

PROJECT 7

Universals in Literature I

Below are poems from five different cultural and literary traditions, distant from one another in space and time. Yet they share common themes, including the pain of separation.

Using an ink highlighter, mark phrases in each poem that show this universal theme and indicate in the margin the separation the author describes.

To the Distant One
And have I lost thee evermore,
Hast thou, oh, fair one, from me flown?
Still in mine ear sounds, as of yore,
Thine every word, thine every tone.

As when at morn the wanderer's eye
Attempts to pierce the air in vain,
When, hidden in the azure sky,
The lark high o'er him chants his strain:

So do I cast my troubled gaze
Through bush, through forest, o'er the lea;
Thou art invoked by all my lays;
Oh, come then, loved one, back to me!

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (German, 1749–1832)²

Mountain Spirit
The deer, when they fall to death,
Return to love of their wives.
The fields and hills, when they wither away,
Return to Spring a thousand years old.

—Toson Shimazaki (Japan, 1880s)³

2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Edgar Alfred Bowring, *The Poems of Goethe, Translated in the Original Metres by Edgar Alfred Bowring* (London: J. W. Parker, 1853), 19.

3. Yone Noguchi, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* (London: John Murray, 1914), 94.

Li Fu-jen

The sound of her silk skirt has stopped.
On the marble pavement dust grows.
Her empty room is cold and still.
Fallen leaves are piled against the doors.
Longing for that lovely lady
How can I bring my aching heart to rest?

—Wu-ti (China, 157–87 B.C.)⁴

(Untitled)

Violently falls the snow,
In the mist that precedes the lightning;
It bends the branches to the earth,
And splits the tallest trees in twain.
Among the shepherds none can pasture his flock;
It closes to traffic all the roads to market.
Lovers must then trust the birds,
With messages to their loves—
Messages to express their passion.

—Moorish (North Africa)⁵

Carrickfergus (stanzas 3 and 4)

My childhood days bring back sad reflections
of happy days so long ago.
My boyhood friends and my own relations,
have all passed on like the melting snow.
So I'll spend my days in endless roving,
soft is the grass and my bed is free.
Oh to be home now in Carrickfergus,
on the long road down to the salty sea.

—traditional (Ireland)⁶

4. Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 49.

5. Rene Basset, ed., *Moorish Literature* (New York: Collier, 1900), viii.

6. Lyrics traditional, taken from Van Morrison and the Chieftains, "Irish Heartbeat."

Discovering the links and naming the ancestors is exciting and honorable work. But even those without a documented genealogy can rest assured, they share ancestry with every group of people on earth. We are cousins not only in “spirit” or culture but also in DNA and family.

LANGUAGE

Language is at the heart of every culture and helps define the identity of any “people.” The three concepts of language, culture, and people are so intimately related they are used synonymously. *German* can indicate German people, German language, or German culture. The same is true of *Japanese*, *Thai*, and many others as well; one word names all three things.

Traditions of language and culture are conventionally discussed in “national” terms, such as *German literature*, *Japanese literature*, and so on. National lines define literature not exactly by nation, however, but more often by language, which transcends state boundaries. In German literary traditions, for example, one will find Franz Kafka, who wrote in German but was from the Czech city of Prague. German Jews such as Heinrich Heine, who wrote in German, are also conventionally included in the German literary tradition, whereas German émigrés who wrote in English or in the language of an adopted country might be found in traditions of both Germany and the United States. Thus, not all writers of German are Germans, and not all those who are Germans write in the German language. The same is true of “national literature” of the United States. “American literature” does not ordinarily include English language literature of the British Isles or of Canada but might include Native American literature not in English. There is American literature in many languages: Spanish, Chinese, Eskimo, and so on. In short, efforts to segregate culture “nationally” are contrived and open to flaw even in the most “national” of all characteristics, language.

