

MYTH, RITUAL AND RACIAL IDENTITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S *THE FISHER KING*

Celia M. Wallhead
Universidad de Granada

ABSTRACT

In its title, Paule Marshall's latest novel, *The Fisher King* (2000), evokes a myth; and in its structure, characterisation and themes, it rewrites that myth in the twentieth century. The location is Brooklyn, New York, but the characters migrate from the West Indies to New York, then on to Paris; one of them migrates from Cameroon to Paris, and since the leading characters are African American, they have originally been forcibly uprooted from Africa in the first place. Thus the myth of medieval knights itself migrates and accommodates themes concerning identity and race in the contemporary world. In this paper, the different elements of the Fisher King myth: the Waste Land, the King, the Healer, the Weeping Women, the Hairless Maiden, the Ménage-à-trois, are identified in the story, and their significance is explained.

KEY WORDS: Paule Marshall, Fisher King myth, identity, race, migrancy, rewriting.

RESUMEN

El título de la última novela de Paule Marshall, *The Fisher King* (2000), evoca un mito, y en su estructura, caracterización y temas, reescribe ese mito en el siglo veinte. La ubicación es Brooklyn, Nueva York, pero los personajes migran del Caribe a Nueva York, y después a París; uno de ellos emigra de Camerún a París. Como los protagonistas son afroamericanos, han sido desarraigados a la fuerza en primer lugar. Así que el mito de caballeros medievales también emigra y llega a acomodar temas sobre la identidad y la raza en el mundo contemporáneo. En este ensayo identificamos en la historia los distintos elementos que pertenecen al mito del Rey Pescador: la tierra baldía, el rey, el curandero, las mujeres que lloran, la doncella sin pelo, el *ménage-à-trois*; al final, intentamos explicar su significado y relevancia en la novela de Marshall.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Paule Marshall, mito del Rey Pescador, identidad, raza, emigración, reescritura.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many postmodern writers have continued in the footsteps of the Modernists in rewriting the ancient myths in their fiction. It is a practice which takes advan-

tage of a well-known set of ideas and of a narrative structure which, when reworked in the modern context, can serve to illuminate aspects of contemporary life and culture. Quite often the myths are recontextualised far from their original location. Salman Rushdie's rewriting of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (1999) is a case in point.

The recognition of the presence of a myth in a work of literature is not always immediate and straightforward, especially if the writer envisions the reader making an effort in working towards his or her response. Whereas the employment of a well-known intertext may be obvious, for example, from the title, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, Moddelmog (1993) has shown that instead of a large sign like a word or phrase in the title, or the name of a hero, there may be several less strident signs. Yet however small and insignificant the sign, once its relevance has been recognised, it has the power to evoke the whole myth in all its structure and ramifications. As with *Ulysses*, Paule Marshall's latest novel, *The Fisher King* (2000), evokes a myth in its very title, and, in the body of the work, rewrites it in structure, character and theme. However, as we read, the relevance is not at all obvious, and the title becomes more and more enigmatic, since in the novel, there appear to be no king, no fishermen and no fish. In spite of this, for those familiar with the legend of the Holy Grail, the Fisher King has a special significance, and the reader can start to look for small but meaningful signs.

The first obvious connection is with medieval castles and, indeed, a book about the Holy Grail (*The Fisher King* 74). Marshall's novel is the story of four generations within two warring families of West Indian and African American origin, some of whom live in castle-like residences. The youngest generation is represented by Sonny, who lives in Paris, but is the common great-grandson of the two matriarchs now resident in Brooklyn: the West Indian, Ulene Payne, and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, originally from Georgia. Sonny has been fascinated by medieval castles and knights in armour since being given the book. He is always drawing them and displays considerable talent. He draws himself as a miniature knight in one corner of the picture, armed with lance and a "Sir Lancelot broadsword" (75). He takes it upon himself to vouch for the physical integrity of his namesake grandfather, whom he moves from castle to castle in the different drawings. This act of safekeeping is also one of healing and restoration, since the grandfather, Sonny-Rett Payne, who had been a famous jazz player in Paris, had died in a fall down the steps of the Métro: "And not only was he safe, he was healed as well, all the bloody head wounds he had suffered in the Métro completely healed" (154). Sony-Rett Payne, the object of desire of most of the characters in the story, is the wounded knight or king of the Fisher King legend. Although dead, he is "restored" by the new generation. Young Sonny and his cousins ask the right questions and give the correct answers, as in the legend. As they exchange secret information about love, this heals the rift between the families, even though it cannot bring back the dead.

