Loemker, 2003: 459).

The term perennial philosophy 'stands for the notion of a philosophy of philosophies, an enduring set of...insights which is repeated in all variations of thought' (Loemker, 2003: 459). This idea of a common experiential and mystical core within the spiritual tradition was further championed by Aldous Huxley, who in 1946 explained it thus:

2 For consistency I use the term the Absolute in my discussion to refer to the ground of being, but defer to the chosen term of any author in discussion of their work. I concur with Smith's definition of the Absolute as the 'Infinite' that 'both includes and transcends everything else, which everything is (in categorical contrast) finite and relative'. See, Smith H (1987) Is there a perennial philosophy? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 3: 552.

More than twenty-five centuries have passed since that which has been called the Perennial Philosophy was first committed to writing; and in the course of those centuries it has found expression, now partial, now complete, now in this form, now in that, again and again... (It) has made use of the terminology and traditions of every one of the higher religions. But under all this confusion of tongues and myths, of local histories and particularist doctrines, there remains a Highest Common Factor (Huxley in Walsh and Vaughan, 1993: 213).

With its roots in renaissance perennialism, the twentieth century philosophical movement The Traditionalist School, founded by Guenon and including such notables as A.K. Coomaraswamy and Schuon, derived its name from the primordial tradition from which they asserted that all religion arose (Shah-Kazemi, 2007: 41). Their exposition of perennial philosophy (also known as Sanatana Dharma), continues today in the work of a number of scholars, notably the renowned Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Kazlev, 2004; Sedgwick, 2003). The Traditionalist School asserts that the world finds itself today in what Hinduism terms the age of Kali Yuga. Kali Yuga's state of chaos and decline exists in direct opposition to our original state, Satya Yuga. In this a long-past Golden Age humankind existed in perfectly harmonized consubstantiation with their primordial nature (Shah-Kazemi, 2007: 44).

Contemporary American philosopher Ken Wilber, following twentieth century Indian philosopher Aurobindo, fundamentally disagrees. A proponent of evolution, he argues that the egregious flaws of the contemporary world do not represent a devolutionary slide from a previous Golden Age. Far from being anti-spiritual, Wilber presents the contours of modern day humanistic-scientific-rational-secular society as a necessary, intermediate form of evolution (Wilber, 1998: 66, 78). Evolution, for Wilber, is countenanced through a set of tenets that assert evolution to be 'as active in humans as it is in the rest of the Kosmos'³ (Wilber, 1998: 73). He presents modernity's great global movements of liberation—from slaves to workers to women—as part of the evidence for humankind's ongoing spiritual evolution. His position is a rebuttal of what he identifies as modernity's refusal to 'recognise the full spectrum of consciousness' and, at the same time, of romantic traditionalism's refusal to 'recognise any substantial advances made by modernity itself' (Wilber, 1998: 58).

Wilber presents perennial philosophy as the essence distilled from the deep structural similarities of religious belief. He presents the central tenets thus: Spirit or the Absolute exists and is found within all things. Yet most people live in a state of separative duality,⁴

3 Wilber defines the Kosmos as the totality of the physiosphere, biosphere, noosphere and divine domains. See, Wilber, K (1998) *The Eye of Spirit*. Boston, MA and London: Shambhala Publications, 64.

4 Wilber describes this as the state of sin from a Christian perspective: 'Sin...is the self-contraction, the separate-self sense'. See, Wilber K (1991) *Grace and Grit—Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 85. Keller reports that the philosopher Kierkegaard defined sin 'as despair', 'summoned by the failure to be who we are...he goes on to distinguish between specifically 'masculine' and 'feminine' forms of despair. If the masculine sin is 'potentiated defiance'—a refusal to accept the ultimate terms of selfhood—the feminine analogue is 'potentiated weakness'. She goes

unconscious of their intimate union with Spirit. In this state of duality, awareness—dominated by the self-contraction of the individual ego—does not recognize its true identity with the All, or non-duality of being, that is Spirit. But, Wilber's tenets of perennial philosophy continue, there is a pathway out of duality: one must die to the limits of the small self in order to awaken to the supreme identity of self as Spirit. This experience is one of satori, enlightenment, rebirth or resurrection (Wilber, 1991: 81-85).

