

The Oedipus Rex (Sophocles)

9D

Humanities II

Mrs. C. VanZant

Mythology Part II

Ascension, Apotheosis, and Atonement.

(Read first the extract from Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles, translated by Robert Fitzgerald lines 1579-1667.

Discovery of the Unknown:

Forty days after *Easter (*the time of the crucifixion), as the sun approaches mid-heaven following the vernal equinox, Christians celebrate the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven. Mithras, Elijah, Saint Francis, and, in some stories too, Faust, are carried off. And in a later addition to the Christian story the Virgin Mary is physically assumed into heaven to reign there with Christ.

The myth of the apotheosis is the logical conclusion to the hero's adventures. He is taken out of the cycle of life and given a permanent status in recognition of his inherent divinity--his real self. As he had been miraculously conceived of the void, so he must be returned to the creator and to that void. Thus Jesus carries back to heaven the body he had received through the Virgin Mary. The historical hero vanishes into eternity and becomes all present in the cosmos forever. It is as if the hero by his act were warning us to concentrate not on his historical qualities but on his role as world hero who is significant only when free of the local, the material, and the sectarian. To tie the hero to the historical is to kill him and all that he represents. If myth is to speak to man's inner life, it must emanate from the void--from the non-historical, timeless unknown. "Ascended into heaven", writes Alan Watts, "Christ is no more Jesus but 'all-in-all.' 1. He is reborn again in God.

When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lowest parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.²

1. Alan Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity p. 188
2. Ephesians 4:8-10

The myth of the apotheosis is psychologically as valid today as it ever was. The process of self-realization leads the individual in the direction of the universally valid human norms, freedom and unity. To achieve individuation is to achieve freedom from fear and from the limitations of time and to find unity in all opposites. Thus apotheosis is frequently expressed in the androgynous being in whom what has been separated in time and history returns to the state of oneness free in the cosmos. In the androgyne, the Yin and the Yang combined in the Chinese holy woman T'ai Yuan, the Zuni Indian chief god Awonawilona who is he-she, the child of Hermès and Aphrodite, Hermaphrodite, and in Eros himself, who is both male and female, we have the symbol of the final achievement of the essential self through loss of the illusion of local and personal self. "This is the release potential within us all", writes Joseph Campbell, "which anyone can attain--through hero-hood"³ The hero of the apotheosis is the individual at his last threshold. As he is carried off to heaven, he is acting out the final event in the great process of losing the self to find the self. The hero is the symbol here of the individual who has achieved the mythical consciousness, in which the divine within is active in relation to all things and events. To realize the self in its total reality is to repossess the soul--the world soul of the collective unconsciousness, in which the divine within is active in relation to all things and events. To realize the self in its total reality is to repossess the soul--the world soul of the collective unconscious.

A fuller understanding of the apotheosis myth will be achieved through a reading of Joseph Campbell's chapter on apotheosis in The Hero With a Thousand Faces. A penetrating consideration of the androgyne aspect and the ascent motif is contained in Mircea Eliade's Mephistopholes and the Androgyne; Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol.

3. Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces

Vocabulary Notes:

Apotheosis: Greek-from apotheoun

1. to deify - the elevation of a human rank to that of a god.
2. The raising of a thing or person to divine status
3. The culmination or highest development of of a thing
4. The ultimate quintessential, or final form
5. The exaltation of a person or thing to a final state of triumph or glory.

Androgyne: Hermaphrodite. having the characteristics of both sexes.

- Androgynous:
1. Being at once both male and female (hermaphrodite) sometimes hot and sometimes cold (used of planets)
 2. Bearing both staminate and pistillate flowers in the same cluster.

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