In this essay, I am first going to review the role of the Fisher King in the Holy Grail stories, as interpreted by Jessie Weston in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Then I hope to trace the parallels in Paule Marshall's story and interpret the signifi-

cance of the similarities in relation to the main themes of the book, which are racial identity and interracial relations in terms of roots and culture.

2. THE FISHER KING

In the first decades of the twentieth century, as Jessie L. Weston worked on J.G.Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), she was struck by the resemblance between certain features of the Grail story of twelfth-century romance and characteristic details of the Nature Cults he described. She also found parallels between features of the Grail story and Mystery Cults which at one time had existed in a close union with Christianity. This union involved the practical assimilation of the central rite, a "Eucharistic" Feast, in which the worshippers partook of the "Food of Life" from the sacred vessels (Weston 5). The insistence is upon continuous, ever-renewing life: as the old king dies, a new king is immediately consecrated. The Fish is a life symbol of immemorial antiquity, and the title of Fisher has, from the earliest ages, been associated with deities who were held to be specially connected with the origin and preservation of life (Weston 125). The Fish, along with the Dove, has always been held in general reverence, probably because of the belief that all life comes from the water (Weston 133).

Although there appears to be no prototype extant, most versions are framed within a Quest story set in a Waste Land. The story postulates a close connection between the vitality of a certain king, and the prosperity of his kingdom. The forces of the ruler being weakened or destroyed, by wound, sickness, old age, or death, the land becomes Waste, and the task of the hero is that of restoration (Weston 23). The aim of the Grail Quest is twofold: it is to benefit the King and also the land. The restoration of the rivers to their channels, the "Freeing of the Waters", is one of the admired feats of the Grail heroes. But it is also a feat of the heroes of the *Rig-Veda* hymns sung long before the romances of the twelfth century were written down, indeed, they date back to one thousand years BC. Yet again, it is a feat associated with the heroes of the cults involved in the worship of Adonis, ancient rituals carried out to avert a dreaded calamity, that of the temporary suspension of all the reproductive energies of Nature. Weston notes the fact that the Grail castle is always situated in the close vicinity of water, either on or near the sea, or on the banks of an important river. In the Adonis cult too, the presence of water is an important feature, with the effigy of the dead god being cast into the water. Weston postulated that in the earliest, least contaminated version of the Grail story, the central figure would be dead—unlike King Arthur in the extant versions—and the task of the Quester, be it Gawain, Perceval, Galahad or whoever, was to restore him, not merely to health, but to life. In all these versions, the Fisher King is invariably old—an aged father or grandfather—only his Healer is a youthful character.

Weston's most daring hypothesis is of an original ritual of life-giving potency of universal observance. She bases this idea on the collection of records which suggest parallels in countries as widely separate as the British Isles, Russia, and

Central Africa. Frazer had found African parallels, for example, in the dominant Ju-Ju of a town in Nigeria, a Priest-King figure, on whose personal health the fruitfulness of the district depended (Weston 64).

The Quest is essentially a story of male heroes, who set out with their masculine, phallic, symbols of Lance and Sword to fight evil, avenge murder, or do whatever was required to re-establish the original order and harmony through restoring life and health. The place of women is subordinate and often vague. While the Cup or Vase and the Dish are female sex symbols representing reproductive energy, in these stories, fruitfulness does not depend so much on the female, as on a fully-restored male. If women are at all prominent, it is in the mourning rituals. They weep for the dead or dying King. In addition to the generalized “Weeping Women”, Frazer found within the Adonis myth an example of the practice of cutting off the hair in honour of the god. Women who hesitated to make this sacrifice were expected to offer themselves to strangers and give the gold received for their favours to the goddess Aphrodite (Weston 47-9). On other occasions, women played more negative roles. For example, in the legends surrounding Joseph of Arimathea, in one version, Joseph himself is the Fisher King, and, “ensnared by the beauty of the daughter of the Pagan King of Norway, whom he has slain, he baptises her, though she is still an unbeliever at heart, and makes her his wife, thus drawing the wrath of Heaven upon himself” (Weston 22).

