

The Cosmogonic Cycle: An Overview

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By Sinéad Donohoe

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Where the hero's journey describes the life of a single hero and his community, the cosmogonic round narrates the life cycle of the universe. Countless heroes live within the confines of a single cosmogonic cycle, and while it is almost never mentioned in discussions of the hero's journey, the cosmogonic round is the journey's backbone. On the surface, the cosmogonic cycle concerns itself simply with the creation and eventual destruction of the universe, but this round has echoes in each individual's life. As the essential formula of the hero's journey is: Separation, Initiation, and Return; likewise, the essential formula of the cosmogonic cycle is: Emanations, Transformations, Dissolutions.

Emanations

In this stage of the cycle, the universe is born, and the life of the world begins. These are the creation myths: whether that of the cosmic egg, the world created by the Word of God, or the tortoise who creates the earth by bringing mud up on his back from the ocean floor. But the important question in these myths is not "how is the world created?" but "from whence is the world created?" As Joseph Campbell explains, "the universal doctrine teaches that all the visible structures of the world – all things and beings – are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they rise, which supports and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve." The universe comes from, and is supported by, "a ubiquitous power," which Campbell describes as "the power known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as *mana*, to the Sioux Indians as *wakonda*, the Hindus as Sakti, and the Christians as the power of God."

This power is the spiritual or mystic source, and force, made visible in the world. The realm of the unmanifest – that which exists behind the universe, and from which the universe emanates – is absolute, immortal, and unchanging. It is the realm of Oneness, which is beyond duality of any kind. The known world, on the other hand, is the realm of duality, where Oneness is broken into many, and separateness appears to be real. This is the emanation of the world – the point where the universe appears to break from the unmanifest (though it is never truly separate), and becomes visible. As the first stage of the hero's journey is his separation from his community, so too is the first stage of the cosmogonic cycle a kind of separation, or departure from the unmanifest source which lies behind the known universe.

Transformations

The world now exists and supports life of its own, and the focus of the cosmogonic cycle shifts to human life. We are now, also, firmly in the realm of duality: male-female, light-dark, high-low, good-evil, life-death. In this stage the universal round is moved forward by the succession of human generations in the world. Within the context of the hero's journey, Campbell here describes the cycle and evolution of heroes with each succeeding generation. The hero quest itself reveals the importance of the cosmogonic cycle, for the hero journeys precisely to come back into relation with the mystic realm from which the world arises.

The hero generations themselves sequentially evolve from being firmly invested in the external appearances of the world, towards the manifestation of a spiritual life in the world. As the hero, in the initiation stage of his individual quest, learns to let go of his attachment to physical life in order to come into contact with a spiritual power, so too does the universe transform by the succession of heroes who reach the realm of the unmanifest to renew the flow of energy into the visible world, continuing its life.

Dissolutions

The dominant "effect" of the completed quest on the hero is what Campbell calls "reconciliation with the grave." The hero either experiences a metaphorical death, or actually dies and is resurrected. It is *through* this death that the hero is able to come back into contact with the universal source, as the unmanifest is beyond what can be directly experienced in the visible world. The cosmogonic cycle's importance, and power, lies in its transformation of our ego-perceptions of the physical world: where from the limited perspectives of our individual point of view the death of the hero may seem tragic, in the life of the universe his death is transformed into the hero's crowning glory. As Campbell underlines: "Here [in death] the whole sense of the life is epitomized."

Life gives way to death which gives way to new life: this is the cosmogonic cycle, and it is the hero's quest. As the hero must die and return, so too must the universe. In the mythological systems of the world, visions of apocalypse tend to be overwhelming and terrifying, but this not because the end of the world is something that should not happen, or because it's "bad." Those are judgements made in separation from the the perspective of the cosmogonic round. Like the death of the individual hero, the disappearance of the universe is only horrifying in the sense that it is sublime. The god you aren't ready for appears terrifying, but it is only the ego-perspective that dissolves. As Campbell points out again and again, images of the destroyer gods and menacing threshold guardians all over the world always have a raised hand, signalling "Do not be afraid." And, at last, as the death of the hero is followed by his resurrection which brings new life to the world, the death of one universe precipitates the birth of another. As Campbell reassures: "The basic principle of all mythology is this of the beginning in the end."

The cosmogonic cycle describes the source from which we move away and then back towards, like a single wave in an ocean which ripples outward to the shore, and then turns back again towards the centre. Each event, each life tumbles into the next like a nesting doll with infinite shells emanating outward and being open inward all at once.

But, Yakko does a much better job of explaining the nesting doll analogy:



https://youtu.be/f_J5rBxeTlk

The Cosmogonic Cycle: Emanations

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In case you need it: here's [a quick overview of the entire Cosmogonic Cycle](#). Once again, all quotes unless otherwise noted are from ***The Hero with a Thousand Faces***.

The beginning stage of the cosmogonic cycle, emanations are the creation myths of the world, of which there are many forms. One of the most recurrent creation images in world mythology is that of the cosmic egg, in ***The Hero with a Thousand Faces***, Joseph Campbell transcribes the Hindu telling:

“In the beginning of the world was merely nonbeing, It was existent. It developed. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year. It was split asunder. One of the two eggshell parts became silver, one gold. That which was of silver is the earth. That which was of gold is the sky. What was the outer membrane is the mountains. What was the inner membrane is cloud and mist. What were the veins are the rivers. What was the fluid within is the ocean. Now, what was born therefrom is yonder sun.”

The most important element of this stage in the cosmogonic round can be found here. Yet, it is not the belief that the world is a cosmic egg, but rather *before* the egg appears, *before* the world exists, there “was merely nonbeing, It was existent.” Campbell goes on to quote a physicist who declares: “*That which is* is a shell floating in the infinitude of *that which is not*.” The “nonbeing” which *exists* before the apparent creation of the world is the source from which the visible universe is born. As the root meaning of emanate is “to flow out,” the critical point of this stage is that the visible world *flows out of* an essential, invisible source. This source is beyond any category of thought, language, or symbol, even the terms “nonbeing” and “beyond” fail to reach it. Nonbeing is the unmanifest, it has no form, and it has no opposite. The world we take to be real is a shadow of the unmanifest only, an infinitely small fraction of this source materialized into something visible. The unmanifest is the source from which all life flows, from which all visible entities arise and are supported. As Campbell explains, this source is “the power known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as *mana*, to the Sioux Indians as *wakonda*, the Hindus as Sakti, and the Christians as the power of God.”

The world emanates from this unmanifest, mystic, timeless realm, and is supported by it, but the unmanifest is not immediately visible in the world. At the creation of the universe, “the forward roll of the cosmogonic round precipitates the One into the many.” The unmanifest realm is that of total Oneness, it would be too overwhelming to be perceived by our earth-bound minds – in fact, any direct contact with the unmanifest would require the total dissolution of you because individuals and separation are not real in the mystic dimension. What we see and experience in the world, and *as ourselves*, are fractions of fractions of fractions of fractions of the source from which everything arises. Like pure white light entering a prism and breaking into all the visible colours in the world, the unmanifest energy of source must “break” into many separate and opposing dualistic images in order to made visible. Thus the created world gives

rise to the existence of duality – or at least, the appearance of duality. Campbell describes this “breaking” into the manifold of existence “a great crisis, a rift, [which] splits the created world into two apparently contradictory planes of being.”

