

A Study of Hero Archetype in Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*.

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Abstract

This paper studies the hero archetype in the collection *The Book of Nightmares*. Kinnell's poems can be studied into hero archetypes which comprise of three stages. They are separation or departure, trials and victories of initiation, and return and reintegration with society. It studies the hero's journey to face several circumstances and later returns to the community.

Keyword: Meaning of archetypes, hero archetype, separation or departure, trials and victories, and return and reintegration with society.

INTRODUCTION

Galway Kinnell was born to Irish and Scottish immigrants on Feb 1, 1927, in Providence, Rhode Island, and rose in the nearby town of Pawtucket. During his childhood, Kinnell was introverted. He has no interest in school and spends much of his childhood wandering through the nearby Seekonk Woods. A copy of Francis Turner Palgrave *Golden Treasury*, published in 1861, reveals him to the hypnotic poems of Edgar Allan Poe. It makes his interest in poetry and literature. Later, at the age of twelve, Kinnell starts his writing career.

He has eleven collections of poetry; *First Poems* (1946-1954), *What a Kingdom It Was* (1960), *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* (1964), *Body Rags* (1968), *The Book of Nightmares* (1971), *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words* (1980), *The Past* (1985), *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* (1990), *Imperfect Thirst* (1994), *Strong Is Your Hold* (2006), and *Last Poems* (2012-2014). His complete poems contain two hundred fifty-seven.

Besides poetry, Kinnell has penned one novel *Black Light* (1966), and one children's book, *How Alligator Missed the Breakfast* (1982). He also wrote essays like "The Poetics of Physical World" (1969), "Thoughts Occasioned by the Most Significant of Human Events" (1982), "The Fundamental Project of Technology" (1983), and "Remarks on Accepting the American Book Award (1984) and edited "The Essential Whitman" (1987).

Kinnell has won several prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for his *Selected Poems*, Shelley Prize from the Poetry Society of America, the Medal Merit from the Institute of Arts and Letters, the American Book Award, and the State Poet of Vermont. Kinnell's poems can be explored into several ideas. Among these, the hero archetype is one of the important topics to study in Kinnell's poetry.

MEANING OF ARCHETYPES

The concept of archetypes was first proposed by Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Archetype

is a very typical example or an original form which something is developed or made. In literary criticism, those images, figures, character types, settings, and story patterns are universally shared by people across cultures. Therefore, in Jungian theory it means a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest human ancestors and supposed to be present in the collective unconscious. Like Jung, Joseph Campbell in his famous book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* also studies archetypes and captures a series of stages to the hero's journey that characterize his journey. Therefore, in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell explores the eight types of characters in the hero's journey. These are hero, mentor, ally, herald, trickster, shape shifter, guardian, and shadow. Among these archetypes, hero archetype are one of the most important archetypes and thus, this paper analyse the journey of the Kinnell's hero for the better understanding of the hero's personality to the readers

HERO ARCHETYPE

The hero archetype is a motif based on overcoming obstacles and achieving certain goals. It is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the conscious. At the simplest, a hero is a person who can go beyond his personal limitation as well as the limitations imposed upon him by his culture. According to Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, is "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 monomyth." (23) The monomyth or the hero's journey is the category of tales involving a hero who goes

on an adventure and encounters several circumstances and finally achieves victory and comes home changed or transformed. Hence, *The Book of Nightmares* is a collection of poetry that offers its readers the possibility to study the hero's archetypal journey: the quest. Within this archetype, there are three stages: Separation or Departure, Trials and Victories of Initiation, and Return and Reintegration with Society.

SEPARATION OR DEPARTURE

Separation or departure is the first stage of the hero archetype. In this stage, the hero or protagonist lives in the ordinary world and receives a call to go on adventure. The hero is reluctant to go but is helped by a mentor archetype. In his book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell affirms that the "Typical circumstances of the call are the dark forest, the great tree, the babbling stream, and the loathly, underestimated appearance of the carrier of the power of destiny" (43). Therefore, all these are found in Kinnell's "Under the Maud Moon," "The Shoes of Wandering," "Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata," "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight," "The Call Across the Valley of Not-Knowing," "The Path Among the Stones," and "Lastness" respectively. In the poem "Under the Maud Moon," the quester encounters the old and dark forest:

On the path

by this wet site

of old fires —

black ashes, black stones, (1-4)

The above reference describes the persona's journey where he encountered the path with the wet site of old fires, black ashes, and black stones. He encounters difficulties and failed to get comfort but

still continues his journey in order to seek the knowledge which he longs for.