From a purely narrative point of view, in all versions, there exists an a priori lack of something essential, the lack that sets all Quest stories in motion. Thus we can say that there is an initial state from which the narrative will develop, and it is a state of deficiency, or what Claude Bremond calls “degradation” (Bremond 1996). Bremond couples “degradation” with “amelioration” to form an important binary concept in his theory of narration. For the Quest narratives to develop from and beyond this state of degradation, there must be an amelioration process. According to Bremond, degradation can only be followed by amelioration, and likewise, amelioration can only be followed by degradation. The Fisher King stories usually display two major units. The first is the exposition, which corresponds to a state of degradation: the Fisher King is wounded, sick or dead. The second major unit begins as the Healer sets out on his Quest of restoration. The journey, with its tasks to be fulfilled and its obstacles to be overcome, constitutes the process of amelioration. Thus the tales usually move from tragedy to acceptance, success, and even optimism. Within each unit, however, there can be separate moments of degradation and amelioration. While the Fisher King and his Healer are united in their desire, the amelioration in the individual schema of the Fisher King may concern not only the physical aspect of his life, but the spiritual too, in terms of reputation or transition to a new King, if his death has to be accepted. The Healer always functions as an ally to the Fisher King, fighting on his behalf against all adversaries or obstacles. As Bremond puts it, a “state of deficiency implies the presence of an *obstacle* which prevents the realization of a more satisfying state” (66). The Fisher King story is therefore a sort of obstacle race, with its consequent winner, runners-up, and losers.



3. PARALLELS TO THE FISHER KING MYTH IN PAULE MARSHALL'S EPONYMOUS STORY

The archetypal events and symbols of the Grail legend: the Waste Land, the Fisher King, the Hidden Castle, the Healer, the Weeping Women, are all to be found here, adapted to a twentieth-century international context. We will look at each element in turn.

3.1. THE WASTE LAND

The story invokes two distinct temporal situations, which also develop in different locations. The “narrative present” covers barely one month, from “late March” (14) to just after Friday, April 6th 1984, the date of a memorial concert in honour of the fifteenth anniversary of the death of Sonny-Rett Payne, the jazz player. It takes place in Brooklyn, New York, as Sonny-Rett’s grandson, also called Sonny, is taken there to be present at the homage to his famous forebear. Spliced into this narrative unit are flashbacks based on memories of the main characters going back four generations. The matriarchs take us back to their roots in the West Indies and in Georgia, and their youth, struggling with poverty, in New York, in the early part of the century. Their children, Sonny-Rett and Charisse, leave New York for Paris, to make fame and fortune in the world of jazz. But they do not go to Paris solely because it is the entertainment Mecca of those years, but because they flee America. America is seen as a Waste Land, at more or less the same time as T.S. Eliot was adapting Frazer’s concept to his own view of the Western world between the World Wars. Americans were becoming urban dwellers, and the old agricultural regime of the West Indies and of rural America is left behind. The patriarch McCullum, Florence Varina’s husband, is forced to abandon his lands in Georgia, for it was believed a Negro had no right to be a landowner, and all that is left of his property is “Miss Grandiflora”, an uprooted tree. Whereas it is not exactly uprooted, in that its seeds are taken from the South and planted up North in the garden of the brownstone in Brooklyn, it stands as a metaphor for the uprooting and relocation of the family. The tree thrives alone within the urban garden, and also symbolises restoration through maintaining links with the natural world. Florence Varina has placed a plaque on her tree, and people pay money to come to see it, sent by the Conservatory Association. This can be viewed as a form of prostitution. The real restoration is carried out, not by her, but by a member of the other family, by Edgar Payne, Sonny-Rett’s brother.

Edgar Payne’s headed notepaper gives us a clue to his role: “The Three R’s Housing group of central Brooklyn / Reclamation. Restoration. Rebirth” (25). In a new age, in which rich African American entrepreneurs are tolerated, he is able to buy up old property and rehabilitate it, giving new life to the neighbourhood. When he was a child, this would have been unthinkable in the white, patriarchal society.

New York was a Waste Land to Sonny-Rett for several other reasons. Firstly, his mother did not approve of his music; she claimed that it was not Christian, it





was “Sodom and Gomorrah music.” Secondly, his union with Cherisse was not approved of by their respective families. But more importantly, he suffered unbearable racial discrimination. This took a variety of forms, most notably, refusal of entry to restaurants, and harassment in Klu Klux Klan towns and cities (185). Sonny-Rett and Cherisse left America never to return. However, Paris is not the Promised Land either. In this city founded upon an important river, Sonny-Rett enjoys some success. He lives in a “hidden castle”, an old house on the banks of the Seine, with expensive furniture and chandeliers. He and his wife feast and drink champagne out of costly glasses. The symbolic chalice or Grail is either represented by the champagne glass, an icon of success, or by fame itself. Perhaps even, Sonny-Rett’s ear is the real chalice, as one of his ears is always pointed upwards to heaven, as if to hear the divine music for which he is famous.