It is important to note, however, that it is only from the point of view of the created world that duality of any kind exists. Quoting his friend Heinrich Zimmer, Campbell often said: “The best things cannot be told’ because they transcend all thought. ‘The second best are misunderstood,’ because those are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can’t be thought about, and one gets stuck in the thoughts.” Myth is of this second order, they are misunderstood because in attempting to describe something which transcends all experience, language, and comprehension, they only have the commonalities of human experience, language, and thought to communicate with. So while the concepts of male and female do not exist in the unmanifest realm, mythology often ascribes male and female aspects to heroes, gods, and elemental forces because they are the only references we understand, and not because some god or force is *actually* male or female. It is, for example, why many cultures in the world present the image of God as either androgynous, or as having both male and female faces.

In the creation myths of the world, it is often the female principle which brings the world into being. Correspondingly, the unmanifest energy, or source, in myth is often characterized as male: The Father. However, pure source must pass through the female principle in order to become the manifest world we see. Not unlike the conception and birth of a child, the female principle translates the pure energy of the “father”, unmanifest energy, into material form. It is the female principle who literally “gives birth” to duality. Even the gods themselves are simply personifications of this unmanifest realm, not the energy themselves. So in the Eastern tradition the gods are habitually seen holding their own severed heads, calling us to move passed their image to a relationship with the energy they only represent. Or, in the words of Meister Eckhart: “the ultimate and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God, leaving your notion of God for *an experience* of that which transcends all notions. I and you, this and that, true and untrue – every one of them has its opposite. But mythology suggests that behind that duality there is a singularity over which this plays like a shadow game.”

The realm of the unmanifest is the single most important aspect of myth. Commenting on a then-recent definition of myth given in an article from Foreign Affairs, Joseph Campbell summarizes the author definition of myth as “an order of acceptable ideas concerning the cosmos and its parts and nations and other human groups,” but finds this incomplete. He goes on to state that any definition of conception of myth *must* include the unmanifest source of the universe: “the mystic dimension informs all this. If that’s not there, you don’t have a mythology, you have an ideology” (quoted from *Transformations of Myth Through Time*). Campbell distils the cosmogonic cycle into psychological terms, making a link between the emanation, life, and death of the universe, as compatible with an individual’s life cycle experience of sleeping and waking: “as the consciousness of the individual rests on a sea of night into which it descends in slumber and out of which it mysteriously wakes, so, in the imagery of myth, the universe is precipitated out of, and reposes upon, a timellessness back into which it again dissolves. ... the

passage of universal consciousness from the deep sleep zone of the unmanifest, through dream, to the full day of waking; then back again through dream to the timeless dark. As in the actual experience of every living being, so in the grandiose figure of the living cosmos.”

This stage’s presence, in micro-cosmic form, in the hero’s journey is most often found in the motif of the virgin birth. Explaining the role of the female/mother energy in the creation of the world, Campbell states: “the world generating spirit of the father passes into the manifold earthly experience through a transforming medium – the mother of the world. ... More abstractly understood, she is the world-bounding frame: ‘space, time, and causality.’ – the shell of the cosmic egg.”



As the visible world is a physical manifestation of the unmanifest realm’s energy, so is the hero the earth-bound reflection of ‘The Father’s’ energy, and his journey is often a quest seeking his father. This is ultimately a spiritual journey, the hero attempts to connect with (or, more accurately, re-connect with) the unmanifest, supporting source of the world. To return to Campbell’s analogy of the cosmogonic round with the cycle of sleep, he says: “as the mental and physical health of the individual depends on an orderly flow of vital forces into the field of waking day from the unconscious dark, so again in myth, the continuance of the cosmic order is assured only by a controlled flow of power from the source.” The hero’s journey’s aim is precisely to renew the flow of this source into the world, allowing life to continue. The hero’s mother is a virgin because “her spouse is the Invisible Unknown,” and the virgin birth is a symbol of the beginning of a spiritual life – it has absolutely nothing to do with the “morality” of sex. Likewise, the emanation of the world is a kind of virgin birth of pure unmanifest source being translated into material form. And as the creation of the world is precipitated by the “breaking” of the One into the many forms of the visible world, the hero’s journey is again the cosmogonic round in microcosm: the first stage of the journey is that of separation, where the hero splits away from his community – either by choice or exile.

And so the world of form is created, and in the next phase of the emanation stage, life on earth begins. The primordial, super-God-like beings who first populate the earth bring the mountains, oceans, rivers, plants and animals into being. As the cycle continues these primordial deities are usurped by the next order of beings, monstrous, God-like creatures: in the Greek tradition, these were the Titans. The cycle continues forward as generation topples into the next generation of pre- and supra-human beings until we come at last to our “human-historical form,” as Campbell puts it. It is at this point that the second stage of the cosmogonic cycle begins: Transformations.

The Cosmogonic Cycle: Transformations

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This is the second stage of the cosmogonic cycle. An overview of the cycle can be found [here](#), and as usual, all quotations are from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* unless otherwise noted.

As Joseph Campbell explains, "the first effect of the cosmogonic emanations is the framing of the world stage." In [Emanations](#), the physical world is created from the unmanifest, mystic realm. The second stage, or effect, of the cosmogonic round, Transformations, is "the production of life within the frame: life polarized for self-reproduction under the dual form of the male and female." Once the world is made manifest, in many mythological systems, the first primordial gods appear on the earth and create all the aspects of the landscape as well as the plant and animal life. These primordial gods are then succeeded by generation after generation of gods and pre-and supra-human beings until at last we come to the "human-historical form." In the Transformations stage of the cosmogonic cycle, "the world of human life is now the problem."

The initial emanation of the world is a 'flowing *outward*' of energy into manifestation from the mystic dimension. This first half of the cosmogonic round describes the progressive constriction of consciousness: the first inhabitants of the created world are the figures of mythology, the gods and titans, and these "Created Creating Ones" gradually give way to "the sphere of human history." As the cycle of human life moves on, the world's connection with the mystic source of the universe is cut-off and lost to view, we see only with "the little hard-fact pupil of the human eye." The gods can no longer carry the cosmogonic cycle toward its destiny because "they have become invisible." Life moves away from its divine source, or as Campbell puts it, "Men's perspectives become flat, comprehending only the light-reflecting, tangible surfaces of existence. The vista into depth closes over. The significant form of the human agony is lost to view. Society lapses into mistake and disaster. The Little Ego has usurped the judgement seat of the Self." The world has become pinched off from the life-supporting source of the world – and worse, increasingly does not believe the mystic realm exists at all. It is now the work of the heroes, "more or less human in character" to realize the world's destiny.

For Campbell, "the hero of action is the agent of the [cosmogonic] cycle, continuing into the living moment the impulse that first moved the world." The hero's journey leads them back into contact with the unmanifest, mystic realm which created and now supports the universe. The hero renews the flow of this energy into the world, moving life and the cycle forward. Here we find the true sense of the mythological motif of heroes born of virgin birth. As the world has moved away from and lost connection with its divine source, "the people yearn for some personality who, in a world of twisted bodies and souls, will represent again the lines of the incarnate image." Those living in the disconnected world are lost and spiritually impoverished.