The Hero as 'Everyman'

In accord with Campbell's definition of the true function of mythology as guiding us towards the spiritual potentials of human life (Campbell, 1949: 31), the vast canons of mythology, metaphysical philosophy and religion can be seen to exist in an intimate relationship of inquiry to a central theological question: 'Who am I?' Yet a careful examination of the central human agent of these disciplines finds that the subject, protagonist, and central individual of each articulation of perennial philosophy is most consistently 'man'. For example, let us listen to the words of Huxley's doctrine: 'It is possible for a man...to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the divine Ground...man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground' (Huxley in Walsh and Vaughan, 1993: 213). Here, I am sure Huxley uses 'man' to imagine this 'him' as a universal every-person, and yet the further we lift his veil, the more strangely clear it becomes that this 'everyman' is no woman.

We might begin, in examining the figure of woman in perennial philosophy, by looking again to the journey of the hero. In early modern books on the hero, heroism is assigned almost exclusively to men (Segal, 2004; see also Carlyle, 1908; Rank, 1909; Raglan, 1936). Carlyle, for example, begins his book on the hero with 'as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the History of the Great Men' (Carlyle in Segal, 2004: 1). Even when theorists deigned to extend the potential prerogative of heroism to woman, their nod would more often than not subsume woman as subtext, a bracketed subspecies of the category Man.

While Campbell suggests that 'the whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women' (Campbell, 1949: 121), in analysing his observations it is starkly obvious that at the journey's 'zenith' or 'central point' the hero is distinctly male (Campbell, 1949: 109). At the heart of initiation, woman as hero is lost (Segal, 2004: 14). It is Woman⁵ who serves as the 'crisis at the nadir' of the male hero's journey (Campbell, 1949: 109). Campbell writes that in mythic symbology Woman represents 'the totality of what can be known for the hero' (Campbell, 1949: 116). Further, the meeting and mystical marriage of the hero with the queen goddess of the world at the central point of the journey 'represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master' (Campbell, 1949: 120).

on 'Kierkegaard perceptively links woman's weakened sense of self to her self-loss in service to others, a form of despair and self-abnegation'. See, Keller C (1986) *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 12.

5 I use 'Woman' (capitalized) to refer to woman as a symbol or concept/definition.

At this point in the journey, the hero meets the goddess (as Woman), and comes to 'know' and unite with 'the feminine' through making love with her: 'She is the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest' (Campbell, 1949: 110-11). In the goddess 'who is incarnate in every woman' (Campbell, 1949: 116), Campbell also recognizes the figure of the hero's mother. The maternal goddess is loving and caring: she is the 'incarnation of the promise of perfection...the comforting, the nourishing, the "good" mother—young and beautiful—who was known to us, and even tasted, in the remotest past' (Campbell, 1949: 111). But the Mother, can also be 'bad'; in that guise she threatens to subsume the hero within her undifferentiated mass.

Analysing Campbell's hero, feminist theorists Pearson and Pope note that while Campbell initially declares that the hero can be of either gender he 'then proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male and to define the female characters as goddesses, temptresses, and earth mothers' (Pearson and Pope, 1981: 4). The depth of the confused gender dynamics of Campbell's heroic outline is deeper than Pearson and Pope's statement might suggest. Campbell's use of gender-inclusive language is conscious and deliberate, and as Segal points out, in illustrating the journey he 'enlists myths of female heroes as often as those of male ones' (Segal, 2004: 14). For example, Campbell discusses Inanna's journey as representative of a journey of initiation and 'spiritual rebirth' (Campbell, 1949: 104). Her story, he writes, is 'the oldest recorded account of the passage through the gates of metamorphosis' (Campbell, 1949: 105). Yet after presenting Inanna's story, he continues to examine the hero's initiation under the title 'Woman as the Temptress', defaulting to the vantage point of the male hero.

Where Woman has been 'the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure' (Campbell, 1949: 116), now she is the manifestation of evil in the embodiment of desire. Campbell quotes Flugel in respect to the existence of 'a very general association on the one hand between the notion of mind, spirit or soul and the idea of the father or of masculinity; and on the other hand between the notion of the body or of matter...and the idea of the mother or of the feminine principle' (Flugel in Campbell, 1949: 113). This 'very general association' between body/matter/woman/mother/the feminine principle, is explored in a heavily Christianized account⁶ of the stories of Saints Bernard, Peter and Anthony and their battles with Woman as the symbol of the 'Queen of sin':

practising his austerities...[he] was troubled by voluptuous hallucinations perpetrated by female devils attracted to his magnetic solitude. Apparitions of this order, with loins of irresistible attraction and breasts bursting to be touched, are known to all the hermit-resorts of history (Campbell, 1949: 125).

