



Segal, Robert A., *Myth Theorized*. –Sheffield: Equinox, 2023, 187 pp. ISBN-13 978-1-78179-864-5

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Theories of myth try to make sense of the whole category of myths, accounting for their origin, their function or their subject matter. Drawing upon this premise, Professor Robert A. Segal undertakes the task of comparing and evaluating these theories in his recent publication, titled *Myth Theorized*. He conducts this by employing a diverse array of methodologies and approaches rooted in both the social sciences and the humanities, spanning across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This work becomes a notable addition to Professor Segal's other two books on the topic of myth theories: *Theorizing about Myth* (1999) and *Myth Analyzed* (2021). Comprising a total of fourteen chapters following an introductory section, the book also features notes, a bibliography and an index. Despite the absence of a discernible chronological or linear sequence, certain themes and ideas recur throughout the pages of the fourteen chapters, constituting the primary conclusions drawn from the volume.

Chapter 1 introduces the book's central thesis, which revolves around the existence of a significant dichotomy between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century theories of myth. The former perceives myth as a literal and primitive explanation of the physical world, whereas the latter interprets myth as symbolically accounting for the human experience. This contrast is exemplified through the exploration of prominent exponents of the nineteenth-century view of myth, like Edward Burnett Tylor or James George Frazer, and of the twentieth-century one, such as Hans Blumenberg or Joseph Campbell. Segal explains nuances and differences amongst members of the same group, drawing comparisons with theories from various backgrounds and time periods.

In the second chapter, Professor Segal compares Friedrich Max Müller's twentieth-century theory of myth and religion with the perspectives of Carl Jung, Andrew Lang and, especially, E. B. Tylor. In a distinctly nineteenth-century fashion, E. B. Tylor interprets religion and myth in a literal sense, whereas Müller, Tylor's primary rival theorist, propounds a religionist theory. Müller pits myth against religion, suggesting that religion originates to convey the

experience of the divine, while myth emerges later as a result of confusion. This chapter showcases Segal's capacity to bridge disparate realms of knowledge and provide easily comprehensible explanations for readers less acquainted with the intricacies of religious and mythological arguments.

Chapter 3 focuses on the most popular interpretation of the myth of Adonis, as expounded by J. G. Frazer in his renowned work, *The Golden Bough*. In a manner reflective of nineteenth-century thought, Frazer delineates three pre-scientific stages of culture: magic, religion and the combination of magic and religion, termed "myth ritualism". Frazer places Adonis in all three stages, establishing him as one of the key Mediterranean gods of vegetation. Effectively demonstrated in this chapter is the fact that Frazer's analysis of Adonis transcends the domain of myth, encompassing religion, culture and human nature. This substantiates the continued relevance of Frazer's work in contemporary times and underscores its deserving place in scholarly consideration.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of J. G. Frazer's stages of culture, centring on the interpretation of Osiris and the most conflicting and contradictory aspects of this theory – specifically, the concept of euhemerism, involving the transformation of a human into a god. Professor Segal elucidates that, despite providing scant evidence to support the notion of euhemerism in the case of Osiris, J. G. Frazer still deems Osiris as fitting euhemerism more closely than his other three Mediterranean gods of vegetation. Notably, this draws a parallel between Osiris and Jesus, both of whom experience death as a transition to divinity.

In the fifth chapter, Segal compares the popular theories of J. G. Frazer with those of another very popular writer on myth: J. Campbell. He uses the chronological divide introduced earlier to show their differing perspectives. Frazer, embodying the nineteenth-century stance, asserts that myth offers rudimentary explanations about the physical world and is thus unnecessary for moderns, who already have science. In contrast, Campbell, representing the

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twentieth-century perspective, contends that myth is timeless and indispensable, serving as a conduit for expressing symbolic and mystical meanings. Despite their differences, these authors have a common thread: their significant impact on the literary domain, with their ideas being applied to various artistic mediums.

