

## MYTH, CRITICAL LITERACY, AND MISS AMERICA

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Of all the skills that we teach in foundations courses, critical literacy, I believe, is the most important, because it has the most potential to lead to liberation in all its forms—intellectual, emotional, economic, social, political, and spiritual. In an effort to make the task of understanding literacy easier for my students, I use a variety of images—three, to be exact—that help convey its meaning. First, I use the textbook phrases that we all know so well: conventional literacy develops the ability to read a signature, functional literacy develops the ability to read a message, cultural literacy develops the ability to read a text, and critical literacy develops the ability to read the world (Tozer, 1998). (Sounds easy, eh?) Second, in an effort to make their knowledge more active, I ask students to imagine that they are teachers and that their task is to ask a series of questions that summarize the major issues of critical literacy. This, too, is far from easy, for it reenacts the demanding work of Socrates, who asked his listeners, past and present, not only to answer his probing questions **but to ask them as well**—the mark, I believe, of a truly literate person. Third, after my students spend considerable time and effort attempting to articulate critical literacy as a series of questions, I advance my third pedagogical image. This one is also a question.... I ask my students to uncover the myth—if you will, the embedded images—that lie hidden in their assignment. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me give you the task I assign them, and then you will be able to understand the puzzlement of their raised eyebrows, which I attempt to disarm with my all-knowing smile....

Since our class has already studied the PBS video entitled “The War on Boys,” I balance our study of gender issues by examining our culture’s War on Girls. I use a short excerpt of the *Miss America Pageant* to open the skirmish. Using the words of the Pageant contestants as well as the rubrics of the Pageant itself, I ask my students

to develop a series of questions that illustrate the concepts of critical literacy. After about five minutes, I ask students to share one of their questions with the class. What I am hoping to get—and usually do, in some form or another—are questions like these:

1. Who holds the power in this Pageant?
2. What studies (authors) confirm this picture?
3. Are there any victims in this Pageant? If so, who?
4. What is the message that the Pageant sends to society?
5. To what extent is this Pageant accountable to the people?
6. Why do Americans tolerate this Pageant?
7. Why are scholarships given to the contestant's university?
8. How could the victims of this Pageant liberate themselves?
9. Give a mythic analysis of this Pageant.

We spend a good deal of class time discussing our answers to these questions. Since the last question of the list—giving a mythic analysis of the Pageant—is the deepest and most difficult question for my students, I guide them through it gently, as if we were treading a labyrinth. I do so because mythical analysis is difficult for a number of reasons. First, mythical analysis is usually not taught in courses other than literary criticism, and therefore most education students are not familiar with it, even though former generations were exposed to it—in church, at home, and at school (Sutton, 1963). Second, and to add to the problem, the very concept of myth presents difficulties. As the critic Michael Bell points out, “The word myth inhabits a twilight zone between literature, philosophy, and anthropology. It means both **a supremely significant foundational story** and a falsehood. We therefore use it relationally; one person's belief is another person's myth (1997, p.1). We all know many people who

strive to live rationally, without myth, which is often considered to be an irrational throwback to the Pleistocene.... Yet, despite our contemporary rejection of myth, many of our deepest thinkers, playwrights, artists, and musicians consider myth to be our treasure, the essence of our wisdom. Robert Bly's book, *Iron John*, and the recent film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, amply illustrate this point, that life is woven from myth, often from the hidden dragons of the past, from which we cannot escape, but which, when rightly accessed, hold the secret to our—and others'—happiness. Those who believe that mythic analysis is useful know that it is difficult to learn and teach for yet another reason. Psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim claim that the myths that we live—and that our culture projects—are largely unconscious. Therefore few of us know what myths lie behind our lives: only in retrospect, if we are lucky, do we see some sort of pattern. Thus it takes great deal of skill, insight, and maturity to see the mythic outlines of our lives, as well as in the mythic outline of our culture. For all its difficulty, it is helpful to identify these myths, these foundational narratives that are so important. We often pay a price for discovering the foundational myth, for living unconsciously conforms to the directive of our culture, which trains us to think and act automatically, as if time, not insight, were important. But mythic analysis is an important adjunct to critical literacy, because it helps uncover the unconscious scripts that drive us to live mindlessly. Thus, mythical analysis is useful because it can foster insight and illumination, both of which prepare the ground for the more difficult work of liberation.