Here Woman is the siren song of immanent flesh that calls the saint-hero away from his transcendence of desire and the world-flesh: 'there is experienced a moment of

6 This Christian emphasis is strange for Campbell, whose writing is repeatedly marked by dismissal of elements of Christian faith. Yet he could just as easily have drawn similar quotes on the temptations of female flesh from Buddhist and other religious texts.

revulsion...woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul' (Campbell, 1949: 122).

'The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations' (Campbell, 1949: 116). From goddess to mother, to carnal temptress and onwards, it is the symbol Woman who undergoes metamorphosis for the male hero. She is the hero's mother, the lost connection to his primal beginnings; she is the ground of being. She is 'lure' and 'guide' (Campbell, 1949: 116). She is the beguiling divine that is the core agitation and goal of his journey: that which is to be explored and merged with. She waits for the arrival of the hero, who receives her as 'the mastered of the world' (Campbell, 1949: 120). She is also the revolting snare of the undifferentiated, the primal source, which is to be negotiated, destroyed, and/or transcended. She is desire, she is flesh, she is the earth. She serves as the ultimate illustration of the contours of duality. Where man is self/agent, she is his undifferentiated all/other.

As Campbell proceeds to discuss Woman in terms of the 'picture language of mythology' (Campbell, 1949: 116), it is starkly clear that the hero is meeting Woman: a symbol for the male journeyer. But what, finally, does Campbell have to say of the heroine who comes to initiation?

And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed—whether she will or not. And if she has shunned him, the scales fall from her eyes; if she had sought him, her desire finds its peace (Campbell, 1949: 118).

While there is a similar meeting and union with the God, the difference is keenly felt in the lack of discussion of Man in godly form as a symbol for the female hero. The hero as woman is also confronted, '*whether she will or not*' (Campbell, 1949: 119, italics mine), with the potential of sexual agency being used against her. It is she who will be acted upon, she who will be the subject of male heroic action.⁷

Faithful both to some of the limits of the mythic record and in accord with the gender traditionalism of his time, Campbell does not adequately deal with woman as hero. In an interview on this topic he suggests that the hero's journey appears differently for the two sexes as 'the male body lacks that recall to nature, to the female nature, that there is automatically in the female body' (Campbell, 2004: 147). Campbell also suggested differently gendered roles on the mythic plane: woman as receptive dreamer, man as active warrior.

In his reading of gender, Campbell falls foul of the traditional gender norms of both modern and mythic time. I assert that, in part, gender symbolism in mythology poses an issue similar to that of 'ideas in local "ethnic" inflections' (Campbell, 1986: 21). David Miller, scholar of mythology, writes that mythology has been charged with creating 'repressive and oppressive' archetypes which stereotype 'races, religions, and genders'

7 Reading myth's psychosexual manifestation of woman meeting with the God (Father) might thus involve examining the pattern of violence towards women, sexual or otherwise, that many feminist theorists have traced throughout the corpus of mythology and patriarchal religion.

and metaphysically sanction the status quo (Miller, 1996: 62). Campbell is clear on this. He delineates between the local and ethnic specifics of mythologies and their broader spiritual dimensions:

mythology is a control system, on the one hand framing its community...and, on the other hand...conducting individuals through the ineluctable psychophysiological stages of transformation of a human lifetime...in unbroken accord simultaneously with...the rapture of participation in a manner of being beyond time (Campbell, 1986: 20).

He outlines four primary functions of mythology:⁸ the *sociological* that integrates the individual with the social order, the *psychological* which fosters the process of individuation, the *metaphysical* which elicits and supports 'a sense of awe before the recognition of the numinous' (Campbell, 1964: 519), and finally, the *cosmological* which creates an image of life and the universe in accord with the knowledge of the time⁹ (Campbell, 1964: 519-21). As part of the mythological system of framing, ordering and control (Campbell, 1986: 20-21), the ideas shaping gender images in mythology are limited by recourse to the time and location of their conjuring.

Is woman a hero of myth and life, for Campbell? He answers with a definitive 'Yes'. But if we look at the symbolism the answer is, 'Not really'. At the crux of the journey, Woman, 'recalled to nature', becomes symbolic flesh: sex, desire, generative motherhood. As flesh, Woman loses her agency and it is the male who retains it as well as the ability to act as hero. Woman disappears and is replaced by symbol because she is not fully allowed her subjectivity. Thus it becomes starkly clear why mythological figures of Woman are marked as non-heroic. Woman has been positioned as the purely phylogenetic source material (ripe, passive flesh) that has silently enabled the 'dazzling exploits' of the ontogenic male.