To people from a society with writing, it might seem that given the opportunity, any society would naturally elect to have writing. But at least one civilization provides a different picture. The people who built ancient Teotihuacan of central America constructed cities and enormous temples, traded over great distances, and celebrated elaborate rituals. They performed these feats of engineering and organization without the use of a written language. Yet the Teotihuacan traded regularly with people who used writing and presumably could have adopted writing for themselves. Historians have different theories about why the Teotihuacanos chose to not implement writing, but as yet no one knows for certain.

Language is obviously universal. All people have language equally. Literature is also universal, in the absence of writing as much as through writing.

And within literature there are also universals, recurrent themes that might appear in myths, rituals, stories, songs, prayers, and poems. One could find many particular themes in literature worldwide, some very specific, others more general. For example, the theme of “the pain of separation” appears in the literature of every human tradition. Pain and grief over separation from someone or something loved is expressed worldwide and throughout history in poems, songs, hymns, plays, rituals, and so forth. Separation from departed loved ones is perhaps the most common form this sentiment assumes, but humans can grieve separation from many things. For example, this medieval Hebrew poet wrote from Spain about the pain of being separated from his homeland. In so doing, he described a universal sentiment and theme.

Jerusalem

Beautiful heights, city of a great King,
From the western coast my desire burns towards thee.
Pity and tenderness burst in me, remembering
Thy former glories, thy temple now broken stones.
I wish I could fly to thee on the wings of an eagle
And mingle my tears with thy dust.
I have sought thee, love, though the King is not there
And instead of Gilead’s balm, snakes and scorpions.
Let me fall on thy broken stones and tenderly kiss them—
The taste of thy dust will be sweeter than honey to me.

—Judah Halevi (trans., Robert Mezey)¹

1. Robert Mezey, ed., *Poems from the Hebrew* (New York: Crowell, 1973), 62. Reprinted courtesy of Robert Mezey.

Separation from one's homeland, loved ones, or family might seem like an obvious universal, but we could choose from many other examples of universals. Every literary tradition, whether oral or written, makes use of themes, symbols, and motifs. Particular themes and motifs occur over and over throughout the cultures of the world. There has been a great deal of research into comparative themes in myth, literature, and religions for more than a century. The great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung identified many universal motifs not only in literature but also in rituals, in dreams, and in religious traditions. For example, Jung identified the motif and symbol of wind or breeze as a universal signifier of life or soul. Jung called these universal motifs **archetypes** and maintained that human societies use archetypes as expressions of a unified human consciousness.

MYTH

Myths are stories that are neither "factual" nor "false," but adhere instead to deeper truths. Myths can express social, political, or religious themes, or they can provide interpretations of the natural world. **Joseph Campbell**, a preeminent twentieth-century scholar of myth, claims mythmaking and human society emerged together. Evidence of myth found at the earliest archeological sites

tells us something, furthermore, of the unity of our species; for the fundamental themes of mythological thought have remained constant and universal, not only throughout history, but also over the whole extent of mankind's occupation of the earth.⁷

Every society constructs myths. Some universal types include **hero myths**, **creation myths**, morality, quest, and myths that define social identity. Hero myths typically follow patterns of "(1) separation, (2) initiation, and (3) return." Campbell writes,

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.⁸

In modern society, hero myths can be found in film, in religious stories, and in fiction. Even American "road trip" movies sometimes follow this ancient pattern, as do some parts of the *Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter stories.

7. Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By: The Emergence of Mankind* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1972), 19.

8. Joseph Campbell, 209.

Though people do not hold faith in these stories as they might a great traditional myth, the structures are similar and they are instructive in that sense.

Creation myths describe origins. It seems to be an important element of any civilization to search for tribal or cultural origins and to explain human existence. Some of the world's richest collections of myths come from the people of the Americas, North and South. The following myth and prayer originates from one ancient civilization of the Andes. The prayer was translated into Spanish verse in the sixteenth century by Bishop Luis Geronimo de Ore. It was later translated into English.

