

Mythical Melodies: A Study of Robertson Davies'

The Lyre of Orpheus

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Myths are tales of the basic essence of life and are evidence of the unifying soul of the world. It is this unifying truth which myths proclaim that finds expression in Robertson Davies' trilogies. Davies' delightful novel, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, presents an enchanting world of myths dexterously merged with the realm of the modern. In its exemplary evocation of mythical motifs and archetypal situations, the novel becomes a fine instance of the mythic method adopted by the Modernist novelists at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, through the silent but central metaphor of the musical instrument called lyre, Davies bridges the mythical and the modern.

Cast in the shadows of Greek myths, *The Lyre of Orpheus* re-enacts the lives of the mythical Orpheus and King Arthur in the modern world. In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a musician who sang so mellifluously that the universe danced to his tunes. He was the son of Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, and of the god, Apollo. It was Apollo who gifted Orpheus his lyre, the instrument that became a metaphor for divine music. On one occasion, he calmed the sea with his playing; another time, he saved the Argonauts from the deadly Sirens by playing so loudly that they could not hear the Sirens' songs. In *The Lyre of Orpheus*, the lore of the lyre is combined with the Celtic myth of King Arthur, testifying Davies' brilliant craftsmanship and mythological imagination. King Arthur was a legendary medieval ruler of Britain whose life and deeds became the basis for a collection of tales known as the Arthurian legends. The Arthurian story, with its elements of mystery, magic, love, war, adventure, betrayal, chivalry, and fate, has touched the popular imagination and has become part of the world's shared mythology.

Combining these two mythic motifs and placing them in a modern Canadian context, Davies attempts a brilliant synergy with remarkable success. The third novel in The Cornish Trilogy, *The Lyre of Orpheus* narrates the experiences of the production of an opera named "Arthur of Britain" by the Cornish Foundation. The enduring and enchanting expeditions of King Arthur and his Knights, for the Holy Grail, offer an analogous motif to *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Davies' use of the Arthurian journey myth is keenly observed by Diamond-Nigh who notes that Davies' characters in the novel perform a "...dual role as historic individual and archetypal manifestation..." (39). It is these archetypal manifestations and suggestions that Davies is able to evoke throughout the novel that make *The Lyre of Orpheus* an exemplary piece of art.

The Lyre of Orpheus touches upon the lives of both the mythical Arthur and the modern Arthur simultaneously. The myth of King Arthur and his Knights is polished and presented in a different ambience. Davies' endeavour to retell and re-create myths emphasises the fact that a myth can no longer be treated as an outdated, old story. Rather, the "joyful relativity and vitality"

(Bakhtin 158) of myths keep its energy active always. Modern Arthur's round table meeting with his fellows in *The Lyre of Orpheus* to discuss the production of the opera invariably evokes a link to the mythical King Arthur and his Knights. Also, the number of committee members in the novel is equal to the total number of the Knights who accompanied the mythical King Arthur. In the novel, one of the members in the production team suggests: "We have an assembly of the Knights of the Round Table: Arthur gives them their charge – they are to disperse and seek the Holy Grail, which will bring lasting peace and greatness to Britain. The knights accept their duty and are sent their different ways" (139).

Through the mythical tones in *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Davies conveys a dictum that pushes the readers to understand the real value of art in one's life. To him, art is the rhythm of life because the very nature of art provides meaning to life; the symphony of art brings harmony to one's existence. Having realized this truth, Daviesian characters are in relentless quests for perfection in art – drama, music, opera, and magic. Like the mythical Orpheus' Lyre, art symbolizes enduring solutions and elevated states of mind. The novel, however, becomes a testimony to Davies' mythopoeic imagination affirming an enchanting philosophy that art of the highest order contains knowledge, wisdom and the texture of universal brotherhood and noble values of life – all rooted in and bloomed from man's encounter with the mythical and the mystical.

The invasive but indirect metaphor of music suggests many things in *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Davies, it seems, is always aware of the inevitable role music has played throughout his life. He once described himself as a 'failed musician'. The musical knowledge he acquired and the use he made of music and musicians in his novels disclose his ardent passion for music. The reader can easily understand the progress of music in Canada through the novels of Davies. In fact, the title of the novel, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, insinuates the idea that music strives to speak to mankind in the only possible language of this unseen world. Robin Elliott, a noted critic, talks about the novel as, "The lyre of Orpheus opens the door of the underworld. This phrase provided Davies with not only the title for his book, but also a leitmotif that runs through it, about the relationship between music and the unseen world" (1038). For Davies, music provides and promotes harmony in one's life through its magical notes. In the novel, the unseen world full of sound and fury is later transformed into a world of love and compassion after the production of the opera. The stage performance of the opera gives immense pleasures to the spectators; the musical opera reaches, like the mythical lyre, mellifluously into their hearts and offers peace and amity.