The hero is needed to renew the force of life and faith back into this world, and therefore move the cosmogonic cycle along its round. The hero is born to a virgin because she remains “undefiled of the fashionable errors of her generation.” Her status of virgin refers to two things: first, that she has not been corrupted by this spiritually abase world, she has retained a connection with the mystic realm (and please, for the love of god, realize this has nothing whatsoever to do with sex); and second, that she is “a miniature in the midst of men of the cosmic woman who was the bride of the wind” – she is the human incarnation of the female energy which transformed the unmanifest energy into the visible world (see Emanations). So, the virgin birth symbolizes the birth of a spiritual life, which is precisely the sense of the hero’s journey: a spiritual quest to reconnect with the divine source. The hero himself, as son and “earthly reflection” of the “cosmic woman” and the mystic “Father” energy we call God, the hero seeks his true Father in order to release His energy back into the world and restore life.

Very often, the stories of the hero’s childhood include exile. The child-hero is banished from the land of his birth or otherwise excluded from his community. Like his earthly mother, he is separated from society because the source of renewed life cannot be found in the realm of death and disconnection. The hero “born to save the world” is exiled to “the mid-point or navel of the world,” this is the umbilical spot of the universe from which he returns as an adult to perform his heroic deeds. The hero renews the life of the world and then himself departs in death. But his death is not tragic, rather, it is the moment which “the whole sense of [his] life is epitomized,” for as the hero reminds us of the imperative that all things change and we must learn not to hold on so fearfully, so is his departure from the world a lesson in letting go. The hero teaches us how to embrace the fluidity of life. Each hero thus does not simply “save” or renew the world, he transforms it.

This continual renewal of life energy is what allows the cosmogonic cycle to continue. Yet, as the universe cycles through various phases of movement away from, and then back toward, the mystic source, so too do the succeeding generations of heroes evolve, one after the next, as the life of the universe progresses. In the transformations stage of the cycle, Campbell identifies five distinct stages of herohood: the hero as warrior, lover, emperor and tyrant, redeemer, and saint. The journey of each hero type has its own shape and means, and slowly turns the world’s progression back towards its mystic Source. For it is the universe’s destiny, as it is the hero’s, to return to the unmanifest dimension from whence it arose. For the birth of the world is a twin birth which brings forth not only the life of the visible world and all those in it, but also bears the world’s destiny: its death. This is the final stage of the cosmogonic round, Dissolutions, where the world – which moved away from the mystic realm with its emanation – returns and diffuses back into pure source. But, before the universe disappears, our next stop is to look more closely at the individual hero types which transform the world.

The Cosmogonic Cycle: The Hero Types

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During the transformations stage of the cosmogonic cycle, the life of the world reaches the apex of its manifestation. Life grows, continues, and begins to dissolve. The universe is at its furthest point from the unmanifest source which birthed it, and towards the end of this stage, it begins to turn back towards the divine realm. Where the emanation of the world is first moved by the purely spiritual force of the unmanifest, and the early stages of life are governed by the gods in all their guises and the mythic creatures which come after them, in transformations, the agents of the cycle become the heroes in human form. The heroes are many, diverse and they walk different paths. They journey to renew the influx of spiritual energy into the world, and in so doing, gradually turn the cosmogonic cycle toward its destiny.

The Hero as Warrior

Campbell explains that the era of the hero “in *human form*” arises “only when villages and cities have expanded over the land.” But this is a world not far removed from the last vestiges of the mythological age, “many monsters remaining from primeval times still lurk in the outlying regions.” These are the dragons, giants, ogres, minotaurs and giant snakes of the past, and they must be “cleared away.” Campbell is also quick to point out that along with these monsters, “tyrants of human breed ... [who] are the cause of widespread misery” must also be overcome. These are the hero-warrior’s tasks: “the elementary deeds of the hero are those of the clearing of the field.”

There is also a clear sense of the hero’s roll in supporting the advance of the cosmogonic cycle: “the sword edge of the hero-warrior flashes with the energy of the creative Source: before it fall the shells of the Outworn.” The hero-warrior symbolizes the absolute restless flowing of time itself, and the necessity of this constant progression. The “monster” the hero-warrior must face is the one who attempts to hold on, who wishes for time to stop, for the inevitable changes time creates to cease: “the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo: Holdfast, the keeper of the past. ... he is enemy, dragon, tyrant, because he turns his own advantage the authority of his position. He is Holdfast not because he keeps the *past* but because he *keeps*.” This keeping and holding on blocks the flow of source into the universe and must be freed up in order to allow and renew life.

The hero-warrior explicitly champions the progression of the universe, he “is the champion not of things become but of things becoming.” This hero reminds us that all things are changing, nothing can be held, and that the very life of the world relies on this. The hero-warrior slays the monsters of a past age and tyrants who hoard wealth and well-being. What is most important, however, is not that the hero overcomes a monster or a tyrant, but rather, the true “hero-deed is a continuous shattering of the crystallizations of the moment. The cycle rolls: mythology

focuses on the growing-point." The hero pushes his community to let go of the past, and even their attachment to the present, and into the future. This task is a renewal of life because "transformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity, is the characteristic of the living God."

Still, in these stories, while the point of the quest is to shatter the "crystallizations of the moment" and focus the world on becoming, the adventures of the hero-warrior tend to be externally focused and physical: the hero-warrior is the sword swinger, the knight, who slays the monster or tyrant in battle.

The Hero as Lover

This hero type is often, though not always, a kind of second stage for the hero-warrior. In this case, after defeating the enemy and releasing what he was trying to store up, "the life energy released from the toils of the tyrant Holdfast," the hero-lover's reward is a bride. In these stories, the woman symbolizes the "life energy" which is released when the monster/tyrant is defeated. "She is the maiden of the innumerable dragon slayings, the bride abducted from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover." In joining with his new bride, the hero-lover restores the world through completion: "She is the 'other portion' of the hero himself – for 'each is both': if his stature is that of world monarch she is the world, and if he is a warrior she is fame."

It is important to remember, that we are dealing here with the language of myth, and not a political statement about gender. In myth, the male principle (*not* person) is that of specific, directed, outward action; the female principle is the energy of life itself, creation, the transformation of energy into form. A tale like *Sleeping Beauty* – in which a Princess lies helpless and unconscious in a spell deep within a castle, and a valiant Prince fights through the castle's obstacles in order to kiss her and wake her from her sleep – may seem terribly sexist when seen through the eyes of modern gender politics, where a man rescues a helpless woman, but to read it this way is to miss the story completely. It is not meant to be read as if the female reader stands in for the sleeping Princess, and a male reader for the gallant Prince: the Prince and the Princess are aspects of the same Self, regardless of gender, the reader is *both*. Mythologically, a story like *Sleeping Beauty* is about the awakening of one's spiritual awareness into the conscious mind – the Princess as the sleeping, buried soul, the false, failing Princes as the failed triumphs and boasts of the ego, and the true, successful, hero-lover Prince as the pure intention of the conscious mind: the ego putting itself to death, thereby clearing the way for the re-emergence of the spirit into conscious, waking life. In stories of the hero-warrior where he then becomes the hero-lover, it is symbolic of reconnecting to the divine source, reconnecting to a source which is beyond either male or female, and beyond even the totality of both. As the lover, the hero regains his missing half, his "other portion", his bride, and the two lovers become identified as one, not only with each other, but with the mystic realm (the hero's *real* "other portion" – the

bride's too). The hero-lover is only presented as "incomplete" without his bride in so far as he is separated from the spiritual realm, his marriage to her is thus symbolic of his reconnection with this realm, the ultimate source of wholeness which transcends the duality of male and female.