So I begin the journey of mythical analysis downward and inward by asking my students what images from classical mythology deal specifically with images. A stony silence usually follows—an appropriate response, as it turns out, for the myth that I am trying to tease from them is the myth of *Pygmalion*: the Cretan sculptor who falls in love with Aphrodite and, since he cannot possess her, carves an image of her as a substitute.

At this point, a few students smile, nod “Aha,” and conclusively

mention Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle of the Broadway show, "My Fair Lady," derived from G. B. Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*—a Victorian adaptation of the original myth. But the Broadway musical and G. B. Shaw's play are a far cry from the original Greek myth, which springs from a radically different perspective from Victorian middle class consciousness.

The Greek myth takes us back to what might be called primal theater. *Pygmalion*, because he cannot possess *Aphrodite*, makes an ivory image of her and ... as the story goes ... takes her image to bed with him. This proves unsatisfactory, as most images do, so he pleads with the goddess to take pity on him. *Aphrodite* grants his prayer and brings the image to life, naming it *Galatea*. The story concludes in a curious fashion. *Pygmalion* marries *Galatea*, who dutifully bears him a son (*Paphus*) and a daughter (*Metharme*). *Paphus*, *Pygmalion*'s successor, begins a dynasty that founds the Cyprian city of *Paphos*, where a famous temple to *Aphrodite* is built (Graves, 1955, p. 211).

Students usually see that what connects *Pygmalion* and Miss America is the image of ideal beauty that *Pygmalion* **attempts to fall in love with**: *Galatea*. I begin a psychological exploration of the myth by asking if it is common to fall in love with an image that we have fashioned from our deepest desires. Shy and reluctant nods of assent usually come my way from different corners of the room.... I point out that psychological studies indicate that image-making lies at the heart of romantic attachment—one of our species' most common psychic preoccupations, and one that enjoys heightened intensity during adolescence and early youth. The prevalence of images in the works of Euripides, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Moliere, and Joyce, for example, along with the testimony of films, poetry, fiction, pornography, dreams, fantasies, imaginative exercises, bedroom talk, and the like, all bear this line of inquiry out.

Another psychological dimension to this myth, I point out to my students, occurs in the classroom, when teachers, against their better judgement, attempt to seduce their students into a very danger-

ous activity. The activity to which I am referring is, of course, thinking—which often proves to be both painful and subversive. But thinking can turn even more dangerous if and when teachers attempt to seduce their students in another manner—into having them accept their (the teacher’s) view of reality. After all, what is more dangerous than a ready-made answer? Seduction can also occur outside the classroom as well, when teachers (and students) attempt to fall in love with each other, like silly dumbbells—recently captured in the film, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, a “real funomonon,” as Joyce might put it.

Shocking as these psychological readings might be for many of my attentive undergraduates, I continue to interrogate them further about the myth. I ask them to raise another angle, another perspective, besides the handy sexual one. There is usually another long silence after I ask this.... But eventually some brave student brings up the idea that dreams are powerful images, too, images that have important psychological functions. They can be considered as emotional releases or safety valves that help us to preserve our sanity, that prevent us from going mad. I concur and develop this notion further. It is true that some images have a softening effect on us, buffering the impact of reality. As a case in point, referring to the Miss America Pageant, what teenager—or adult, for that matter?—does not wish for a complexion or figure like Miss America’s? In a more universal way, appealing to adults and teenagers alike, I point out that we all cling, as Eugene O’Neil expressed it in his play, *The Ice Man Cometh*, to deeply cherished images or “pipe dreams” which serve as security blankets, protecting us from a world that is often a little too chilly for comfort. Since I am teaching education students, I expand upon the question and ask them if schooling might not be considered a kind of security blanket or pipe-dream as well, if the curriculum that they are obliged to follow might not also wrap them in a world that is based on a some kind of dream, denial, or self-deception.... The more astute of my students recall our earlier readings and discussions of top-down management, where the dreams of trustees or the Board of Regents, for example, materialize in the classroom, as recent “ivory” versions of the curriculum....

