

The Fish Out of Water Myth in Popular Culture and Political Discourse

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Abstract

This essay argues that a Fish Out of Water myth exists in popular culture and political discourse. This myth is manifested in any rhetorical space wherein the rhetor aims to emphasize a geographic, physiological, and/or ideological sense of displacement. A functional typology of this variation on the hero monomyth is advanced, bridging generic and mythic critical orientations. It includes the Unwitting Hero, the Ironic Hero, and the Conquering Hero. Finally, this essay delineates possible applications of this myth to synchronically examine popular culture and political discourse. In examining the applications of the myth to political discourse, the essay briefly addresses the presidential campaign rhetoric of Barack Obama, Sarah Palin, and Donald Trump, arguing that each candidate used the Fish Out of Water myth in their speeches to construct some part of their political personas.

Keywords: Myth, Politics, Popular Culture, Film, Hero

While mythic discourse is common to many texts and discourses, including literary (Levi-Strauss, 1963), popular culture (Rushing & Frenz, 1995), and political (Flood, 2002), I argue in this essay that there exists a Fish Out of Water myth that permeates each of these texts. An analysis of its appearance in popular cinema will be useful here. For example, in the film *Dave*, a man is plucked, virtually against his will, from his relatively anonymous life to replace the ailing (and reductively evil) president of the United States. He unwittingly becomes a hero, despite his complete lack of political experience or training in that capacity, and yet he succeeds due to his endearing personality and sincerity. In *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*, a young teenage woman is forced to act like the mother of her siblings and provide for the family due to the unexpected circumstances referenced in the title of the film. She, like *Dave*, survives (and even thrives) in her new situation, gaining

much corporate prestige and power. Similar stories in literature—*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, for example—use similar plotlines for the purposes of satirizing the ineptitude of elites—or essentially uncovering a kakistocracy. In short, this subcategory of the myth creates a reluctant (or unwitting) hero by manipulating the formulaic function of the 'initiation' rite of passage; rather than descending into the unknown (Campbell, 2008, p. 84), as does the traditional mythic hero, *The Unwitting Hero ascends into the light*.

This myth is a variation of the traditional hero monomyth, within which the protagonist epitomizes the three requisite "rites of passage" of mythology: separation, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2008, p. 23). The Fish Out of Water myth also presents a locus of meaning wherein we may discover elements that subvert the function of the traditional hero myth. This

monomyth, as articulated by Campbell (2008) and Levi-Strauss (1963) in their seminal monographs, is comprised of constitutive units that systematically construct a cogent narrative. While Levi-Strauss asserted that these units, arranged as bundles of meaning, constitute the structure of myths traversing cultures, Campbell wrote that these parts are constructed together to comprise a cultural and cosmic synthesis that may help cultures better understand themselves. In this essay, I will explore elements from both these psychoanalytic and structural approaches to mythic discourse. In so doing, I hope to suggest of the existence of a variation of this monomythic structure.

The Fish Out of Water myth is manifested in any rhetorical space wherein the rhetor aims to emphasize a geographic, physiological, and/or ideological sense of displacement. The space created by this discourse allows the individual to subvert hierarchical rules and achieve success in spite of this transgression. This element of being displaced is convenient because it provides a space within which the protagonist may experience mythic conflict or the first rite of passage, separation. Often, this rite will be portrayed in a subversive manner that shows the protagonist as ostensibly incapable of fitting into the new hierarchy, but being equipped, regardless, with the right tools to succeed. Similar to the monomyth, the protagonist must appear as reluctant to depart from his or her former life or space, but still be determined to fight through it. The protagonist in this myth may also, in more sensational or dramatized incarnations, accidentally stumble into success, or indeed, perfection. In delineating and explicating these components of the myth, I will first explore the origins of the myth, advance a tentative typology based upon its manifestations in popular culture and public discourse, using both generic and mythic criticism and finally suggest its possible function in political discourse.

Origins of the Myth

The phrase has been considered a cliché since the mid nineteenth century, but has been in existence much longer (Kirkpatrick, 1996). Some sources claim that the idea of the myth originated with Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (Martin, 1996), while others attribute it to the Greeks around 373 CE, and used again in the 14th century (Lee, 2005). It is possible that the metaphorical name of the myth advanced in this essay gained popularity in Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 fable *The Little Mermaid*. In this tale, a young mermaid yearns to depart from her surroundings and become human in order to obtain a soul that can live on eternally. In her subsequent journey from the ocean into

the human world, she suffers from the pain of not having a tongue with which to speak, as well as the anxiety of the ominous possibility of losing her life, as stated by an evil sea witch. Incidentally, applying Levi-Strauss's (1963) mythic framework to this tale, we see that the sea witch is the trickster in the story: the mediator between the little mermaid's old life and new.