O Pachacamac!
Thou who hast existed from the beginning.
Thou who shalt exist until the end,
powerful but merciful,
Who didst create man by saying,
"Let man be,"
Who defended us from evil,
and presented our life and our health,
art Thou in the sky or upon the earth?
In the clouds or in the deeps?
Hear the voice of him who implores Thee,
and grant him his petitions.
Give us life everlasting,
preserve us, and accept this our sacrifice.⁹

As they develop and evolve over long periods of time, myths often synthesize many elements and traditions into single accounts. This is the case of the *Popul Vuh*, the great myth of the Kiche Maya of central America. This creation myth from the *Popul Vuh* shows at least four different traditions that had integrated into Kiche culture. It was translated from the Maya Kiche language by Lewis Spence.

Over a universe wrapped in a gloom of a dense and primeval night passed the good Hurakan the mighty wind. He called out, "earth," and the solid land appeared. The chief gods took counsel; they were Hurakan, Gucumatz, the serpents covered with green feathers, and Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, the mother and father gods. As the result of their deliberations animals were created. But as yet man was not. To supply the deficiency the divine beings resolved to create mannikins

9. Millicent Todd Bingham, *Peru: A Land of Contrasts* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1914), 177–178.

carved out of wood. But these soon incurred the displeasure of the gods, who, irritated by their lack of reverence, resolved to destroy them. Then, by the will of Hurakan, the Heart of Heaven, the waters were swollen, and a great flood came across the mannikins of wood. . . .¹⁰

The Christian influence in this creation myth is evident, but one can also see that the account draws from other traditions as well. Myths are reflections of the culture that produced them, deep, profound, intricate.

The intimate identification of a culture with its myths has led one scholar to refer to some myths as national sagas, such as the *Iliad* of the Greeks or the *Mahabharata* of India. The *Mahabharata* is several thousand years old and contains many types of myth within its narrative. The sacred text *Bhavagad Gita* is part of the *Mahabharata*, as are numerous national, moral, and hero myths. The *Mahabharata* opens with a simple story about a Brahman, or priest; turn to the appendix, page 104, and read it.

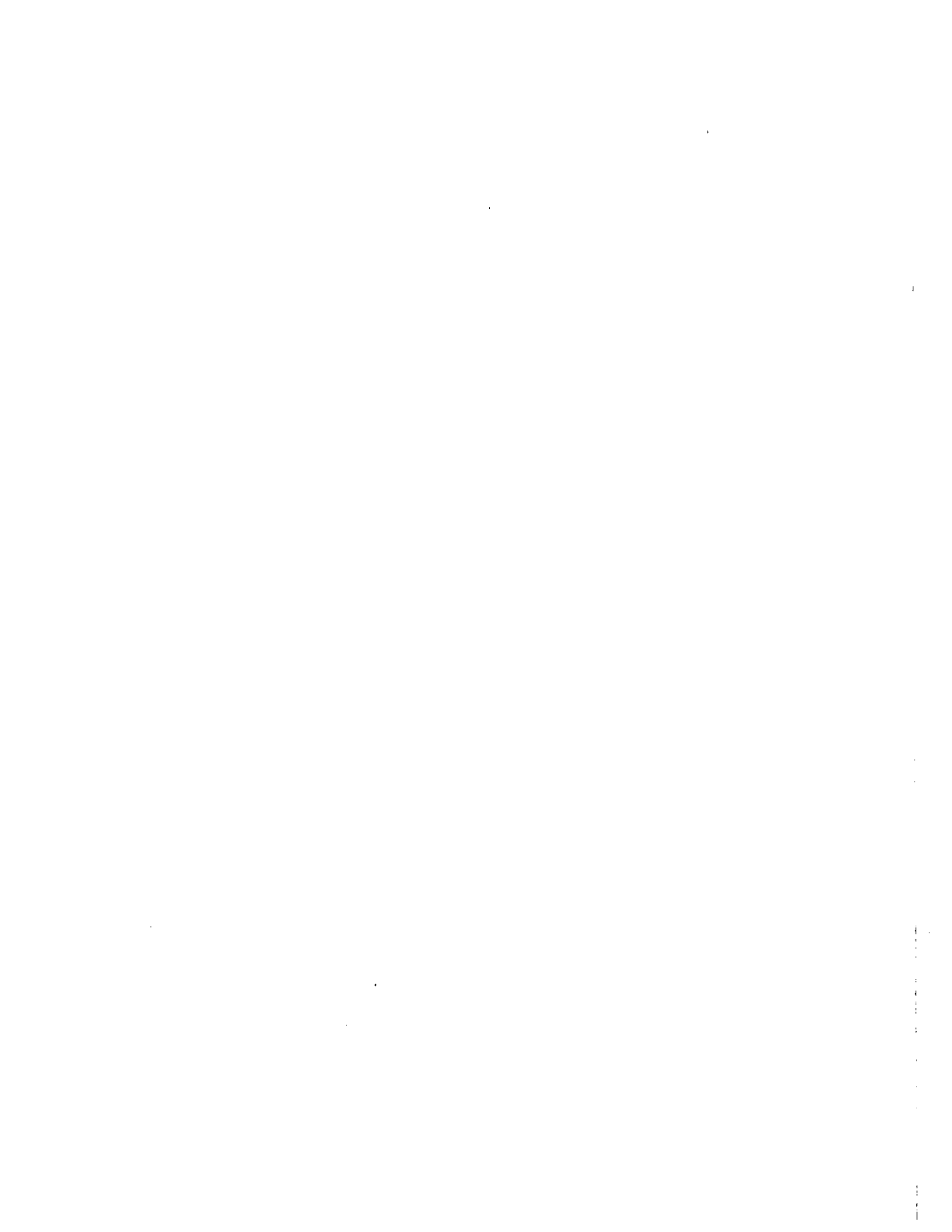
10. Lewis Spence, *Mythic and Heroic Sagas of the Kiches of Central America* (London: D. Nutt, 1908), 9-10.