There are some nods of assent to this line of inquiry. But I am after more. Since many of my students are politically naive, I have no other choice but to take chisel in hand and hammer out the following line of thought.

Pygmalion—I say—is Madison Avenue. Pygmalion is the media, projecting images of nubile women that make their corporate owners filthy rich. And—I also say—Miss America is Galatea, the image that is brought to life by Aphrodite, the pervasive, powerful, bewitching Sex Goddess whom most humans adore and serve. Pygmalion (Madison Avenue—or, behind it, Coca Cola, Ford, Philip Morris, et al.) succeeds because of Aphrodite, who attains her vitality through nothing less than “make believe”—a Pageant. (Awesome, nod my undergraduates....) I point out that another way to see **Miss America becoming real** is to compare her to Cinderella. Cinderella, a poor waif at the beginning of the story, becomes real at the Ball, the Pageant of all Pageants. At the Ball she meets her prince, who effortlessly falls in love with her. Now why does the Prince fall in love with her? The answer is the same as Pygmalion’s—because she fits his image, as exactly as her foot does the glass slipper. Love comes through matching an image. After the Ball, we are led to believe, Cinderella and her Prince live happily ever after. This is the payoff of the Pageant—the image of Bliss, the reward of effortless relationship, without risk, sweat, deformity, uniqueness, sickness, or smelly feet....

The uncanny presence of Aphrodite, who lives not only on Olympus but in every nook and cranny of our planet, brings the Miss America Pageant alive, and her primal force also gives a curve and twist to every line of the **show**, be it walking, singing, dancing, talking, and even **answering questions**.... All of these activities happen without the slightest trace that the contestants have been victimized by a jealous goddess who **loves to do this kind of thing** to young girls, who are just too pretty for their own good.... Her relish for this kind of revenge is classic. It is Aphrodite, we remember, who forces Psyche to submit to a number of tasks that overwhelm her. It is only

the disobedience of her maverick son, Cupid, as well as the hidden grace of Nature, in the guise of ants, eagles, and stone towers, that keeps her from catastrophe and suicide, the unfortunate end of much inappropriate image-making.

Classical literature is full of the Love Goddess' fury. Homer, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, recounts the curse that follows Helen, considered the most beautiful and enchanting woman of the classical world. Helen brings ruin not only to all of Troy but to most of Greece as well—its arrogant chieftains, their resentful wives and lost children, and the countless commoners who sailed, fought, and died for her sake. Sophocles, in his *Antigone*, has the chorus say of Aphrodite, “Whoever feels your irresistible grip is driven mad, their mind wrenched apart, swerving into ruin” (Fagles, 1984, p. 101). Against such a goddess, no mortal can stand. Much later in time, during the European Renaissance, Cervantes, in his first published work, the pastoral romance, *Galatea*, portrays the same kind of bitter controversy that attends Aphrodite, the Love Goddess. Two shepherds, Elicio and Erastro—one noble, one rustic, prototypes of Cervantes' later characters, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza—both seek the hand of the same woman, the princess Galatea, “whose beauty,” Cervantes tells us, “is such that it is better to imagine it, since words are inadequate to do it justice.” Beautiful as she is, Galatea has a very difficult life, trying to deflect the constant and unwelcome advances of many suitors. The romance closes in Galatea's unresolved conflict with her father, Aurelio, who wants her to marry someone she resists. As Elicio and Erastro prepare to come to her rescue, the First Part of Cervantes' early work closes, with the promised Second Part never to follow. But the theme of the early work—the plight of idealized beauty that cannot be rescued by rustic nobility—does not disappear from Cervantes' literary imagination. Instead, it appears in larger form, in his masterpiece, *Don Quixote*, which takes up the unfinished project of *Galatea* and transforms it into an even wider theme—noble obsession in conflict with reasonable mediocrity; virtuous fantasy at odds with unvarnished materialism. This theme is embodied in the experience of every major and minor character of the novel,

