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## **El Cid and the Hero's Journey**

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In spite of the immense diversity of human culture and custom, there exists a common sense of longing and loss seemingly as old as civilization itself. Each human being must abandon the security and tranquility of the amniotic paradise and venture forth into a cold and brutal world. Sigmund Freud recognized the "castration" trauma inherent in the process of birth as an original source of anxiety and neurosis in the human psyche (Levitas 114). Many have equated this painful separation from the womb as symbolic of the larger and more painful separation from our cosmic origins, or God. This is reflected in the story of Genesis, where man, exiled from Eden, must wander the savage world, naked and hungry, carrying with him forever the memory of his abandoned perfection. As Jorge Luis Borges says in "Adam Cast Forth":

Already it's imprecise  
In my memory, the clear Paradise,  
But I know it exists, in flower and profusion,

Although not for me. My punishment for life  
Is the stubborn earth with the incestuous strife  
Of Cains and Abels and their brood; I await no pardon.

Yet in the cycles of the season, the rhythm of the seas, and the infinite dance of day and night, the human Orphan observes the cyclical nature of time and hopes one day to return to a lost Paradise.

The universality of the human experience results in surprisingly similar images and themes throughout the myths that define us. As Joseph Campbell says in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse; now and again crack the hard nutshell of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will

always be the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told (3).

The antagonist of myth is of course the Hero. The Hero is created in the image of us all. He suffers the same separation we have suffered, overcomes the same afflictions and deprivations against which we struggle, and receives the great rewards we hope one day to receive. According to Campbell, the Hero's journey can be described as such:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the myth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won. The hero comes back from his adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (30).

This formula can be applied to such diverse myths as Homer's *Odyssey*, Goethe's *Faust*, and the medieval texts *Beowulf* and *Tristan and Isolde*. It can also be applied to the religious traditions of the life and resurrection of Jesus and the tribulations of Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha. The journey of separation-initiation-return is so prevalent that it fits perfectly in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and survives to this day in such diverse heroes as Lewis Carroll's Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter. Don Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar encountered the same cycle of separation-initiation-return in the beautiful medieval Spanish epic *Poem of the Cid*.

Don Rodrigo, the Cid, is forced to abandon his home due to the unjust ire of the king Don Alfonso. He endures the fire of many battles with the Moors and returns, without having lost faith or betrayed his loyalty, to receive the praise and gratitude of the king who banished him. In this way the Cid, like Odysseus, Tristan, Beowulf, Dr. Faustus, and Roland, fulfill the cosmic destiny of us all and return to their divine or earthly origins.

Joseph Campbell calls the first stage of the hero's journey "the call to adventure:"

"The 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." (58)

The "call to adventure" of the Cid is his unjust exile. Like Odysseus in the wrathful hands of Poseidon, or Job, whose only sin was his exemplary life, the Cid is exiled by the king and must abandon his wife, his children, his lands, the very life he has known; the Cid answers the call valiantly:

"They made ready for the journey and slackened their reins. As they left Vivar a crow flew on the right, and as they entered Burgos they saw it on the left. The Cid shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head: 'Good cheer, Alvar Fáñez, for we are banished from this land.'" (23)

Once the hero answers the call and begins his journey, he is often gifted with supernatural aid. According to Campbell:

For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure who provides the hero with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass. What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny. It is a reassurance—a promise that the peace of Paradise, which was first known within the mother womb, is not to be lost (69).

For the Cid this reassurance comes in the form of the angel Gabriel:

After having his supper, the Cid lay down and fell into a deep and pleasant sleep. The angel Gabriel came to him in a dream and said: 'Ride out good Cid Campeador, for no man ever set forth at so fortunate a moment. All your life you will meet with success.' When the Cid woke he made the sign of the cross on his forehead and lips. He crossed himself and commended himself to God, greatly pleased with his dream (43).

Just as Odysseus confronted strange creatures and deceitful singers, as Tristan and Isolde endured isolation in the forest of Morois, just as Beowulf had to overthrow Grendel in the golden hall of Herot then descend to the bottom of a teeming lake to slay Grendel's mother, so too the Cid must wander in his own exile and fight in his own battles. The Cid fights for his king, for Spain and for Christianity in spite of his ill-usage at the hands of the king: "A favor, my lord Alfonso, in God's name! The warrior Cid makes his most profound obeisance to his excellent lord; he begs you to grant it, as you hope for God's protection. You banished him and he is still in disgrace, but he continues doing mighty deeds in a strange land."

And like long-suffering Job from the Bible, the Cid remains loyal to his lord. In the Biblical story, after having endured unspeakable punishment and woe Job stoically says:

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly (343).

Like Job, the Cid never loses his faith nor abandons his loyalty. Also like Job, he is rewarded for his unshakeable faith. After passing through trials by fire, the hero finally returns to claim his salvation. Campbell calls this stage "atonement with the father." The Cid receives his atonement when he is pardoned by King Don Alfonso:

He knelt down on his hands and knees and with his teeth he pulled up a mouthful of grass. With tears of joy streaming from his eyes he showed in this way his complete submission to his liege lord. Alfonso, however, was distressed at this display of humility, and he said: 'Stand up Cid Campeador, and kiss my hands but not my feet. You will have no pardon from me unless you do so.' But the Cid remained on his knees and said: 'I beg a favor of you, my liege lord, that as I kneel here you grant me your pardon in the hearing of all this assembled company.' The King replied: 'I shall do so with all my heart. Here and now I pardon you and restore you to my favor and welcome your return to my kingdom.' The Cid answered: 'I receive your pardon with gratitude, my lord Alfonso. For it I thank God, then you and these my vassals who stand here with me.' Still on his knees, the Cid kissed the King's hands, and then, rising to his feet, he kissed him on the mouth. The whole assembly rejoiced at this (129).

But something has happened to the hero. He realizes that courage, strength were with him all along. As Campbell says:

The godly powers that have been sought and won are revealed to have been in the heart of the hero all the time. Ideally, the invested one has been divested of his mere humanity and is representative of an impersonal cosmic force. He is the twice-born: he has become himself the father (39, 136).

At this point the Cid becomes more than a man. He attains the status of the hero. He has given Spain victory over the Moors. And as the Cid has become the father, it is now his right to see that his sons-in-law, the Infantes of Carrion, are punished for transgressions against his daughters.

At the beginning of the third Cantar, the lion is a symbol of the Cid himself. The cowardice of the Infantes when confronted with the lion (the Cid) proves that they were not worthy of association with the great Warrior. At the end of the poem, the Infantes are disgraced and the daughters of the Cid have become queens:

Today the Kings of Spain are related to him and all gain lustre from the fame of the fortunate Campeador. He passed from this life on the day of Pentecost. May Christ pardon him! (215).

The hero's journey is now ended. He has arrived at his point of departure. He has passed, as we all may, from the sweetness of paradise to the flames of hell and back again. His journey reminds us of something forgotten, of something almost remembered.

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