Another popular version of the hero-lover type, are the stories in which the hero is put through many impossible tests in order to win the hand of a Princess. This does not necessarily follow the quest of a hero-warrior and often stands alone. This version does, however, mirror the hero-warrior quest. The hero-lover is presented with a list of near-impossible tasks which are "difficult beyond measure," the purpose of which is not only to test the hero, but to represent the "absolute refusal, on the part of the parent ogre, to permit life to go its way." Like the Holdfast monsters and tyrants of the hero-warrior, the hero-lover encounters the problem of the natural outward flow of life being blocked, and here again we find the bride as symbolic of the very energy of life which must be freed. But there is nothing to fear. Life cannot be stopped, and "when a fit candidate appears, no task in the world is beyond his skill. Unpredicted helpers, miracles of time and space, further his project; destiny itself (the maiden) lends a hand and betrays a weak spot in the paternal system. Barriers, fetters, chasms, fronts of every kind dissolve before the authoritative presence of the hero." The hero-lover is at last united with his beloved, and their union is the microcosmic mirror of the ultimate Oneness of the spiritual source of the world. The hero-lover has much in common with Meeting the Goddess, an archetypal variant of The Hero's Journey.

The Hero as Emperor and as Tyrant

This hero type often correlates with the Atonement with the Father variant in The Hero's Journey. The hero-emperor tends to be virgin-born, and his quest begins as he seeks the identity of his father. Within the story, this may be the search for a physical father, but ultimately the question of who is the hero's father "touches the problem of man and the invisible." There is an important shift with this hero type, the hero-warrior and the hero-lover have adventures which stay very much grounded in the material world, though they are in relation with the mystic, and these adventures "merely [continue] the dynamics of the cosmogonic round." With the entrance into the cycle of the hero-emperor, we meet our first example of "the supreme hero ... he who reopens the eye - so that through all the comings and goings, delights and agonies of the world panorama, the One Presence will be seen again." The stories of the hero-emperor are not simply "of action but of significant representation." The hero-emperor may still encounter monsters and other heroic tasks that need to be fulfilled before he can reach his Father - a symbolic representation of the unmanifest, mystic energy which first gave rise to the world - but the ultimate meaning of the story lies in the hero-emperor's atonement with his Father.

The two are reunited, and the hero "blessed by the father returns to represent the father among men." Not only is the hero-emperor the Father's "earthly reflection," in stories with this hero-type, the hero becomes a ruler, or teacher, in his own society where "his word is law" because it is infused with the spiritual life-force of the mystic realm. The hero-emperor is "centred in the

source, he makes visible the repose and harmony of the central place. He is a reflection of the World Axis from which the concentric circles spread – the World Mountain, the World Tree ... To see him is to perceive the meaning of existence. From his presence boons go out; his word is the wind of life." The hero-emperor is the just and powerful word of law in his community because he is supported by his Father, "the invisible unknown," and reflects this power into the world.

However, as the cosmogonic round continues forward the hero-emperor's rightful rule must pass with it. As the hero is but a mortal man, eventually his "perspective flattens to include only the human term of the equation," and his recollection of the source is lost, "the experience of supernal powers immediately fails. The upholding idea of the community is lost. Force is all that binds it." The hero-emperor becomes the hero-tyrant, clinging to his kingdom with force, without being centred as "the World Axis." The emperor has become "the usurper from whom the world is now to be saved." The saviour comes to us in the form of the next hero type.

The Hero as World Redeemer

The hero of this type is probably the most familiar. The hero-redeemers are typically positioned as the generation which succeeds the hero-tyrant, with the redeemer very often being his son. They enact very similar quests, reaching the "mansion of the father," the spiritual source of the world (not the physical, biological father), and return to their community to renew the flow of life. There are, however, "two degrees of initiation" possible. The first degree, that of the hero-emperor/tyrant, "the son returns as emissary" of the father to rule over his corner of the world, the hero whose word is Law. The second degree, that of the hero-redeemer, returns with knowledge: "I and the father are one." This is the higher illumination, and they are incarnations of the father "in the highest sense" and "their words carry an authority beyond anything pronounced by the heroes of the scepter and the book." It is the work of the hero-redeemer to wrest the hero-tyrant from, as Campbell puts it, his pretensions. As the emissary of the mystic realm, the hero-tyrant is empowered by the righteousness of the divine, but is not wholly identified with it, a corner of his ego-consciousness remains in tact. Over time, it is this ego-consciousness which "[occludes] the source of grace with the shadow of [the hero-tyrant's] limited personality." By contrast, having totally identified with the Father, the hero-redeemer is "utterly free of such ego-consciousness" and his very presence "is a direct manifestation of the law." His mere being refutes the claim to power held by the hero-tyrant.

Just as the hero-warrior enters the stage of the world at a dark time where the dragons and ogres of myth still stalk the earth, the hero-redeemer enters during "the period of desolation as caused by a moral fault on the part of man." But it's important to note here that these "moral faults" are not the work of 'evil', whether in the world or the heart of man himself, rather, they are working of time itself. As Campbell explains, "from the standpoint of the cosmogonic cycle, a regular alternation of fair and foul is characteristic of the spectacle of time." This transformation is inherent in life itself: "Just as in the history of the universe, so also in that of nations:

emanations leads to dissolution, youth to age, birth to death ... The golden age, the reign of the world emperor, alternates, in the pulse of every moment of life, with the waste land, the reign of the tyrant. The god who is the creator becomes the destroyer in the end." The hero-tyrant has not become evil or corrupt, "the tyrant ogre is no less representative of the father than the earlier world emperor whose position he usurped, or than the brilliant hero (the son) who is to supplant him." The tyrant and the redeemer are aspects of the same self: "[the hero-tyrant] is the representative of the set-fast, as the hero is the carrier of the changing." It is simply our perspective in time that makes the hero-tyrant and the hero-redeemer appear at odds. But this is precisely the hero-redeemer's lesson: "I and the father are one." The hero-redeemer recognizes his absolute identity with the divine source of the universe, as he recognizes his absolute identity with his earthly father (even when he *appears* to be on the wrong side of God's Law).