But even his fame has a hollow ring, for it became fashionable among whites to patronize blacks, a form of hypocritical attention Marshall had denounced in an earlier story, “Merle” (1969; see Wallhead 1998:147.) After the “fat years” of success come “lean years” when the popularity of jazz is on the wane and rock and roll takes over the market. Sonny-Rett ends his life in poverty, and his daughter, Jojo, belongs to the “lost generation”. As the “narrative present” begins, her son Sonny, now aged about ten, is living a life of deprivation with Hattie Carmichael, a friend and lover of Sonny-Rett’s.

3.2. THE FISHER KING

Sonny-Rett Payne, as his name—a homophone of “pain”—suggests, is the Fisher King of Marshall’s story, and the equivalent of the wounded or dead knight. In this case, he is the dead knight, since he is already dead when the “narrative present” begins. When he dies from his bleeding wounds after falling down the Métro steps (154), it is never known whether he died by accident, committed suicide, or was hit or pushed by the police. Thus, after an initial amelioration corresponding to his fame as a jazz pianist in Paris, there comes the degradation of his decline and death. Two male relatives take it upon themselves to rehabilitate his reputation and heal the rifts in the family, ending the story on a hopeful note of prospective amelioration.

3.3. THE HEALERS

The Healers are male members of the second and fourth generation. Firstly, Sonny-Rett’s brother, Edgar Payne, the rich and powerful old man of the story, as we have seen, dedicates all his money and effort to rehabilitating parts of Brooklyn and to celebrating his brother’s life and memory. Although at the end we discover that the concert was a trick, a pretext, to entice his grand-nephew Sonny over to America, none-the-less, the memorial concert remains the means by which the dead musician is “brought back to life” through his music. However, the Healer is usu-

ally a youthful character, so the true Healer here is the grandson Sonny. Sonny has kept Sonny-Rett in the safe-keeping of his knight drawings, and has “transported” him from one castle drawing to another. He also makes himself a lance with a branch broken off from “Miss Grandiflora.”

The members of the new, fourth, generation have been abandoned by their parents: Edgar’s daughter and her husband are divorced, which means that Sonny’s cousins have also suffered from the general malaise. But they fare better because they know how to ask the right questions and thus pass the tests they are faced with. For example, they exchange secrets about love, and, in a more open society, they say the right things.

3.4. THE MÉNAGE-À-TROIS

Sonny-Rett failed to ask the right questions in his life. For instance, he did not question Hattie about her feelings for him, and married the wrong woman. Cherisse was incapable of love and only wanted to be admired. He discovered too late that Hattie loved him more than Cherisse ever could. This leads to a domestic crisis which is solved by the establishment of a ménage-à-trois in the household. The prototype in Arthurian legend is, of course, the love triangle of King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and the younger Sir Lancelot. Indeed, in some accounts, Lancelot’s challenge to King Arthur’s virility is the cause of the destitution of the land. But also, King Arthur’s age and loss of vigour are a cause of the adultery. They are a factor too, in the love triangle of King Mark, Iseut and Tristan, insofar as this has not been caused by the effects of the love potion. The difference in Marshall’s story is that instead of two men fighting over one charismatic woman, we have the male as a star figure with two females contesting for his charms.

3.5. THE HAIRLESS MAIDEN

To our modern ears, the “Hairless Maiden” sounds as though it is of the order of The “chinless wonder”, but this figure traditionally plays a crucial role in the story. She is one of the “Weeping Women” Jessie Weston refers to (49). Quite often, these women were widows, and sometimes they were expected to deny their femininity, as a sign of mourning. In addition to the obligation to dress in black, they accepted the sacrificial rite of cutting that primordial feminine symbol, their hair. Weston explains (51) that the loss of the maiden’s hair may be the result of the hero’s failure to ask the question. In this story, as Sonny-Rett fails to ask Hattie if she loves him, she loses her hair. The explanation is that it has fallen out as a result of using potions to straighten it. Merle, the heroine of the afore-mentioned eponymous work, also has problems with her hair in her efforts to straighten it. Hattie has to wear a turban, which, in addition to her black clothes (181), makes her cut a strange figure. Initially, she is a rootless individual, she was put out for adoption because her mother was sent to an institution. She goes on to deny what traces of