the most singular example being Don Quixote's inflation of Aldonza Lorenza—a woman he never has even seen—into an illusory princess, whom he calls Dulcinea del Toboso (Pt 1, Bk 1). The stories of Marcella (Pt 2, Bk 2, 5-6), Dorothea (Pt 2, Bk 4, 1-3), and Camilla (Pt 1, Bk 4, 6-8), as well as the story of the madman locked up in the prison of Seville (Pt 2, Bk 3, 1) also illustrate this theme, which is derived from the ancient Greek source of the myth of Pygmalion, who attempts to embrace what cannot be held.

Since time is about to run out, I am forced to cut short this tantalizing digression into classical literature and refocus our attention on the original Greek myth of Pygmalion. For the myth has other dimensions to it that are important for critical literacy, dimensions that Shaw's play as well as its Broadway version, "My Fair Lady," both ignore, even though Freudian psychoanalysis had begun to permeate British and American culture by the time of their creation and production. The vast underbody of the myth resists detection, like an iceberg, so I throw out the following questions to try to bring up its submerged content.

I ask my students not only what it means to fall in love with a goddess but also what happens when people take an image of a goddess to bed with them. The silence that follows indicates that if more light is to be shed on this topic, the task is going to fall on my shoulders. I cautiously begin by confiding that I have viewed a number of college catalogues, but I have never come across a course entitled "Fetishes, Goddesses, and Bed...." Therefore, since college courses are the depositories of world knowledge, I humbly confess that there is nothing more to say. We will just have to end it here.... I admit that I am at a loss as to how to proceed.... I also admit that, even if I knew, I would be reluctant to explore this topic in the classroom, especially with undergraduates, since my thoughts might force them to confront something that most of them, up to this point in their lives, have probably studiously avoided—namely, a confrontation with their own Shadow, what Freud called the "polymorphous perverse," hidden within each of us—the fly in every ointment. But I poke around a bit

and ask my students to examine what lies close at hand, so to speak—personal fantasies, dreams, dorm talk, fraternity and sorority parties, the internet, and other similar venues. Accessing this information, I suggest, could help reveal what it means to fall in love with a goddess and take her image to bed with you. What it means, I believe, is different for all of us, but it probably combines such activities as longing, fantasy, dreams, masturbation, remorse, isolation, guilt, and loneliness. Despite our permissive culture of instant gratification, genuine relationship occurs, as Jung said, only when the head and tail are joined, only when the conscious and subconscious minds work together for similar goals, only when right thought and action cooperate with desire and fantasy—unlike Pygmalion, who severed them, by forcing reason into fantasy.

I conclude with a final question which, following my theological bent, is actually a three-in-one sally (whammy, if you prefer). First, I ask, how can an image take on its own life? Second, how can an image have offspring? Third, how can its offspring be guided into maturity? This is the climax of my little lecture on critical literacy. I put it in simple terms, for by now my undergraduates are looking a bit stony-eyed, as if I have broken a taboo (another way of defining critical literacy). First, how does an image take on its own life? Pygmalion provides the answer. He has a child, Metharme, by his daughter, Galatea. That spells incest. Not bad for starters. But that is only one third of it. Second, how does the image have offspring? Pygmalion's son and successor, Paphus, begins a dynasty that founds the Cyprian city of Paphos, where a famous temple to Aphrodite is built. That means that the son, following his love-obsessed, sex-crazed father, subdues the matriarchy and institutes the temples of the patriarchy. That spells prostitution, which occurs only after the image of woman has been distorted and heightened by voyeurism. And that, I add, is where advertising and abuse come in, transforming the simple loveliness of a girl or woman into pornography. Now we have two thirds of it. I press on to my final point, for I am committed to give clear answers and workable solutions to the problems I raise. I address my third question: How can the children—the images that come