In the novel, Mamusia and Yerko leave their Rosedale house after it has burned mysteriously to the ground; they camp out in a room in the basement garage of the condominium building where Arthur and Maria live. "The lyre of Orpheus opens the door of the underworld" (128) Maria says to Darcourt, as they take the elevator to visit the Laoutaros. Maria's comment, ironic in tone, equating the Laoutaroses' subterranean dwelling with the underworld of ancient mythology reiterates the mythic foundations of the novel and acts as a reverberation of mythic wisdom.

The Lyre of Orpheus is epitomised by the legendary hero's indefatigable journey to seek the Holy Grail. The modern Arthur's journey is oriented towards the re-establishment of art in society. Both modern and mythical "Arthurs" believe that their mission would benefit humankind as it is not undertaken for the fulfilment of personal desires. The transformation of society is the ultimate aim of their quest. The mythical Arthur believed that the Holy Grail would bring peace and enormous pride to his land if it was found and that the nation would flourish through the Holy Grail. As a lover of art, the modern Arthur believes that art would bring harmony to society. With such noble vision and mission both the "Arthurs" set out more or less following the "Cambellian hero journeys."

Also, Arthur's journey has mythic parallels in that it resembles the voyage of Orpheus through Hades, the netherworld, in search of Eurydice, his beloved. Orpheus protected by the Gods, descends to the Hades and arrives at the infamous Stygian realm, passing by ghosts and souls of people unknown. He also manages to charm Cerberus, the known monster with the three heads. Orpheus presents himself in front of the God of the Underworld Hades (Pluto) and his wife Persephone. Orpheus starts playing for them and even the cold heart of Pluto starts melting, due to the melodies emanating from Orpheus lyre. Pluto tells Orpheus that he can take Eurydice with him but under one condition; Eurydice would follow him while walking out to the light from the caves of the Underworld, but he should not look at her before coming out into the light, otherwise he would lose her forever. Orpheus thanks the Gods and leaves to ascend to the world. He tries to hear Eurydice's steps, but can not hear anything. He feels that the Gods are fooling him. Eurydice is actually behind him, but as a shadow, waiting to come into the light, to become a full woman again. Only a few feet away from the exit, Orpheus loses his faith and turns back to look; he sees Eurydice behind him, but her shadow is whisked back among the dead and Eurydice was gone forever.

The immensity of Orpheus journey and the tragic end that awaits Orpheus is refashioned by Davies. Davies, in fact, makes his hero wiser and courageous "not to look back" and equips him to follow his dream unconditionally. The journey of these mythic heroes—Arthur and Orpheus—and that of the Daviesian hero, closely mirrors the Cambellian hero journey patterns. Joseph Campbell projects the expedition of the hero through different stages of life: the journey from the normal world into extraordinary realms; the obstacles confronting en route; the encounters with people that provides new insights resulting in the elevation to power and wisdom. Likewise, on the way to the goal, the mythic hero meets a wise person or a teacher, who will impart knowledge and teach him new skills to reach his destination; the hero gradually becomes consciously aware of the mission that he has to fulfil. Steering towards the goal, according to Campbell, the hero is challenged to his limit, reaching a culminating experience, which he calls a "supreme ordeal". The result is that the hero achieves his reward and is forever altered by the experience. He often attains new powers and sets off with them. Gradually the hero reappears with these new abilities, bringing a boon to his society.

In *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Arthur is disturbed by the infidelity of his wife Maria, who is seduced by Geraint Powell, the opera director disguised as Arthur, while Arthur himself is on a journey. Maria not aware of this trickery by Geraint Powell as the act happens in the dark when she is half asleep, submits herself to Powell and becomes pregnant. The mythical King Arthur too

had encountered the same situation as he had often been away on his quest for the Holy Grail and in his absence, Sir Lancelot, the King's minister and friend, had engaged in an adulterous affair with Queen Guinevere. On knowing of his beloved's infidelity, the King was heart broken and the incurable ache gradually led him to the grave.

Unlike the mythical Arthur, however, Davies' Arthur is soon able to be released and relieved from worries. An irredeemable faith in fate makes the modern Arthur reconcile readily; Arthur forgives both Geraint Powell and Maria and he adopts the baby as his own, while Geraint Powell takes on the role of an "absentee but devoted uncle" (Diamond-Nigh 38). It is insinuated that Davies does not openly subject his characters to mythical forces since they celebrate individualities of their own to identify their own paths different from the roads taken by the mythological heroes. Davies' Arthur thus veers away from the mythical path and eludes tragedy through reconciliation.

Davies' mythological imagination imbues his characters with the power to move away from their mythic counterparts. His characters give shape to their own "personal myth" by adopting their own way of life, and making their own decisions though placed in a mythical position. "Personal myth" is crafted through the knowledge, worldly experience and wisdom they gain by journeying like mythic heroes. The journeys equip them with the power to write their "personal myth" and a vital vigour to overcome hurdles. This is explained by Prof. Darcourt, one of the characters, "we all have a personal myth, but anyhow a myth that has its shape and its pattern somewhere outside our daily life" (285). "Personal myth" imparts courage and spirit to the characters and inspires them to be modern and mythical at once.