Chapter 6 offers an unconventional perspective on J. Campbell's theory of myth, challenging the common belief that he adheres closely to Jungian principles. Campbell's ideas differ significantly from C. Jung's concerning the origin and purpose of myth. While Jung asserts that myth arises from the unconscious, J. Campbell's writings suggest a more nuanced stance, indicating that the unconscious can sometimes be acquired rather than inherited. Additionally, Campbell extends the role of myth beyond C. Jung's conception, viewing it not only as a means to unveil the archetypes of the unconscious but also as a tool for providing symbolic imagery for the world, justifying societal practices through divine endorsement, and above all, aligning individuals with the cosmos, society, and their own identities. Sigmund Freud's and his disciple Otto Rank's ideas on heroism are introduced as a point of comparison with Jung's own theory. This comparison further accentuates the disparities between J. Campbell's and C. Jung's understandings of heroism. Through this exploration, Segal addresses intricate topics like unconsciousness, instincts, the development of consciousness, and heroism in life, while effectively underscoring the distinct viewpoints and approaches associated with these ideas.

Chapter 7 assesses the validity of Mircea Eliade's famous argument that religiosity is innate to human beings, that religion is expressed through myth, and that modern individuals inevitably harbour (religious) myths. Similar to C. Jung, J. Campbell, and other theorists from the twentieth century, M. Eliade shares the belief in the eternal nature of myths. However, unlike C. Jung and J. Campbell who allow for wholly secular myths, M. Eliade seeks traces of religiosity within modern myths. Yet, his endeavour to locate religious myths in contemporary contexts falls short, as he is unable to substantiate the existence of modern myths with religious elements. In this manner, M. Eliade's attempt to demonstrate the presence of modern myths, in accordance with his religious criteria, ultimately proves unsuccessful.

Chapter 8 explores one particular challenge myth faces in modernity, i.e. the question of whether myth is compatible with science. Unlike nineteenth-century theorists like E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, their twentieth-century counterparts such as S. Freud, C. Jung and J. Campbell tend to assert that myth and science can coexist. Professor Segal shows that this perspective arises from the understanding that myth does not serve as a literal explanation for the physical world but rather functions as a symbolic representation of the human experience within it. Belonging to this second group of thinkers but pushing the bound-

aries further, M. Eliade and Bronisław Malinowski maintain that myth and science can be compatible, even when addressing matters of the physical world, because they serve distinct purposes. M. Eliade, in particular, attributes myths with functions that transcend those of science, namely bringing both primitives and moderns closer to divinity.

In Chapter 9 Segal delves further into the central thesis of his book, which posits that twentieth-century theories of myth fundamentally differ from their nineteenth-century counterparts. This time, he engages in a comparison and contrast of his own classification with that proposed by scholar Daniel Dubuisson in his work *Twentieth Century Mythologies: Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, Eliade* (1993). Segal contends that of Dubuisson's three theorists, Georges Dumézil is the one who most clearly qualifies, in his terms, as a twentieth-century thinker; only for him, myth is not about the physical world, but about the social world, an idea widely shared among twentieth-century theorists.

Chapter 10 tackles the complex and changing relationship between myth and literature. Moreover, it presents an overview of various perspectives on this relationship. Some scholars have traced elements of myth within literary works. Others argue that literature stems from myth, with myth serving as the script for rituals (as evidenced by figures like J. G. Frazer, along with other proponents of myth ritualism such as Jane Ellen Harrison and Gilbert Murray). Contrasting viewpoints regarding the nature of myth as story are also introduced: where for E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, myth is an explanation of external events that accidentally takes the form of a story, for H. Blumenberg myth is basically and primarily a story and not an explanation. Ultimately, Professor Segal identifies recurring plot structures in myths, particularly hero myths, and compares templates proposed by O. Rank, J. Campbell, and Raglan, who apply Freudian, Jungian, and Frazerian theories, respectively.

John Milton's characterisation of heaven and hell in *Paradise Lost* takes centre stage in Chapter 11. Quite uniquely, this writer presents the sacred as a fusion of both the physical and the mental. He skilfully weaves descriptions of hell and paradise as tangible locations in the world alongside characterisations of these places as states of mind. By contrast to Milton's juxtaposition of the spiritual and physical, modern depictions of heaven and hell have differentiated the outer from the inner, the physical from the psychological, as exemplified prominently by figures like C. Jung and S. Freud. This has meant the removal of any sacredness from the physical world. Segal broadens the scope of the discussion on the nature of heaven and hell by establishing connections between different theorists, including M. Eliade, Émile Durkheim or Donald Woods Winnicott.