Feminist Critique of the Hero

Tension in the gendered symbolic is certainly not unique to Campbell's work. At root level even the term 'heroine' is problematic. 'Other' to the hero, it can oddly connote a certain weakness and vulnerability as much as it expresses strength. The 'perfect pink-and-white passivity' (Yolen in Ragan, 1936: xvii) of fairytale heroines—sleeping, victims, 'hopelessly alluring in her helplessness' (Keller, 1986: 70), awaiting rescue or return—have seen to this. Almost always defined by her sexual difference, almost always

8 Campbell's functions of mythology are similar to, and yet contrast with, Levi-Strauss' designation of mythological levels or codes. Levi-Strauss proposes the following orders: 'the geographical, the acoustic, the astronomical, the culinary or alimentary, the technoeconomic, the sociological, the cosmological, and the sociopolitical' See, Doty W (2000) *Mythography*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 117. For Campbell's purposes the metaphysical and psychological functions form the core of the hero's journey.

9 Examples such as the debate between fundamentalist Christianity and the scientific arena over the facts of evolution, demonstrate, for example, Christianity's failure to keep the cosmological aspect of their mythology system up to date.

in contrast or relation to the active hero,¹⁰ she ‘represents’ something for him: it is she who waits (Penelope), she who is to be rescued (Andromeda), she who receives (Mary), she who is abducted (Persephone).

So, what is it that defines the hero as a male? Historically the predominant heroic stories of an era can in many ways be seen to present a cultural model of ideal human development (Doty, 2000: 17). The history of the way the heroic has been defined reflects the history of the definition of selfhood: ‘active or passive, conquering or receptive’ (Doty, 2000: 64). In accord with the Western tradition, the hero is ‘he who acts’ (Cavarero, 1997: 2): where action is ‘the clearest illumination of the individual’, ‘heroism is the ‘revelation, the dazzling exploit of the act’...while the hero who does not act is nothing’ (Cavarero, 1997: 2).

Confronting the problem of identifying with either the hero or heroine of myth, Cavarero writes, it is ‘inevitable that a woman will eventually insist on asking: to what extent do Prometheus or Odysseus offer me sensible images of my embodied existence as a woman? Or, to limit myself to the figures of my own sex, to what extent do Penelope’s and Circe’s experiences match my own?’ (Cavarero, 1995: 3). Woman, she writes ‘lacks a mythic figure that can represent her as a female subjectivity capable of taking shape within her own symbolic order’ (Cavarero, 1995: 3). In her exploration of Plato, Classicist Cavarero traces links between the symbolic base which frames gender in both Greek myth and its early philosophy. Historically, the roots of Greek philosophy are embedded in mythology, with works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* being ‘simultaneously philosophical, psychological, poetic, theological, and narrational’ (Grosz, 1990: 147). Grosz suggests that myth and philosophy continue to share closer borders than philosophy might like to imagine. She quotes Michelle le Doueff on this subject, who writes that ‘philosophical discourse...posits itself as philosophical—by distancing itself from the myth, the fable, the poetic, and all that is image-making’ (Le Doueff in Grosz, 1990: 163); yet it is only able to do so by turning a blind eye to its own abundant use of image and metaphor. Setting itself the task of defining the ‘nature’ of human beings, philosophy is, Elizabeth Grosz writes, directly implicated in how the subjectivity of ‘men and women, or masculine and feminine, are defined’ (Grosz, 1990: 148). Posing the same manner of questions and contextualized as part of the same Western canon, philosophy, theology and mythology are jointly implicated by their production of the same poor symbolic gender outcomes for women. In these proximate arenas images of women (as other), the image of the female divine, and the image of woman as hero are closely and intimately entwined; one drifts into another.