Yet, importantly, the hero-redeemer avoids his earthly sire's fate of becoming a tyrant, for he recognizes "the hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow, unless he crucifies *himself* today" (or, if you prefer, as it's put in ***The Dark Knight***: "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain"). This is the way the hero-redeemer avoids the mistake of crystallizing time. But this is not a moral judgement against the tyrant, it is *recognition*: "the son slays the father, but the son and the father are one." Slaying the father and self-crucifixion is the *same act*. And they both have the same symbolic meaning: the heroes, in death, return to the mystic, spiritual source. This is nothing more than the outward manifestation of the hero-redeemer's revelation, that he is one with this source. The hero-redeemer saves the world by freeing it from his father's tyranny, *as well as* his own. He is the revelation of the existence of divine presence in the world, and each individual's absolute identity with that source.

The Hero as Saint

This is the final hero type. The cycle of heroes has moved from the outward, physical adventures of the hero-warrior and lover, to the intellectual authority of the hero-emperor and -tyrant, and then to the spiritually awakened example of the hero-redeemer. As the universe revolves from the emanation of the visible world towards its dissolution back into source, so too do the heroes evolve towards this dissolution, becoming more and more spiritually focused, less and less attached to the details of life in physical reality. The saint is yet another step towards dissolution, he is what Campbell terms "the world-renouncer." The hero-saint does not work to overcome monsters, tyrants or attempt to win lovers. Rather, in life he aims to return to the father, to divorce himself as far as possible *in life* from the physical world and rejoin the mystic realm. The hero-saint is "endowed with a pure understanding, restraining the self with firmness, turning away from sound and other objects, and abandoning love and hatred; dwelling in solitude, eating but little, controlling the speech, body, and mind, ever engaged in meditation and concentration, and cultivating freedom from passion; forsaking conceit and power, pride and lust, wrath and possessions, tranquil in heart, and free from ego – he becomes worthy of

becoming one with the imperishable." The hero-saint approaches the shore "from which there is no return." He is interested only in "the ultimate claim of the unseen" in this world. He is as close to ego-less as it is possible to be in this world: "the ego is burnt out. Like a dead leaf in a breeze, the body continues to move about the earth, but the soul has dissolved already in the ocean of bliss."

But, as Campbell points out, there are precious few stories about such heroes for "these heroes are beyond the myth." The hero-saint has reached beyond a state-of-being which can be reached with words. "They have stepped away from the realm of forms ... Once the *hidden* profile has been discovered, myth is the penultimate, silence the ultimate, word. The moment the spirit passes to the hidden, silence alone remains." The cycle has progressed towards dissolution, and the earth's heroes have come so close to the edge of the cycle they are almost invisible from the world. They are the last visible apparition of the spiritual realm supporting the world.

As the generations of heroes proceed, we see a gradual dissolution. The hero-warrior is a purely physical champion who eventually gives way to the hero-saint, the purely spiritual. So too does the world itself progress from the purely spiritual realm of the unmanifest to its physical manifestation, and then back to where it began. But the hero has something to say about the ultimate disappearance of the universe. The hero, of any type, enacts the ultimate fate of the world within the course of his own life, either in his departure or his death. Like the universe, he too must return, fully, to the unmanifest. This is only possible through death, where the hero is released from the bonds of the visible world to dissolve back into the realm of his spiritual father. Yet, this is never presented as tragic, for "the hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror." "The first condition" of herohood, Campbell tells us, "is reconciliation with the grave."

The purpose of the hero journey itself is to reunite the hero with the divine source of being. At the quest's peak, he reconnects with this energy in *tempered* form: to experience the unmanifest without a veil would be to completely lose yourself and dissolve back into its source. The unmanifest is a sun whose full light the ego-consciousness cannot withstand. In the hero journey, the hero contacts the divine energy in mitigated form, enough to unblock its flow into the world once more, but not enough to lose himself for he must return to his community. And yet, breaking through to this connection, however tempered, is enough to foster the hero's realization that death, as our ego-perspectives see it, does not exist. Death is simply the end of identifying with our small, self-centred, fearful, egotistic personality, and a reemergence into total identification with the unmanifest. Dissolution is not annihilation, it's expansion. The hero's death is where "the whole sense of the [hero's] life is epitomized" for what he cannot *fully* encounter in his journey, he embraces at his death.

The hero's death is not something that has gone wrong, it is precisely his destiny, from the moment of his birth – as it is the world's. The unmanifest realm the hero rejoins at his death is beyond the duality of the visible world, it is not only the realm of divinity, it is where the

dissolved individuals of the world become inseparable once again from that divinity. It is in this sense that the ancient Egyptians, after a loved one died, would no longer refer to them by their earthly name, but as Osiris, the god of the afterlife. Those departed literally become divinity itself. This is the true destiny of the world and all those in it, to realize and then become divine. As Campbell explains, this is the very purpose of the hero and the tales of his journey: "the tendency has always been to endow the hero with extraordinary powers from the moment of birth, or even the moment of conception. The whole hero-life is shown to have been a pageant of marvels with a great central adventure as its culmination. This accords with the view that herohood is predestined, rather than simply achieved ... the hero is ... a symbol to be contemplated [rather] than an example to be literally followed. The divine being is a revelation of the omnipotent Self, which dwells within us all. The contemplation of the life thus should be undertaken as a meditation on *one's own immanent divinity*, not as a prelude to precise imitation, the lesson being, not "Do thus and be good," but "Know this and be God."'" The hero's life mirrors the life of the world: he is born, lives and expands the horizons of life, and then dissolves into divinity. The cycle of hero types moves the world along the cosmogonic round, towards its own "immanent divinity," into the next stage of the cosmogonic cycle: Dissolutions.

The Cosmogonic Cycle: Dissolutions Part 1

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By Sinéad Donohoe

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And so we come at last to the final stage of the cosmogonic cycle. Dissolutions: where the visible world dissolves back into the unmanifest source. We are familiar with this stage in its guise as the many stories of the end of the world: the Bible's Book of Revelations, the Norse Ragnarok, the Hindu age of Kali Yuga, the Buddhist Sermon of the Seven Suns, and countless others.

It may help to return to Joseph Campbell's diagram of the cosmogonic round. Here, Campbell aligns the life cycle of the universe with our nightly journey into sleep:

The universe emanates from the transcendent "deep sleep," and it is back into this same source that the world dissolves. We must be careful here, because Campbell's language is very precise. I have spoken often of the ego, which in everyday conversation has a far more narrow meaning than it does here. Ordinarily, when we mention

someone's "ego" we tend to mean this strictly as the part of them which is narcissistic, self-interested, self-serving, and arrogant, and it is almost always meant to be derogatory. These dimensions are indeed *part* of the ego referred to here, but it is far more broad. Any conscious thought, image, or idea you have is your ego. Familiarity with your personal details (your name, place of birth, birthday, address, and so on), your preferences (about *everything*, movies, colours, hobbies, you name it), your opinions about others (even the very nice ones), and yourself, are all the machinations of the ego. When you are thinking about what you're going to eat for dinner, that's your ego. When you recognize a friend at the movie theatre, that's your ego. All your memories and how you feel about them, your daydreams, ideals, the internal running commentary of your daily life, that's *all* the ego. More or less anything that you are consciously aware of is the ego: it is *all* you are referring to when you say "I." Critically, the ego *both* identifies "me," and distinguishes that self from others – it believes, for example, that my sister, neighbour, mail carrier, and so on, are not included in "I."