In Chapter 12, Segal raises the pertinent question of whether mythical heroes must exclusively be male. Building upon the discussion presented in Chapter 10, he assesses the key theories concerning hero myths. On

the one hand, the theories that equate the hero with the king, as exemplified by J. Frazer's and Raglan's perspective, inherently necessitate male heroes. J. Campbell presents a different perspective – his heroes can arise from any social class, and he gives many examples of female heroes. However, as Segal acutely elucidates, his emphasis seems to be on male heroes only. In O. Rank's initial (and Freudian) rendition, the hero, who can be an aristocrat rather than strictly a king, is always male. But once he breaks with S. Freud's ideas, the subject ceases to be the relationship between son and father and becomes that between either son or daughter and the mother. Heroes can therefore be of either gender. The chapter concludes by highlighting the endeavours of certain scholars to propose female heroes. Notably, Carol Pearson's work *The Hero Within* (1989) exemplifies an attempt to demonstrate the viability of fully developed female heroes within J. Campbell's framework.

In chapter 13 Segal revisits the book's central thesis. Where theorists of the nineteenth century assumed that myth could not be dislodged from the world and therefore could not be saved from science (see E. B. Tylor or J. G. Frazer), theorists of the twentieth century saved myth from science either by removing myth altogether from the world (see S. Freud or C. Jung), or by removing it as an explanation of the world (see B. Malinowski or M. Eliade). Segal then poses the question of whether, in the twenty-first century, myth can be returned to the world in a way compatible with science, just as the twentieth century was able to accommodate myth to science. Drawing upon Roderick Main's concept of "myth beyond projection", Segal argues that Jungian psychology, through the concept of synchronicity, which signifies the alignment between our thoughts and the behaviour of the world, provides an exceptional means to reintroduce myth into the world without leaving science behind.

The modern study of myth has tied myth to science, religion and philosophy. In the fourteenth and final chapter, Professor Segal traces the varying positions of theorists on the relationship among these categories. Especially relevant is the discussion revolving around the interaction between myth and science, which circles back to the book's central contention that nineteenth-century myth theorists more

frequently positioned myth in opposition to science, whereas in the twentieth century, a reconciliation between the two emerged. The chapter meticulously examines the viewpoints of different theorists on the relationships between myth and religion, myth and philosophy, and myth and science – areas that are often intertwined and challenging to differentiate. This chapter encapsulates numerous themes (and authors) that have been extensively discussed in prior chapters, thus serving to recapitulate the book's fundamental concepts.

Segal's *Myth Theorized* makes a substantial contribution to the field of myth studies, showcasing a broad range of authors, disciplines and ideas. The book engages with pivotal myth theorists spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, delves into crucial themes within myth theory, such as hero myths, and grapples with complicated concepts that often intertwine, like the connections between myth and magic, ritual and myth, and myth and the unconscious. Furthermore, it confronts the key challenges that myth has encountered over time, such as its interactions with science and its role as literature. What is particularly noteworthy is the consistent analysis of all these subjects from an interdisciplinary lens. This broad and holistic approach offers readers a comprehensive exploration of the topics under scrutiny. The outcome is a remarkably erudite work, replete with references and ideas, yet accessible in its wording, making it approachable even to those not well-versed in myth theory.

Another crucial contribution lies in the author's adeptness at creating a cohesive map of connections and similarities across theorists and historical periods. This method consistently unifies Segal's exploration of myth, providing a comparative study of a broad spectrum of myth theories. Beyond simply presenting the fundamental principles of each theory, he conducts thorough evaluations of them, rigorously subjecting them to critique. He acutely discerns differences and seeks out common threads, shedding light on overlooked aspects and providing nuanced explanations of both parallels and differences. This comparatist approach significantly enriches the study of myth theories, leading me to believe that this book will become a definitive reference in the field of myth studies for years to come.