In Campbell’s dissection of mythology, woman as hero is lost to the greater symbolic Woman.¹¹ This is not unusual. ‘The feminine’, has been inscribed in religion, philosophy and mythology under a range of related, almost completely fused, guises all of which are directed through the male gaze. Mythology is the foundational axis from which both religious and philosophic thought emerges. Campbell suggests that myth might be

10 This is particularly and primarily so in the western canon of mythology and religious representation.

11 To his credit, Campbell’s door was always purposefully left open to change, he was insistent upon the necessity of creating new ‘living’ mythological models.

defined, 'from the point of view of any orthodoxy...as "other people's religion"' and so too, he writes, the strictures of theistic religious facticity might be defined as 'misunderstood mythology' (Campbell, 1986: 55). With Campbell, I argue that one of the functions of mythology has been as carrier of the earliest expressions of spiritual thought. This is, for example, illustrated by the Sumerian mythic motifs which are carried through into the books of the Old and New Testament.

Thus, just as the hero's journey in mythology can be understood to represent the central tenets of perennial philosophy (as outlined by Wilber), it can also be argued that the core pattern of heroism as 'repeated in the various disciplines that deal with human experience—anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, literature' (Pearson and Pope, 1981: 3), might constitute a path of transpersonal development. While on the divine horizon there are distinct archetypes of the Self, such as Buddha and Christ, for men, for women the mirror of the divine is not so clear.

Campbell asked, and answered, the question of what 'living myth' might look like in contemporary terms. He says, 'It is—and will forever be, as long as our human race exists—the old, everlasting, perennial mythology, in its "subjective sense," poetically renewed in terms neither of a remembered past nor of a projected future, but of now: addressed...to the waking of individuals in the knowledge of themselves' (Campbell, 1972: 275). For women seeking symbolic representation of themselves as hero, Campbell insistence that mythology must 'live', renewed in each age, provides hope. As illustrated by Inanna's journey, strong mythic examples of woman do exist, and Campbell's theory leaves the interpretation of mythology open to the sort of process necessary to adequately unravel and rebuild these mythic images of Woman, and her journey of inquiry into humanity and divinity, as living myth.

References

- Campbell J (1949, 1993 rev ed) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press.
- Campbell J (1962, 1988 rev ed) 'Oriental Mythology' *The Masks of God*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Campbell J (1964, 1991 rev ed) 'Occidental Mythology' *Masks of God*. New York: Penguin Arkana.
- Campbell J (1972, 1988 rev ed) *Myths to Live By*. Toronto: Bantam Books.
- Campbell J (1986) *Inner Reaches of Outer Space*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Carlyle T (1908) *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. London: Cassell.
- Cavarero A (1995) *In Spite of Plato*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cavarero A (1997) *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge.
- Doty W (2000) *Mythography*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press.
- Grosz E (1990) Philosophy. In: Gunew S (ed.) *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. New York: Routledge.
- Kazlev MA (2004) 'Traditionalism' *transformation-evolution-metamorphosis*, 22 July, 2005, <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Religion/Traditionalism.html>
- Keller C (1986) *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kramer SN (1963) *The Sumerians. Their History, Culture and Character*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kudler D (eds) (2004) *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

- Lauter E (1984) *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Arts by Twentieth Century Women*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Loemker LE (2003) 'Perennial Philosophy', *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library.
- Miller DL (1996) The fire is in the mind. In: Young J (ed.) *Saga: Best New Writing on Mythology*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press.
- Pearson C, Pope K (1981) *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. New York: Bowker.
- Perera SB (1981) *Descent to the Goddess*. Toronto: Inner City Books.
- Ragan K (1998) *Fearless Girls*. Sydney: Bantam Books.
- Raglan Lord F (1936, 1949 rev. ed) *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*. London: Watts.
- Rank O (1909, 2004 rev ed) *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Segal RA (2004) *Why Are Mythic Heroes Male?* Lancaster: Lancaster University.
- Sedgwick M (2003) Western sufism and traditionalism. In: Buchardt M, Böwadt P (eds) *Old New Religiousness: The West's Forgotten Cultural Heritage*. Copenhagen: Anis, 139-51.
- Shah-Kazemi R (2007) Tradition as spiritual function: a perennialist perspective. *Vincit Omnia Veritas* 1: 41-50.
- Smith H (1987) Is there a perennial philosophy? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 3: 553-66.
- Thackara WTS (1984) 'The Perennial Philosophy', *Sunrise Magazine*. Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press.
- Walsh RN, Vaughan F (1993) *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*. Los Angeles, CA: JP Tarcher/Perigee.
- Wilber K (1991) *Grace and Grit—Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.
- Wilber K (1998) *The Eye of Spirit*. Boston, MA and London: Shambhala Publications.
- Wolkstein D, Kramer SN (1983) *Innana: Queen of Heaven and Earth*. New York: Harper and Row.