Now, in this diagram, the transformations stage – the sphere of hero journeys, human life, and "reality" – is the realm of the waking mind: the ego. But, this is not to say our experiences in the visible, physical world, are absolutely real. The universe emanates, at its birth, from total "nonbeing," this is the unmanifest, transcendent realm from which all things arise and are supported. This source is, as Campbell explains, "the power known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as *mana*, to the Sioux Indians as *wakonda*, the Hindu as Sakti, and the Christians as the power of God." It cannot be seen or directly touched, it is beyond any reference we have in the visible world. As pure white light enters a prism and breaks into the visible colours which make up the world, so too is the visible world itself simply the reflected shards of the

transcendent source: in the visible world, "we see not the source of the universal power but only the phenomenal forms reflected from that power." The ego itself is also an *infinitely* small fraction of the transcendent.

Campbell describes the unmanifest realm as a state of "superconsciousness," in which all things are included, known, and inseparable. In order for our egos to be able to perceive the world, our potential for superconsciousness must be severely constricted (because we are never completely cut off and separate from the transcendent, only more or less pinched off from it). How could the ego, a structure whose sole purpose is to distinguish between what is "I" and what is "not I," conceive of, let alone accept, a reality where there is no separation? It is the ego's great delusion that our individual awareness is constricted to ourselves, or, as Campbell describes the state of ego consciousness: it is where "men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete." Campbell thus recalibrates, "the lapse of superconsciousness into the state of unconsciousness is precisely the meaning of the biblical image of the Fall. The constriction of consciousness ... turns superconsciousness into unconsciousness." The constriction of consciousness is the true cause of our separation from the transcendent, and this constriction "*at the same instant* and by the same token, creates the world." The visible world is thus not the foundation of reality, rather it is what remains of Reality after it's pinched off and narrowed to the focus of a pin-point. The transformations stage is defined only as the "waking" world from the point of view that it is constrained, separated, and cut up enough that we are able to see it with the human eye, that it is reduced enough so our egos can accept it as valid.

This may be, in fact, the most critical aspect of all mythology: the visible world is not real. Sure, it is real in the sense that we are here, we can see each other, touch this rock and that tree, and feel the breeze against our skin: the world has an objective existence. Yet, we are simply interacting with the fractions of fractions of fractions of fractions, seeing duality where there is ultimately none, as Meister Eckhart explains, "mythology suggests that behind that duality there is a singularity over which this plays like a shadow game." The visible world is made up of shadows only, reflections. The universe is simply the vaporous forms thrown up by the transcendent realm, which are fractured enough for us to perceive it.

Perhaps you are wondering what this has to do with the end of the world. The answer is: rather everything. To return to our little diagram, the end of the world, like its beginning, belongs to the realm of dreams. Dreams are the nexus point between the personal, constricted ego perspective of waking life, and the vast, universal, "deep sleep" of the transcendent realm where the ego disappears. You have no awareness of yourself in the zone of deep sleep, as you would not in the full light of the eternal. Dreams are the distant messages and reflections of the transcendent, filtered through the familiar forms, language, and images of the ego. Dreams are not entirely familiar, and yet, are deeply personal. The dissolution stage of the cosmogonic round is simply the retreat of consciousness back into superconsciousness (or, more accurately, its expansion), back into the source from whence it first arose.

The trouble with this stage arises when we take the “end” of the world to be its “death,” a far too final concept. We only interpret the “end” of the world as “death” because we believe the visible world is real and that our ego perspectives are true. In fact, the whole intention of the transformations stage, with its many hero journeys, is to remind us that the “supreme hero” is “he who reopens the eye.” The crowning achievement of the hero’s quest is “reconciliation with the grave.” This does not mean the hero comes simply to accept death as the inevitable result of life, but rather, that his adventure culminates in the realization that *there is no death*. As we saw in the cycle of hero types, the heroes evolve from the physical, outward directed quests of the warrior (i.e. slaying dragons, saving princesses), to the unutterably internal journey of the saint. This round of heroes, culminating with the hero-saint, is likewise the progress of the intentional abandonment of the ego. By the incarnation of the hero-saint, “the ego is burnt out. Like a dead leaf in the breeze, the body continues to move about the earth, but the soul has dissolved already in the ocean of bliss.” Due to the transparency of the hero-saint’s ego consciousness, the perspective has shifted from “the paradox of the dual perspective” to “the ultimate claim of the unseen.” So too, the end of the world is simply the revelation of the transcendent’s “ultimate claim” over the visible world and what we take to be reality. The world does not end because it is fallen, evil, or “wrong,” but simply because it is a shadow being swept aside by the light.

The “end” described by the myths of this stage are only on the surface about death, destruction, and doom. As Campbell reassures, because the visible world is made up only of “forms”, the reflections of the transcendent, “Be sure there’s nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form.” The hero’s epiphany that death does not exist arises from the moment in his quest where he has come to the edge of the known universe, the edge of his own self, and facing the transcendent realm, he has no choice but to, momentarily (because he must return to us), let go of his ego and merge with the eternal. This is the point in the hero journey where the hero dies and is resurrected (or, at least, experiences death symbolically). Death is necessary because it is the point at which the ego is set aside and simply melts away to nothing. Death sheds one’s earthly persona as a snake sheds an outworn skin.

For Campbell, this moment of death is “the moment in [the hero’s] life when he achieved illumination – the nuclear moment when, while still alive, he found and opened the road to the light beyond the dark wall of our living death.” As the transformations stage of the round is the “waking” life of the ego, death, or personal dissolution, is the waking of the soul: “Life is her sleep, death the awakening” (in the language of myth the soul is feminine, often presented as the trapped or sleeping princess – and part of the reason why the hero in myth is always male). The hero is “the waker of his own soul, [he] is but the convenient means of his own dissolution.” Ultimately, death is simply the release of the ego and the shift in perspective to the superconsciousness of the soul, it only terrifies us because we are so attached to our ego perspectives we fear letting it go. The ego does not easily see beyond its own borders, nor is it readily willing to accept those borders as its own invention.

As Campbell explains, “as in the actual experience of every living being, so in the grandiose figure of the living cosmos”: the myths of the end of world describe the collective ego of humanity and the universe itself disintegrating. It is the fulfilment of the hero-saint’s lesson, the “ultimate claim of the unseen” in the world, the realization that although “the two worlds, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other – different as life and death, as day and night,” this is only from the point of view of the ego. The reality encountered at the world’s dissolution is “the two kingdoms are actually one.” Indeed, Campbell insists this revelation is “a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol,” it is the whole sense of mythology: “Myth is a directing of the mind and heart, by means of profoundly informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existence. Even in the most comical and apparently frivolous of its moments, mythology is directing the mind to this unmanifest which is just beyond the eye.” Or, just beyond the ego.

Death and the end of the world may simply be the dissolving of ego consciousness, but this does not mean it’s done easily or painlessly. In Part 2 of the Dissolutions stage, we turn to the existence of pain, sorrow, and evil in life and their role in the apocalypse (hint: it’s not what you think).