alive—be guided into maturity? Simple, I say, giving a triple answer to my triple question: 1) by learning to view exploitative images critically, 2) by watching channels like C-Span or PBS, and—get this—3) by turning off the television, something that can now be considered a counter-cultural activity!

So what is the conclusion of this analysis? Happier and brighter students? Alas, after all is said and done, there is a visible sense of deflation and disappointment in the class. The reasons are not hard to find. Students have been forced to submit to the deconstruction of one of our most cherished, popular myths. No one is happy with that. It is not uncommon, if I wait long enough, that one of the prettier coeds in the class shyly raises her hand and confesses that she was once the Beauty Queen of her Senior Ball and that, until now, she never thought that “there was anything wrong with that...” All too often, copy-cat style, there are follow-up responses to this confession: “Me, too!” But the undergraduates who were not Beauty Queens sometimes have something more to add. They tend to deride all the contestants of the Miss America Pageant, as well as all beauty pageants, as “stupid.” Recent studies bear this out. Our youth, the most spoiled generation in history, is targeted by multimedia conglomerates, *The Merchants of Cool*. Last year, these conglomerates (Viacom, News Corp, Vivendi Universal, AOL Time Warner, Walt Disney, and Bertelsmann) earned over 150 billion dollars from teenagers, who were maneuvered (actually, tricked) into buying their own fantasies. Recent studies confirm that most teens live in a fantasy world where adults are not present, where the latest rebellion becomes **a product**, where the standards of speech and behavior are progressively coarsened, and where the best way to fit in, as one astute teenager put it, “is to just dumb yourself down enough to accept it” (*Merchants*, 2001). For every Queen, there are millions of non-queens, and they feel it—and resent—it deeply, even while seeing the stupidity of the ongoing show. The only consolation for the losers is actually a very valuable one: they have an early start at “crap-detecting,” a phrase that Hemingway used to describe the essential quality of a good writer, reporter, or cultural critic (Weingartner, 1969).

But the experience of deflation does not end here, for it continues into the next class, in ways that fellow teachers might especially appreciate. I notice, even after all of our deep analytical work, that the college pageant continues right before our very eyes. Pretty undergrads strut their stuff. Their carefully selected clothing, their model-like, statuesque figures, their makeup, their air—all broadcast that they have assimilated the message of Pygmalion down to the smallest detail. This myth does not die easily in our culture. It is projected to all corners of the globe, every minute of the day and night. Pygmalion is Madison Avenue, and his contemporary children are the midriff and the mook. The midriff is “a slim, teenage girl, highly sexualized, a world-weary sophisticate,” and the mook is “a boorish teenage boy, a perpetual adolescent, crude, infantile, misogynistic, and very, very angry” (Merchants, 2001). Pygmalion is the unredeemed, unprosecuted patriarchy, whose incestuous images fake (not-so) innocent teens into doing what they fantasize. The fault lies with Pygmalion, not Galatea, his creation, his dupe.

For me, the bell has rung, leaving an indelible signature: Galatea—the ad, the fetish, the stylized teen—imprisons its creator, Pygmalion (who knows no better), and then it imprisons itself (into the ongoing fantasy of consumerism). Galatea imprisons herself by the erotic power that brought her to life. What can free her? Only the power embedded in another ancient myth, the myth of inner beauty, which captures the magic of the soul. But that will require another chapter, another exploration, where the myth of Pygmalion is transformed into its opposite—the myth of Psyche (Christ-Buddha).

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