identity she displays —her African American looks— by straightening her hair, and pays the penalty. Weston informs us that if the maiden refused to cut her hair, not only did she have to prostitute herself, but her refusal of sacrifice could have repercussions on others, it could bring disease upon the womenfolk, particularly in the form of tumours (133). In our story, Cherisse dies of cancer, as she will not have the tumour removed; also Alva, Eulene's best friend from the West Indies, and Edgar's mother-in-law, dies of a tumour. Hattie herself is not well, she is a drug addict, and her dependence upon prohibited substances is another symptom of the malaise of the Waste Land and the infirmity of the Weeping Women surrounding the Fisher King.

4. DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS: BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The end of the story sees amelioration for the “Fisher King”, Sonny-Rett, but as the “narrative present” draws towards closure, Hattie is faced with a dilemma that involves the amelioration of the other characters. The reader is left wondering what she will decide. It is within her power to heal the rift of the Romeo and Juliet-style polarization of the two families, caused years before by the mutual accusations of Eulene and Florence Varina. Will she refuse to be “bought” by Edgar and take Sonny back to Paris, where there is poverty, hardship, even danger, but love? Or will she be altruistic and make the sacrifice by giving Sonny up to his blood family, to those who need him to heal the rift between the two families? Perhaps she is doomed to be the perpetual loser of the story.

The hopes and expectations of the readers regarding Hattie's decision may be informed by our attitude to power and money, and to the recognition of our identity within a multi-racial society. The division between the families arose because Florence Varina disdained Eulene on account of her West Indian roots. Eulene herself wanted to turn her back on the West Indies, and longed for her son to triumph as a concert pianist in the classical style, playing Bach and Beethoven, and thus be more integrated into white society. But Sonny-Rett's West Indian roots are of paramount importance in his musical gift. Jazz arose through a combination of classical and African music and is thus necessarily of African American origin. While his mother's ambition involves a denial of her African roots, Sonnt-Rett endeavours to recognize them as part of his identity. It is not insignificant that his signature tune is “The Crossing”, as he sails from New York to Paris to triumph. He is aware that this is a reversal, in all senses, of that earlier crossing, the Diaspora of the African slaves. It also reminds the reader of new crossings, those of the *sans papiers*, illegal immigrants like Sonny-Rett's posthumous son-in-law, the nameless father of Sonny from Cameroon. We remember too, Frazer's African parallel, the Ju-Ju of Elele in southern Nigeria, whose title resonates through the name of Sonny-Rett's only daughter, Jojo.

The healing of the families and their solidarity both to each other and to themselves as African Americans is literally vital. Even if Edgar, the rich old man of the story, has pulled the strings throughout, and used money to bring about resto-

ration and amelioration, the positive element is that in this new world of the end of a millennium, the beginning of a new one —and the Fisher King story is often apocalyptic— African Americans have fought for equality, the right to be rich and famous, and have won many battles in the struggle to be accepted on equal terms with whites.



WORKS CITED

- BREMOND, Claude. "The Logic of Narrative Possibilities." *Narratology: An Introduction*. Ed. Susana Onega & José Angel García Landa. London: Longman, 1996.
- FRAZER, J.G. *The Golden Bough*. 1890. London: Macmillan, 1926.
- MARSHALL, Paule. "Merle." *Nine Short Novels by American Women*. Ed. E. McMahon, S. Day & R. Funk. New York: St Martin's, 1993. 627-709.
- . *The Fisher King: A Novel*. New York & London: Scribner, 2000.
- MCMAHON, E., S. DAY & R. FUNK. *Nine Short Novels by American Women*. New York: St Martin's, 1993.
- MODELMOG, Debra. A. *Readers and Mythic Signs: The Oedipus Myth in Twentieth-century Fiction*. Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.
- RUSHDIE, Salman. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1999.
- WALLHEAD, Celia. "Paradigms of Oppression in Paule Marshall's 'Merle'." *The Grove: Working Papers on English Studies* 5 (1998): 135-148.
- WESTON, Jessie L. *From Ritual to Romance*. 1920. New York: Doubleday, 1957.

