

Weaving Voices Article (Feb-Jun 2002)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

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Myths of Manhood – The Hero Jungian Literature by Mark Byrne

REVIEWED BY MARC MARUSIC

THE CENTRAL MYTH figure of Western culture is the hero. There are a huge variety of hero myths, and it would be out of the question to arrive at a single theory to explain them. So Byrne focuses on the relationship of hero myths to the making of men in Western culture. Comparisons to non-Western cultures are made, one of them being that in rites of passage in the latter, symbolic death and rebirth is undergone, while in the former this is less important than the attempt to overcome death.

In the past 100 years a new aspect has been added: interpretation of the hero as an inner psychological figure – hence the subtitle of the book. Byrne analyses how Jung and his followers have used and misused hero myths to weave new narratives of psychological transformation. Jung himself was ambivalent about the hero – he inherited the Western heroic view of making men, while also challenging it by raising the need to undergo a symbolic death in order to mature (be a hero, then sacrifice the hero). Byrne shows how Jung's followers have favoured a simple pro- or anti-hero approach, or have allowed the first half of life to the hero and then recommended his sacrifice in midlife.

The classical Jungians (he looks at the approaches of Harding, Neumann, Von Franz and Henderson, who gives the pro-hero argument). Byrne sees Henderson, who gives equal emphasis to both playing the hero and sacrificing it, as the closest among the classical Jungians in letting the two options he held together so that the psyche will spontaneously produce a 'third' that resolves this tension of opposites. Von Franz on the other hand (unlike Jung) makes bold distinctions between the hero and puer (boy child).

We then look at the anti-hero approach – whereas the classical Jungians stress the hero's culture-building and protective qualities, Hillman stresses his destructiveness. This is tied with a key concern of Hillman's to show the narrowness of the Western myth of developmentalism, which he sees as dominating the practice of psychology. While affirming Hillman for his positive redefinition of the puer even in adult men (in contrast to both classical and some archetypal Jungians who see the puer as arrested development), Byrne believes Hillman goes too far in denouncing the hero and the ego. Hillman's association of hero and ego is too tight – this comes, says Byrne, from a narrow conception of both. While sympathetic to Hillman's approach, the process of letting healing come of its own accord, he finds that Hillman's work does not adequately provide a container to hold the tension of opposites.

Robert Johnson, Layard and Bly show the initiation process may be played out over a long time rather than compacted into a single rite – Byrne explores the upsides and downsides of this approach. A merit of these three writers is they get us to see that ignorance, frustration and defeat can play important roles in the initiatory process, leading to a more complex, tolerant and adaptable picture of manhood than might otherwise be the case. Although Bly is helpful in that he offers a vision of manhood attained not through heroics but through mentoring (mainly by the 'wild man'),

his Iron John has many shortcomings as a tale of male initiation. One of these has been identified by Andrew Samuels (a key theorist Byrne refers to) that failing to acknowledge the time and place specificity of this tale means 'turning to other cultures, other epochs of our own culture, which denies responsibility from present-day men for the world as it is'.

Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (and Hollywood's universalizing the monomyth) has similar problems. Among the ones identified here are Campbell's failure to distinguish between a symbolic death, which leads to rebirth and other experiences, which are literally dead-end; and his reduction of the variety of goddesses to one, focusing on their motherly aspect.

Although some of the writers referred to in this book claim their work is relevant to women too, none of them, as Byrne points out, have seriously considered the relevance of the hero to the developmental tasks specific to women. What could be helpful here is a polytheistic psychology, in which a variety of mythic or archetypal figures might be involved in the making of men and women. Sticking to just the hero as the guiding figure for the journey through life, as Byrne points out, can easily inflate the ego and impede this journey from being imagined in other ways, for example through the eyes of the fool, the trickster, Eros, Dionysus. This though is not to deny the hero's a legitimate place in the psyche as one mythic figure among many.

A key conclusion of Byrne is that it's not the hero who's the problem, rather the identification with or possession by him. He outlines several reasons for our identification with the hero and points to evidence (such as corporate and popular culture) that he doesn't at all appear to be dying. He cautions against proclaiming his death: to do so may be paying him the highest honour, as his death is often his apotheosis and the making of his cult. The best way to dissociate from the hero, recommends Byrne, is to find ways of honouring the hero without being run by him. One such means is to look at new ways of being heroes, which involves harnessing the power of this figure to new ends. He finds this approach to dissociating from the hero far more helpful than the reject-the-hero approach (which risks being run by the shadow – on the one hand, megalomania and hubris, on the other, martyrdom, passivity and frustration) or the classical Jungian way (conceding the first half of life to the hero is a formula for the creating of men who need a midlife crisis in order to develop a mature relationship with the unconscious and the feminine).

Byrne sees Jung's sun hero as the foundation myth of the Jungian tribe, and notes that as the discipline has moved out of its youthful, heroic phase, the hero has become less prominent in Jungian literature. Byrne advises that we need to read myths closely to differentiate between various styles of heroics, and this he clearly does in this widely researched and probing study.