PROJECT 8

Myth and the *Mahabharata*

Although the selection is brief, the story from the *Mahabharata* provided in the appendix is suggestive and seems to be promising great things.

Describe in your own words, in sentences, how the opening of the *Mahabharata* contains all three elements of the hero myth.



again. "Tell Bhishma, your guardian, that Drona is here," he answered briefly, and relapsed again into the depths of thought.

The lads trooped off, with their enthusiasm fresh upon them, to describe to Bhishma, the Protector, the extraordinary experience of the morning; and he, struck by the thought that Drona was the very teacher he was seeking, hastened in person to see him and bring him to the palace. Bhishma had known of Drona formerly as the son of the great sage Bharadwaja. . . . Drona, after his father's death, had performed great austerities and gone through a very determined course of study, in consequence of which he had been mysteriously gifted with divine weapons and the knowledge of how to use them.

8. FROM THE HYMNS OF HOMER

From Hesiod and Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homeric* (London: Heinemann, 1914), 456.

The Homeric Hymns are ancient texts praising the gods of the ancient Greeks. They are about 2,700 years old. This particular selection shows a common practice in history, naming the Earth Mother.

Hymn to the Earth Mother—A Homeric Poem

I will sing of well-founded Earth, mother of all, eldest of all beings.

She feeds all creatures that are in the world,

all that go upon the goodly land,

and all that are in the paths of the seas, and all that fly:

all these are fed of her store.

Through you, O queen, men are blessed in their children

and blessed in their harvests,

and to you it belongs to give means of life to mortal men

and to take it away.

Happy is the man whom you delight to honour!

He has all things abundantly:

his fruitful land is laden with corn,

his pastures are covered with cattle,

and his house is filled with good things.

Such men rule orderly in their cities of fair women:

great riches and wealth follow them:

their sons exult with everfresh delight,

and their daughters with flower-laden hands

play and skip merrily over the soft flowers of the field.

Thus it is with those whom you honour

O holy goddess, bountiful spirit.

Hail, Mother of the gods, wife of starry Heaven;

freely bestow upon me for this my song substance that cheers the heart!

And now I will remember you and another song also.