The Cosmogonic Cycle: Dissolutions Part 2

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By Sinéad Donohoe

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While the dissolutions stage is essentially the end of the world, a stage commonly associated with doom, pain, suffering, judgement, death and indeed extinction, it is more accurate to say it is the *disappearance* of the world only, not its annihilation. However, Campbell acknowledges the fear inherent in the myths of the cosmogonic round: "Creation myths are pervaded with a sense of the doom that is continually recalling all created shapes to the imperishable out of which they first emerged. The forms go forth powerfully, but inevitably reach their apogee, break, and return. Mythology, in this sense, is tragic in its view." Here Campbell points out all creation myths underline that the birth of life likewise births death. All things, all forms, all animals, all plants, all individuals, people, cities and civilizations are doomed to death from the moment of their creation. As the hero's journey teaches us that nothing lasts and all forms are constantly becoming and in flux, so all visible forms in the world – including the world itself – change, distort, break, and disappear. Life, in a sense, is a parade of tragedies, one following the next.

Yet, in *Myths to Live By*, Campbell insists recognizing "the monstrous nature of life" is the "first step to the knowledge of the highest divine." The trick is not just acknowledging the pain of the world, but seeing "its *glory* in that character: the realization that this is just how it is and that it cannot and will not be changed." It is from this same realization that Buddha rightfully asserts "All life is sorrowful," for indeed life in this world *is* filled with misery, illness, fear, and destruction. However, Campbell cautions against hoping the world could be otherwise: "Those who think – and their name is legion – that they know how the universe could have been better than it is, how it would have been had they created it, without pain, without sorrow, without time, without life, are unfit for illumination. Or those who think – as do many – 'Let me first correct society, then get around to myself!' are barred from even the outer gate of the mansion of God's peace. All societies are evil, sorrowful, inequitable; and so they will always be." The belief that the world could, and *should*, be different – even if this wish is the result of altruism – are the grand delusions of the ego, and so, as Campbell suggests, those who hold to these beliefs "are unfit for illumination."

The reason is illumination itself requires the release of this attitude, for it is only the ego who think it knows better. Following his realization that "all life is sorrowful," the Buddha asked if a cure for this sorrow could be found, which led to his second revelation: "There is a release from sorrow." The release however, does not alter the state of the world, as Campbell reiterates, "Revolution is *not* what the Buddha taught. His First Noble Truth was that *life* – all life – is sorrowful. And his cure, therefore, would have to be able to produce relief, no matter what the social, economic, or geographical circumstances [emphasis original]." Release from sorrow, the Third Noble Truth, is Nirvana. Nirvana is the "extinction of egoism." As it is taught in Buddhism, freedom from the ego means freedom from its three temptations: "the desire of ego for

enjoyment, its fear of death, and the sense of duties imposed by society." Nirvana has no expectation of the world, "for the released one is moved from within, not by any external authority: and this motivation from within is not out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of compassion for all suffering beings."

The sense of the Buddha's compassion (or, the Bodhisattva's – this is Gautama Buddha and anyone who seeks enlightenment), is quite different from that of divesting the world of pain, it is rather "benevolence without purpose." As Campbell recalls, "It is said that ambrosia pours from the Bodhisattva's fingertips even to the deepest pits of Hell, giving comfort there to the souls still locked in the torture chambers of their passions." This is the compassion of Nirvana, realizing that "in all our dealings with each other we are [the Bodhisattva's] agents, whether knowingly or not." It is recognizing that all beings are to some extent or another trapped in their own ego perspectives, and being willing to practice empathy towards them (and yourself), allowing through a small ray of the transcendent's light, regardless of their outward actions and appearance. Indeed, the only answer to tragedy is in "dissolving the organ of suffering itself," which Campbell describes as "the idea of an ego to be preserved, committed to its own compelling concepts of what is good and what is evil, true and false, right and wrong," as, anyway, all dichotomies "are dissolved in the metaphysical impulse of compassion" as well as in the full light of the eternal, of which compassion is its earthly expression.

Personal, individual death is a helpful lens through which to understand the end of the world for one's death is a personal apocalypse. As death is only the shedding of the ego, so the end of the world is the release of the ego illusions which gave rise to the visible world. Despite mythology's apparently "tragic view" of life, Campbell deftly points out that mythology is essentially the opposite: "in the sense that [mythology] places our true being not in the forms that shatter but in the imperishable out of which they again immediately bubble forth, mythology is eminently untragic. Indeed, *whenever the mythological mood prevails, tragedy is impossible*. A quality rather of dream prevails. True being, meanwhile, is not in the shapes but in the dreamer." The ultimate lesson of myth is to reorient us away from identifying with the ordinary world around us, with our physical bodies, our beliefs and worldly attachments, and back to the unmanifest, imperishable source. This is essentially Buddha's meaning when he suggests that the extinguishing of the ego is likewise the extinguishing of sorrow, for without the ego all that remains is the transcendent. There can be no sorrow where there is no "I" to feel pain. As we do not identify with the shadows of our dreams, but our waking consciousness, so myth reminds us not to identify with the dream-like forms of the visible world, but with the superconsciousness of the unmanifest. As Campbell points out endlessly, the terrifying, death-celebrating gods of the world's religions are all depicted with a hand raised in peace to remind us: "Do not be afraid. Nothing is happening."

This is what Campbell means when he describes those fixed on the problems of the world as “barred from even the outer gate of the mansion of God’s peace,” for peace is not in the world. The world was created and is maintained by the perspective of the ego, the “mansion of God’s peace” is found by reorienting our identification to the eternal. Finding the still centre within, the umbilical cord which reaches back to the unmanifest source, is the foundation of *true* peace. As Campbell suggests, the highest goal of mythology is to teach us how to “participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.” As mythology underlines the tragic and painful experiences of life, it also calls us passed them, it does not judge or condemn, it invites us to acknowledge pain and “participate joyfully” all the same. Thus we are called to look upon the dissolution of the world and instead of suffering and death, to see the immanent divinity in all things. The myths about the end of the world are terrifying only because they are sublime, because our egos are forced to face the truth: “I may not be real.” These myths are filled with horrors, in fact, in order to shatter the ego, expand our perspectives and help us re-identify with the transcendent. If we could truly learn to “participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world” by understanding that the sorrows are only shadows which disappear in the light of the unmanifest, we could discover the true freedom to live.



From this perspective, our notions of morality and evil are utterly transformed. Campbell writes of the existence of evil: “Universal too is the casting of the antagonist, the representative of evil, in the role of the clown. Devils – both the lusty thickheads and the sharp, clever deceivers – are always clowns. Though they may triumph in the world of space and time, both they and their work simply disappear when the perspective shifts to the transcendental. They are the mistakers of shadow for substance: they symbolize the inevitable imperfections of the realm of shadow, and so long as we remain this side the veil cannot be done away.” It is only in the physical realm that duality appears to be real. Love and hate, bright and dark, good and evil, are all shadows of the same, unknowable, invisible source. The morality of this world is exactly that, only of *this* world, it has no ultimate reality because from the perspective of eternity all acts of evil (indeed, *all* acts) “simply disappear.”