However, it is then in “The Shoes of Wandering” that the persona encounters the tramp shoes, which provides the quester knowledge to cross the first threshold as the path opens completely and a road witnessed by trees that burn “a last time” (68). It gives an allusion to the *Bible* burning trees that bearer of a truth that opens his way to “the road” (68) of knowledge but “the road trembles as it starts across swamped streaked with shined water” (70). However, this “water” will be accompanied by “a lethe- / wind of chill air” (70) that will stroke the quester “all over his body” (72), trying to make him cast his memories to oblivion as he crosses his own Hades. The meaning of Hade is the Greek god of the underworld and the ruler of death.

The poem “Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata” discusses the last stage of the separation. The quester receives two letters from Virginia that take him to different places, from a church to Virginia’s room, the countryside, a kitchen, and a riverbank. At this point, the quest move towards the stage of the “trials and initiation.”

TRIALS AND VICTORIES OF INITIATION

Gradually, the hero faced a series of challenges that would comprise the major weight of the journey and one could trace it from the poem “Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata.” Some of these three challenges are mentioning here. The first task is when the quester hears the Church’s bells resonating, announcing a new day’s beginning. However, it may also signal death as they toll. The quester is still astray and he is looking for guidance

in this uncertain journey in which life and death are part of one continuum. Furthermore, the persona experience a transformative experience as the chime has changed into the chime. In this transformation, eternal is represented as the metaphor of the temple, and bells are contrasted with the chime, a physical reality that gives room to “the maggots / inhabiting beds old men have died in / to crawl out” (27).

Subsequently, from this image of the city and the metamorphosis of the “sacring bell,” (7) the hero seems to be taken big steps from one place to another, wandering the path; and the first site to visit is Virginia’s room where she found in fear. She seems to possess a supernatural being that forces her to draw symbolic elements of wholeness and infinity. Virginia cannot accept that what pushes outwards from the inside is part of her nature. Perhaps, this is what horrifies her, not accepting her shadow to attain herself. However, it makes the quester understand that the horror emerges from understanding that in a road of trials, the persona must recognize that he and his opposite are not of different species but one flesh.

The poem “Little Sleep’s – Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” reveals the last trials, the quester reflects on his old memory with his daughter in her room. It is when he recalls his visit to her room when she screams waking from a nightmare, and the quester “sleepwalks into her room and picks her up” (3) to voice what he believes she thinks:

you cling to me
hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think
you think
I will never die. (4-8)

As a child, the quester daughter does not understand the meaning of life and death. But the quester knows and affirms that his embrace has been made his daughter feel safe and stronger. Therefore, the quester understands that the presence of someone can give comfort.

Human should understand that our life is temporary. One can die at any moment, at any age, and in any place. In his daughter's eyes, the quester gaze at his father's life, and his daughter's past, present, and future in one shot of look. The perception of the quester life-death cycle has changed and he became optimistic that allows him to continue his journey. It realizes him to live a real life and die a more conscious death. At the end of the poem, he states that "*the wages of dying is love*" (103-104). The quester realizes that death is not oblivion or decay but it is love.

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION WITH SOCIETY

The quester must return to his community in order to share his knowledge. Thus, to continue with his course and reach his ultimate purpose or the goal, the persona moves on and in the poem "The Call Across the Valley of Not-Knowing," the quester found a decay house but he still found hope of return:

In the red house sinking down
into ground rot, a lamp
at one window, the smarled ashes letting
a single flame go free,
a shoe of dreaming iron nailed to the wall,
(1-5)

In the above reference mentioned, the hero finds a place that seems to be in decay. However, there is light coming out from one window. Even if the house may be sinking, a flame is released that gives the

quester a hopeful of a return. A flame symbolizes hope that ignites persona's journey.

The poem presented a sleeping woman. She was sleeping next to him that he can feel with his "hand" (7). He is resting next to that "mismatched" (6) over who contradictorily matches him and offers him a new being that the flame in the window provides a promise in the desolate dwelling. In *El laberinto de la Soledad*, Paz's depiction of the hero's stage is enhanced as the latter caresses his partner and both in the darkness. According to Jung in *Four Archetypes*, this psychic pattern is often:

associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness like a ploughed field and a garden. Hollow objects such as ovens and cooking vessels are associated with the mother archetype, and of course, the uterus and anything of a like shape (15).