The mermaid is likewise condemned to constant physical pain as she journeys through the human world: as she walks on her new legs, "every step she took felt as if she were treading on pointed needles and sharp knives...but she bore it gladly" (Andersen, 2004, p. 29). Wrenched from her own world, she experiences pain and discomfort but still endures it in pursuit of higher ideals: she wishes to live eternally and be loved by a human man. Though this fable and the Disney film adaptation have been critiqued for their misogynistic elements (Trites, 1991), Andersen's fable still contains dimensions that are essential to human motivation; chief among these is a desire to endure a difficult situation in pursuit of a higher ideal. It is also notable that this fairytale connotes the departure from one superior world to an inferior (but much more desirable) world—the little mermaid descends from water deities and a prolonged life to an inferior life of human mortality (as suggested in Easterlin, 2001). Conversely, this tale is also deeply mythical by way of functioning as an expiatory Christian allegory; as the mermaid suffers pain in this new world, she ultimately sacrifices her life for the good of those above the water.

Subcategories and Appearances of the Myth in Popular Cinema

In other popular films, this myth has evolved in one important direction: the protagonist is wrenched from his or her world and reluctantly endures the separation from it. The prospect of departing one's world is not attractive to the hero, though it may either have been initially and then changes, or vice versa. Thus, though the individual does not necessarily wish to make the journey, he or she is destined to for a more noble purpose. This notion necessarily clashes from other traditional heroic myths in which the protagonist bravely departs his or her world to heroically conquer an evil entity.

Moreover, the hero in this version of the myth, whom we shall call the Unwitting Hero, succeeds irrespective of the rules of the established hierarchies. Using the Burkean (1970) framework to understand this phenomenon, the Unwitting Hero experiences the requisite guilt of not fulfilling the requirements of the established status quo, but is curiously viewed as endearing

or even erudite despite this failing. This variation of the myth occurs mostly in films within the comedy genre.

This variation of the myth is also manifest in superhero films. Though the audience views superheroes in these films as noble and virtuous beings, they may sometimes forget that the hero was thrust (usually unwillingly) into the role. The superhero Batman does not have super powers but chooses to take the mythic role because of his unusually violent childhood and his possession of an inordinate amount of money. The popular *Twilight* franchise also features the unwitting heroes in the role of Edward Cullen and his vampire family. His vampire sister, for instance, states in the popular book *New Moon* her objection to her role as benevolent vampire: “[T]his is not the life I would have chosen for myself” (Meyer, 2006, p. 534). The rogue hero Jack Bauer experiences the same reluctance to save the world in the TV series *24*. Still, these heroes choose to adapt to their unsavory circumstances by pursuing the noble goals of peace and justice.

The hero in this myth may also assume the functions of Christian allegory. Like the little mermaid protagonist, the archetypal hero Superman is a godlike being who disguises himself as an ordinary man. Neo, in *The Matrix*, is a Messianic character who uses his powers to defeat evil. Finally, Christian symbolism is explicitly invoked in the myth of Spiderman. In the popular film *Spiderman 2*, the hero rescues a train of innocent passengers, during which his side is pierced. In the poignant scene following the carnage, his unmoving body is passed over the heads of the grateful passengers while assuming the crucifixion pose.

The second subcategory of the Fish Out of Water myth is The Ironic Hero. Despite this hero’s general discomfort with experiencing displacement, his or her past experience—previously deemed useless or trivial by the audience—comes to serve his or her best interest in the new hierarchy. For instance, in the critically acclaimed film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the protagonist is a young and poor Indian boy who wins big money on his country’s version of *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire*. While he is certainly out of place on the show, the audience learns that his unique and often horrible past experiences have given him the necessary tools to succeed in his new environment. Similar, though less explicit, depictions of The Ironic Hero exist in other films like *About A Boy*, *Groundhog Day*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Big*, *17 Again*, and *Opportunity Knocks*.