Thus, in a hero quest, the terrifying, oppressive, and evil dragon may be an enemy who must be vanquished, but, from the perspective of eternity, the same dragon is also a reflection of the hero himself. Both the hero and the dragon are holy. Or, as Carol Clover describes in her influential work on the horror genre in film, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, “attacker and attacked are expressions of the same self in nightmare.” You would not condemn a dark figure in a dream because you understand from your waking perspective he was only a spectre, and indeed, arose from your own mind, so too are the appearances of this world from the

perspective of the unmanifest realm simply shadows. But this is a point more eloquently made by author Hubert Selby Jr., whose books are often, and loudly, accused of being the devil's work. Most notably his 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which was not only banned in several countries including Italy, but was the subject of an English obscenity trial in the late 60's (incidentally, the jury were all male because the judge believed women might be "embarrassed at having to read a book which dealt with homosexuality, prostitution, drug-taking and sexual perversion," teacups that we are). In a quote from the book itself, Selby writes, "Sometimes we have the absolute certainty there's something inside us that's so hideous and monstrous that if we ever search it out we won't be able to stand looking at it. But it's when we're willing to come face to face with that demon that we face the angel." Selby articulates the existence of the transcendent behind the abhorrent appearances of the world, and while Selby acknowledges that much of his work is dark, the purpose of this darkness is not to frighten or repulse, but rather – like the dissolution myths of the world – to encourage readers to find the still source of *inner* light which reveals darkness to be an illusion. Likewise, mythology urges us to see that the peace of eternity shines behind even the deepest pits of hell. At the dissolutions stage of the cosmogonic round, all of this is finally laid bare, as Campbell reassures, because once the visible world recedes back into the transcendental source, "both [the devils] and their work simply disappear."

With this understanding, it is possible to see that the existence of tragedy in mythology is impossible, for "the myths never tire of illustrating the point that conflict in the created world is not what it seems." This can be seen in the Mesopotamian creation myth, where Tiamat, a primordial, dragon-like goddess who represents chaos, is split asunder by the great hero Marduk. The shards of Tiamat's body then become the shell of the earth and sky. As Campbell assures, "Tiamat, though slain and dismembered, was not thereby undone. Had the battle been viewed from another angle, the chaos-monster would have been seen to shatter of her own accord, and her fragments move to their respective stations. Marduk and his whole generation of divinities were but *particles of her substance*." This great battle is not really between good and evil, it only appears to be: "From the standpoint of those created forms all seemed accomplished as by a mighty arm, amid danger and pain. But from the centre of emanating presence, the flesh was yielded willingly, and the hand that carved it was ultimately no more than an agent of the will of the victim herself." Herein lie the echoes of the Buddhist law of Pratityasamutpada, the law of mutual arising which underlines the interconnectedness of all being: Tiamat exists because Marduk exists; Marduk exists because Tiamat exists, and thus, the actions of one are expressions of the will of the other. There is no separation between them, no polar opposites of good or evil – not even chaos and order. But, as Campbell underlines, this is all only visible passed the constricted perspective of the ego: "From the perspective of the source, the world is a majestic *harmony* of forms pouring into being, exploding, and dissolving." It is only those of us tied to our ego perspectives who "experience [the world as] a terrible cacaphony of battle cries and pain." Here again we encounter the lesson of the end of the world, to reorient ourselves in

“the repose of the central Cause” rather than the apparent causes of the world, and while Campbell acknowledges “The myths do not deny this agony (the crucifixion); they reveal within, behind, and around it essential peace (the heavenly rose).”

From the perspective of eternity, there is no trace of “evil” here, only a shadow play, which taken too seriously is precisely the villain’s mistake. Tragedy and sorrow are themselves only visions created by the ego, not reality, and so too is the emanation *and* dissolution of the world simply a perspective. In many of the world’s mythologies the true nature of death – that it is simply the release of the ego – is underlined in traditions where the individual does not die once, but countless times over, experiencing many lives, all with the same goal: to totally re-identify with the unmanifest. Death is not an end, but a gateway to the Reality behind the world. Campbell summarizes this belief: “The Chinese tell of a crossing of the Fairy Bridge under guidance of the Jade Maiden and the Golden Youth. The Hindus picture a towering firmament of heavens and a many-leveled underworld of hells. The soul gravitates after death to the story appropriate to its relative density, there to digest and assimilate the whole meaning of its past life. When the lesson has been learned, it returns to the world, to prepare itself for the next degree of experience. Thus gradually it makes its way through all the levels of life-value until it has broken past the confines of the cosmic egg. Dante’s *Divina Commedia* is an exhaustive review of the stages: “Inferno,” the misery of the spirit bound to the prides and actions of the flesh; “Purgatorio,” the process of transmuting fleshly into spiritual experience; “Paradiso,” the degrees of spiritual realization.” Each life’s aim is to become more transparent to the transcendent until finally one breaks through the shadows of the world, back into Oneness.

So it is that the end of the world is not the sudden implosion and annihilation of all living creatures and the earth itself, but the gradual release of all the ego perspectives which make the world real, until the universe itself is released back into formless eternity. Campbell describes this process, through the lens of the Buddhist tradition, as the gradual recognition of the illusion of separation: “As in the much later Buddhist image of the Bodhisattva within whose nimbus stand five hundred transformed Buddhas, each attended by five hundred Bodhisattvas, and each of these, in turn, by innumerable gods, so here, the soul comes to the fullness of its stature and power through assimilating the deities that formerly had been thought to be separate from and outside of it. They are projections of its own being; and as it returns to its true state they are all reassumed.” This is, essentially, the moment of apotheosis (see [The Hero’s Journey](#)), there is no longer duality, no longer separation. This is the true moment of dissolution, where all individuality, all separation, dissolves back into Oneness. And yet... there is another secret whisper behind all the tales of the world’s dissolution: another world will arise again, for nothing is ever truly lost. A promise reflected, too, in many of the world’s hero myths, wherein the tales of Baldr, Jesus, and King Arthur, although they die tragically, are not lost to us forever but are hidden in sleep to return in our need. This, for Campbell, is everything: “The basic principle of all mythology is this of the beginning in the end.” So the world must end, but it must also go on.

The horrifying myths of the world’s doom only appear malignant in the last throes of the ego-self

resisting its own disintegration. Yet it is this ego-self, the source of our *individual* (and therefore false) identities, which must be let go of in order to be "reassumed." This in, in fact, the central riddle of all mythology: "Can the ego put itself to death?" It is out of this riddle that the heroes of myth arise, the impulse to trace the path towards the ego's release, ultimately towards the world's dissolution where the ego perspective disappears altogether. Typically this process, particularly in the Christian tradition, is framed as the final punishment for the great sins of the world: the apocalypse becomes the ultimate redemption of a fallen, evil world. While this version rings true from the point of view that the world's end does indeed dissolve all apparent evil, the essential meaning of these myths is that evil was *never* real. The true meaning of the dissolution of the universe is rather to reopen our eyes to our true identity in the divine source, and therein, as Campbell consoles in *The Hero's Journey* (a transcript of several conversations with students), the concept of redemption is transformed: "The eternal cannot change. It's not touched by time. As soon as you have a historical act, a movement, you're in time. The world of time is a reflex of the energy of what is eternal. But the eternal is not touched by what is here. So the whole doctrine of sin is a false doctrine. It has to do with time. Your eternal character is not touched. You are redeemed." *And always have been.*