Fundamentally, this model will exalt growth and fertility; moreover, Jung emphasizes that the qualities associated with it are maternal kindness and understanding, warmth, tenderness, and peace as the hero's "mismatched halfness" (60 as:

Her hair growing in the firelight,
her breasts full,
her belly swollen,
a sunset of firelight
wavering all down one side, my wife
sleeps on,
happy,
far away, in some other,
newly open room of the world (10-17)

In the above reference, the blissful image of the woman offers the persona hope in his journey. The moments of fear and despair have morphed into harmony. However, before continuing his journey,

the persona discusses his understanding of sexuality as a fundamental feature in life.

In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell discusses that:

When the hero quest has been complete, the adventurer must return with his life. The norm of the journey requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the knowledge to the community. He must renew humanity his community (167).

Therefore the above reference clearly mentioned that there is a norm for the quester that after completing his journey the quester must return to his life and share the knowledge with his community. He should apply that knowledge and renew humanity in his community for the betterment of his society.

In the poem, "The Path Among the Stones," the persona finds himself in a natural environment that mirrors the paradox of humanity and so he affirms:

I come to a field
glittering with the thousand sloughed skins
of arrowheads, stones
which shuddered and leapt forth
to give themselves into the broken hearts
of the living, (11-16)

In the above reference, the persona finds himself in a natural setting that shimmers with dead peels. In this place, arrowheads have cast off their skins, dying to the past but simultaneously living in their descendants who are broken. Although hero faced hurdles, he still move forward to his journey.

The hero must walk through the stones of the field that projects "ghost bloom" (47). As he kept walking to his destination, the stone cast shadows of death that intersect with the action of blooming in the sky and touching the earth through the trees. In this moment of the journey, he wishes to vanish his sadness in the "glitter" (54) of

the light. However, the quester realizes that he must not avoid the path that has to be taken rather he must go on. The scenario may not be the quester expectation but he must carry his journey and return home.

The persona needs to complete his journey, and for this, he must enter hell; action is taken when the sore ground offers a path that "opens / at my feet" (59) and not be confused anymore. The persona continues his descend to be able to, later he reaches higher to complete his learning. The hero realizes that the tracks he leaves behind are immediately filled with warbles. Now he is aware of his advancement, and there are moments when he feels unable to breathe when thinking about his desire for material objects. In this point, Kinnell expresses how society and its machinery progress have made humankind believe that acquiring goods will make them happy. However, there will be a moment of awareness when the poem's hero realizes that these material objects are impractical in the quest for self-knowledge.

The hero overcomes his loneliness. He confirms that even when an individual may experience loneliness, it may not be so because that instant may transform into a gate to "find myself alive / in the whorled / archway of the fingerprint of all things" (86-87). The metaphor of the "whorled / archway" (86-87) indicates the axis of movement towards life and death. Besides loneliness, the hero is also overcome with the binary opposition of life and death. When baby Maud is born and once she dies a moment as she is delivered. It made him witnessed life as well as death.

After this moment, in "Lastness," the hero completes his journey as he finds the bear scratching "the four-footed / circle into the earth" (15-16) being born, growing up,

reproducing, and dying. Finally, the persona recognizes that he is a creature, like any other in the world, but differently. The characteristics of both the bear and the hero are quite similar. The bear sniffs "the sweat / in the breeze, he understands / a creature, a death – creature" (16-18) that gives the hero to embrace the birth of his son, Fergus. Similarly, the hero bent over his newborn son and "smelled / the black, glistening fur / of his head" (39-41). Unequivocally, Kinnell's use of natural imagery enriches the hero's path as the son's reflection on the bear. Therefore, the hero recognizes that the creatures have their own life, so the journey of human life has been his own and that its purpose has been to learn to live their life.

After this realization, the quester understands that this journey of self-discovery has made him embrace the emptiness that scared him when starting it. Furthermore, he realizes that "Lastness / is brightness. It is the brightness / gathered up of all that went before" (81-83), and in this dichotomy in which humankind dwells has to be accepted to live a more fulfilling life. At the end of the journey, he is a different man for he has accomplished his task. Therefore, this hero archetype presents the persona's complete journey that he faced in its three stages of separation, trials, and return.

CONCLUSION

The study of hero archetypes benefits the readers to understand the psychic of the poet even more which consists of strength, courageous, and goodness. The hero's existence is not to show how valuable it is only to the self but also to the others. It displays poet's act to redeem society by overcoming obstacles in service to successfully triumph over adversity and evil. Therefore, presenting Campbell's

hero archetype in Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* is a great achievement for the readers in understanding Galway Kinnell and his poems.

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