The third and final subcategory we will discuss is The Conquering Hero. This hero, generally

portrayed in either historic or futuristic films, reluctantly pursues peaceful goals in a hostile environment and ultimately endorses an ideology of colonialism. Though this hero is ostensibly the closest to resembling the hero monomyth, the Conquering Hero is thrust into his or her situation either as a result of personal vendetta or as a robust attempt at basic survival. In popular sci-fi films like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, the heroes explore new uncertain spaces and ultimately anthropomorphize (and racialize) the Other. Conversely, these narratives emphasize difference; they may mock alien characters because of their ignorance about the hierarchical structure of “civilized” society (see *3rd Rock from the Sun*, *Alf*, and *ET*), or portray them as terrifying and vicious (see *War of the Worlds*, *V*, and *Independence Day*). An ambivalence toward the Other may also pervade films about The Conquering Hero, as evidenced by films like *Gremlins* where the alien characters are portrayed both as cute and vicious, and seductive yet dangerous (Brummett, 1991). In sum, the defining characteristic of this subcategory is the emphasis of difference.

Taken together, these working subcategories of the Fish Out of Water myth give us an idea of how its mythic discourse may be “ideologically marked” (Flood, 2002, p. 44). Though the colonialist ideology clearly pervades many of the variations of these mythic texts, others may certainly be more subtle. In the following section, I will discuss other potential ideologies within discourses where this myth appears.

Cultural and Ideological Functions of the Fish Out of Water Myth

Roughly stated, this mythic discourse serves a subversive ideological function. In the initiation stage of Campbell’s (2008) monomyth, the hero descends into the unknown and often “submit[s] somehow to purgation and surrender[s]” (p. 87). In the initiation stage of the Fish Out of Water Myth, the hero ascends into a sublime and ephemeral existence, not equipped with the hierarchical tools to succeed, and yet does so due to his or her own unique tools; his or her incompetence or difference is the very means of helping him or her fulfill these expectations. However, the fact that the hero metaphorically stumbles out of obscurity and into a synoptic space carries with it some cultural implications. First, it promotes a kakistocratic ideology; it questions the status quo of life in a meritocratic society by promoting an individual’s transcendence from banality to sublimity simply by virtue of his or her difference from the status quo, a hierarchy governed by ineptitude. This difference is the fruition of the hero’s refusal to learn (or accidental ascent over) the established hierarchy. Therefore, the myth challenges the

monomythic notion that an individual must work to succeed. However, when the existence of difference becomes the primary factor in the structural formation of a hierarchy, there runs a risk that an overarching heterogeneity may induce a destabilization of that hierarchy thus weakening its totality (Hall, 1998).

Finally, the myth also challenges the human impulse for transcending chaos and disorder to achieve order and perfection (Burke, 1970). Within the present mythological discourse, it is precisely the guilt of the individual of not being able to live up to the hierarchy that allows him or her to succeed and even thrive, without the requisite expiatory cleansing that is required first. Further, Burke's notion of guilt and redemption is highly dependent upon the unifying concept of an individual's identification with the rest of the human race; because humans all experience failures, foibles, and imperfections, they are linked together in solidarity. In contrast, the Fish Out of Water myth detracts from the essential value of individual experience. Rather, it turns the idea of human experience into a burlesque parody; while most humans repeatedly fail and thus earn experience of invaluable worth, the success of the individual in the Fish Out of Water myth accidentally and effortlessly draws upon their repertoire of trivial (or incomplete) experience to succeed.

An Application of the Myth to Political Discourse

As a tentative case study to apply this myth to political discourse, I will briefly examine the discourse of the campaigns of three candidates who fashioned themselves as political equivalents of the "fish out of water" myth: former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, former US President Barack Obama, and former US President Donald Trump.

In Palin's campaign as running mate to John McCain, much of her campaign rhetoric revolved around being a Fish Out of Water. She repeatedly utilized ethos appeals by evoking images of tough "hockey moms" who were outsiders from the Washington elite. Consider this passage from her 2008 Republican Vice Presidential nomination acceptance speech:

I'm not a member of the permanent political establishment. And I've learned quickly, these last few days, that if you're not a member in good standing of the Washington elite, then some in the media consider a candidate unqualified for that reason alone [but] I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion. I'm going to

Washington to serve the people of this great country. Americans expect us to go to Washington for the right reason, and not just to mingle with the right people...The right reason is to challenge the status quo, to serve the common good, and to leave this nation better than we found it. No one expects us all to agree on everything. But we are expected to govern with integrity, and good will, and clear convictions, and a servant's heart (Palin, 2008).