Deeply interested in the life and customs of Greek people during ancient as well as medieval times, Davies wishes to adopt their practices, system and sagacious approach. The life of those ancient and medieval people flourished with "joyful relativity and vitality" (Bakhtin 158) because they had already adopted myths as part of their mundane life. Davies' admiration for Greek life is expressed in his book, *The Merry Heart*, thus:

The world in which the Greeks lived—I speak chiefly about the Athenians, who were the intellectual leaders of Greek Civilization, was governed by a system of democracy from which we rather presumptuously suppose our own democratic system is derived [...]. They invited the gods to have a say in all important elections. How did they do that? After the votes had been cast by throwing balls of different colours into a vase, the presiding priest threw in a handful of balls chosen at random, so that the gods—or blind chance—might be represented. It was also a way of preventing a packed election. The Greeks were very subtle, and hard-headed in ways that we are not. (9)

Apart from taking myths from its usual helicon - Greek Mythology - Davies often makes use of Biblical myths. Most of his characters have Biblical names and they also possess the characteristics of the Biblical persona they are thus associated with. His central characters of both trilogies - Deptford and Cornish - are linked with Biblical personalities through their attitude and behaviour alike. In fact, even if the characters are not aware of their association with the Biblical personalities, their traits are clearly discernible by fellow characters. Despite having different

opinions and viewpoints, Davies' characters meet together on the line that is created by the writer through his use of myths and archetypes.

Through his smooth narrative, Davies attempts to project the notion that the very existence of society is determined, structured and organized by factors such as religion, history and myth, among others and that a well laid mosaic called Canada is coloured by the tiles of myth, religion, history and so on. Also, Davies himself assumes the mask of an invisible hero speaking through his characters, who endeavours to gather together the available myths of various settlers in Canada and tries to register those myths as his nation's own.

Thus, Davies's expedition through the Canadian literary landscape, his efforts to reinstate order in his society, his endeavours to unify "the heap of broken images", among others, raises him to the heights of a Campbellian mythic hero. In fact, in his essay, "Literature in a Country without a Mythology", Davies says:

... the author today is the descendant of the story teller who went into the market place, sat himself down upon his mat, and beat upon his collection bowl, crying, "Give me a copper coin and I will tell you a golden tale!" That's what I truly believe. All honor to the author as Hero, when firm necessity demands that he be a hero or lose his honor. But let us not, in the heat of this troubled times, assume that a Hero is what an author must be or he is no author. (42)

Assuming the role of Orpheus and adopting the art of writing as the magic Lyre, Davies endeavours to interpret the modern world which seems to be scattered like "a heap of broken images." To Davies, myths are not merely the stories of fantasy or the stories of gods and goddesses but something that project a culture, tradition and moral values as well. Myths are collective and communal; they connect a tribe or nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. As a nation is conceived as an 'imagined community,' Davies' endeavours to envisage Canada through myths, religion and archetypes and his attempt at 'narrating the nation', amounts to a beautiful synthesis and a mythopoesis. This mythopoeic imagination demands that his texts be placed in a mythological context. In fact, in Davies, myths are extended metaphors for the continuous process of renewal and regeneration; the rediscovery of the soul. He writes in his book, *The Merry Heart*:

Canada has a soul right enough, but it has until recently been exceedingly cautious about letting it show. Nor was this simply because Canada was shy, though reticence is a national characteristic; it was because Canada was spiritually lazy, and was perfectly happy to borrow soul, if it might be needed. (44)

Davies, in *The Lyre of Orpheus*, underscores Joseph Campbell's concept that the symbolic meaning of myth is always psychological, metaphysical and mystical; myth preaches not that all is unconscious or all ultimate reality; myth finds unconsciousness within, not beyond consciousness, and inherits ultimate reality within, not beyond everyday reality, which is, therefore, to be embraced rather than rejected. Davies' journey through myths in fact, discloses his resolute attempt throughout, to forge a strand where the mundane reality and ultimate reality merge seamlessly.

In *The Lyre of Orpheus*, the gap within which Davies operates is a type of amalgamation and combination of social factors such as the way of life, way of thinking and a variety of cultural patterns of people in a multi cultural land like Canada. Though living in a society that has been formed and continues to be formed by people with varied identities, people's patriotism and admiration of Canada is revealed in Davies' narration. Creating oneness among these different strands is the primary task of Davies as he knows that his nation lacks documented history and a firm mythical background. Hence he becomes both the historian and mythographer of Canada collecting the available historical and mythical material, of not only the settlers but of all existing nations. This notion of creation and recreation is foregrounded thematically in *The Lyre of Orpheus* intact. Tatjana Chorney, an eminent critic, says in this respect that the writer "who conceives of his art, just like the magician/enchanter, is in continual intercommunication with his audience/readers. ... he makes them participate but in the sense that they are expected to open themselves to enchantment and to absorb the magic of his performance, his text" (126).

Robertson Davies' conception of myth is well organized with the idea that there is an inevitable archetypal presence found within the myths that share a common meaning in all communities. He drives home the idea that myth links us to the vital energy that stands behind the creation of the world, and that they always keep the world alive and active through a consecutive process of renewal.

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