In this speech, Palin positioned herself in the role of the Unwitting Hero. She articulated that she had no interest in abiding by the hierarchical rules of the nation's capitol. Rather, she must go there, not necessarily because she wanted to, but because she needed to adhere to the higher ideal of serving America's best interest. Elsewhere, she continued to emphasize her status as a commoner: "I was just your average hockey mom, and signed up for the PTA. I love those hockey moms. You know they say the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull: lipstick" (Palin, 2008). As evidenced, Palin emphasized her difference throughout her speeches as key to her success. Underscoring its ubiquity in the McCain-Palin campaign, the myth of the Fish Out of Water was referenced repeatedly every time the word "maverick" was uttered.

Likewise, the myth permeated the discourse of the Obama campaign, that of his supporters, and even more frequently, that of his detractors. It was widely referenced in the public discourse of 2008 that Palin and Obama both had little executive experience. However, more salient to Obama's campaign was his declaration of difference to the American people. Symbolically, his slogan "Change We Can Believe In" fulfilled this function, but more overt was his racial difference from the other candidates. The following statement from his announcement for his candidacy for the presidency reveals his outsider status and his desire to fulfill his concept of a higher purpose:

You...came here because you believe in what this country can be...[I] recognize that there is a certain presumptuousness in this, a certain audacity, to this announcement [of my candidacy]. I know that I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I've been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change (Obama, 2007).

Thus, Obama positioned himself as a Fish Out of Water who knew the "audacity" of his venture given the limitations of his experience. However, like Palin, he later explained that his difference

would lead to his success. It was this difference that detractors of both candidates capitalized upon during the campaigns, but also this difference that made the candidates attractive to many of their supporters. Crucially, Obama also added to his outsider status the imperative that the American people could help keep him in check: "This campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us. It must be about what we can do together...It will take your time, your energy, and your advice to push us forward when we're doing right and let us know when we're not" (Obama, 2007). In short, Obama—as a Fish Out of Water—acknowledges his difference and accepts course correction if his outsider status becomes a liability in the minds of the people.

Speaking of capitalizing on difference, Donald Trump was one of the primary critics of Obama, leading the "birther" cause in 2011 that questioned Obama's status as an American citizen (Serwer, 2020). Yet Trump ultimately wielded difference in another way for his own benefit when he eventually became the Republican candidate for the president several years later.

As he campaigned for the office of US President, Donald Trump repeatedly focused on his difference from other candidates, framing Washington politicians as insiders who were corrupted by their very participation in politics. Amplifying his outsider status as a businessman and entertainer rather than a career politician, Trump effectively painted himself as a Fish Out of Water. Frequently making calls to "drain the swamp" of ostensible Washington corruption (Dawsey et al., 2020), Trump continued to use the potent myth to galvanize his supporters, even after he had assumed the office. In his first speech to a joint session of congress as president, for example, Trump reiterated his pledge to "drain the swamp of government corruption," drawing on his outsider status to accomplish hyperbolic objectives: "Everything that is broken in our country can be fixed. Every problem can be solved. And every hurting family can find healing and hope" (Trump, 2017b). Indeed, Trump framed himself as the Conquering Hero throughout his campaign and presidency by using the language of populism. In his inaugural address, he said: "Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning because today...we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people...this moment is your moment. It belongs to you" (Trump, 2017a). In his 2015 presidential announcement address, he said:

Well, you need somebody, because politicians are all talk, no action. Nothing's going to get done. They will not bring us—believe me—to the

promised land...I've watched the politicians. I've dealt with them all my life...They will never make America great again...Our country needs a truly great leader, and we need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal* (Trump, 2015).

In the early days of his campaign, Trump would often speak about his ability to make deals, earned from his years as a businessman. But the Fish Out of Water myth began to take backseat to a more populist type of discourse when Trump would focus on amplifying the ostensible failures of the Obama administration more than articulating his own virtues as an outsider. In these types of speeches, Trump used populism to galvanize the people, drawing particularly on Manichean language, or a discourse "that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite" (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1042). In short, the Conquering Hero and its negative framing of The Other occurs in popular culture and continues to exist in political discourse.

In conclusion, the Fish Out of Water myth may both be resistant or oppressive (i.e., the Conquering Hero) when the hero circumvents the hierarchical structure to achieve success. It decentralizes the essential role of learned experience in discourse, thus enacting the ascent of the mythic hero from obscurity into the light. At the same time, it celebrates and amplifies the outsider status of the individual. In the brief discussion of the myth's role in political discourse in this essay, this ascent is dependent upon the difference of the individual from the dominant ideological structure. While the Fish Out of Water may be considered a virtue, in other words, it may also be the cause of division when it is deployed in political discourse.

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