

Revisioning the Myth of King Ahab in Paulo Coelho's *The Devil and Miss Prym*

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Abstract

*Many people think that myth refers to only folklores or legends which have long been existed in a society. What if myth turns out to be more than just an ancient story our parents tell us? Through Paulo Coelho's *The Devil and Miss Prym*, this article tries to find out the answer. In the novel, a ruthless person was described ruling a village named Viscos. He was Ahab, a man full of arrogance and meanness. He governed the village whose inhabitants are only a few. The existence of this Ahab is reminiscent of another Ahab found in the Bible. However, Coelho presents a surprise for the readers by creating a different Ahab, changing Ahab to a generous and pleasant man. This re-visioning (re-observing and re-examining from a different point of view) reveals the fact that the story of Ahab in the novel is more than merely an old story found in the Bible. Under the light of Roland Barthes's theory of myth, this article aims at revealing how *The Devil and Miss Prym* re-revisions the myth of King Ahab in the Bible. Myth in this novel can also be classified as the myth of freedom since it breaks some accepted concepts in society.*

Keywords: Re-vision, Myth, King Ahab

Introduction

Many people understand myth as an old story. Eliade (1987:263-264) says that myth presents itself as telling its listeners of a time altogether different from the time of our experience. It usually brings us to the beginning of creation. There are quite a lot of myths, such as the myth of gods and goddesses in Indian culture, and the myth of the kings of sea. However, have we ever thought further that myth is more than just a story? According to Roland Barthes, myth is more than a story; it is precisely a type of speech. It is the way to communicate (in Sontag, 1986:93-95).

The Devil and Miss Prym by Paulo Coelho enables us to understand how the myth actually works. The following discussion of

the novel aims at showing how people are generally trapped in their understanding of myth. Most of us know that King Ahab is the most wicked king we have ever known. However, in his novel Paulo Coelho changes the character of King Ahab into a good one, and it is interesting to find out the reason behind this change.

The Devil and Miss Prym was first published in 2000. It has been translated into more than twenty languages from the original Portuguese edition *O Demonio E A Senhorita Prym*. One intriguing fact on the story is that there is a strong connection between King Ahab in the Bible and in the one in the novel. The character, the setting, and the symbol found in the novel are important elements in the attempt of revealing how the myth of King Ahab is re-visioned, and in understanding the function of re-vision.

Under the light of structural analysis, this article elaborates the re-vision of the myth.

A Glimpse on Myth, Re-vision, and Structural Analysis

According to Campbell, myth is an organized of stories (*i.e.* myths) by which we explain our beliefs and our history. Beneath the story-lines, myths usually confront major issues such as the origin of humanity and its traditions, and the way in which the natural and human worlds functions on a profound, universal level (*mythsdreamssymbols.com*, 2014).

In the most basic sense of myth, myth has some functions. First, myth grants continuity and stability to a culture. Second, myth presents guidelines for living. Third, myth justifies a culture's activity. Four, myth gives the meaning of life. Five, myth explain the unexplainable. Under this light myth helps us understand the world, for example, they may state that a drought is caused by an angry deity. Finally, myth offers role models (Campbell, *mythsdreamssymbols.com*, 2014).

However, in a more complex understanding, myth is classified into some major types (Barthes, 1986: 93-95). First, myth as a type of speech. Myth is a system of communication that it is a message. Because of that everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Since myth as a type of speech, it can only be analyzed when it is applied or used. Second, myth as a semiological system. Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system.

That, which is a sign in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. It is in which one speak about the first. The relation concerns with the objects which belong to different categories, that is why it not one of equality but one of equivalence. The total associative of the first two terms will form: the signifier, the signified, and the sign (in Sontag, 1986: 95-99).

The signifier represents the meaning (*form*). The signifier consist of form and meaning but they are never in any contradiction or conflict. The meaning is always there to present the form. The signified represents *concept*. The signified can have several signifiers; that is why we can find many signifiers for one signified. The correlation of the first two is the sign.

Third, myth as a stolen language. To simply understand the myth as a stolen language, remember that the function of the myth always to transform a meaning into form. It means that myth takes over or colonizes the language (concept which is already settled) to strengthen it. Through myth, a person is assumed to be able to read meaning of language beyond what it implies there. Thus, myth requires a wide knowledge to understand a meaning.

Frye categorizes myth into two types, the myth of concern and the myth of freedom. The myth of concern is what holds a group, community, or society together. In the contrary, the myth of freedom is what sees truth as correspondence to reality as verified by the individual (in Good, 2014).

One thing that makes the two categories of myth is far different. If the myth of concern is "what holds", the myth of freedom is "what sees". As what has mentioned above that the myth of concern usually is run by church or political party or even certain norms in society, their objective is to hold a group to shape their mind in accordance with them.

Meanwhile, the myth of freedom gives us a space to argue, to re-think, to see something critically. It comes from self-awareness that there are many things in society that makes us think in the box and we have to find the way out.

Regarding the term *re-vision*, Peter Widdowson mentions that *re-vision* is the term that deploys a strategic ambiguity between the word *revise* in the sense of "to examine and correct; to make a new, improved version of; to study a *new*, and *re-vision*: to see in another light; to re-

envision or perceive differently; and thus to recast and re-evaluate the *original* (1999: 164-165).

Re- vision is when the author makes a story and put it another way, it is a way of defamiliarising, of; making strange, the naturalised or habitualised world of conventional perceptual reality, of „seeing things as they really are“ (Widdowson, 1999: 114).

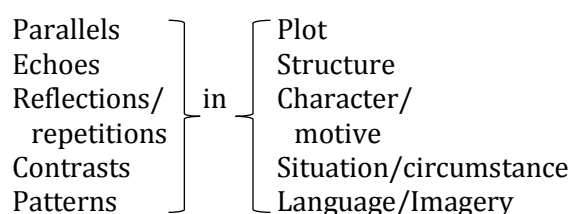
Further, Widdowson (1999: 165-166) states that there are some principal characteristics of *re-visionary* works:

1. that they tend to *re-write* canonic texts (those *classics*) which have a high profile of admiration and popularity in our literary heritage;
2. that they keep the original text in clear view, so that it is not just the *source* of new modern version but a constantly invoked *intertext* for it;
3. that, in this way, they denaturalize the original in exposing those discourses which we no longer see in it because we have learnt to read it in restricted and conventional ways;
4. that they not only re- write the original as a different, separate, new work, but re-cast, and thus repossess and liberate, the original as itself a *new* text to be read newly- enabling us to *see* a different one to what we thought we knew as, say, *Jane Eyre*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest* or "An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard";
5. that they make us see parallels (or contrast) between the period of the original text's production and that of the modern work;
6. that they invariably have a clear cultural-political thirst, especially on behalf of those exploited, marginalized and silenced by dominant ideologies, in demanding that the political inscription and cultural complicity in oppression of past texts be revised and re-visioned as part the process of restoring a voice, a history or an identity to the erstwhile oppressed.

Another theory that provides a ground for the discussion in this article is the theory

of structural analysis. Eagleton (1996: 82-83) emphasizes that, first, it is an analytical not evaluative. Second, it refuses the *obvious* meaning of the story and seeks instead to isolate certain *deep* structures within it, which are not apparent on the surface. The third is if one can say the particular content of narrative is replaceable; there is a sense that the *content* of the narrative is its structure.

According to Barry (2002: 39), structural analysis is the analysis that focuses on studying of certain object which has meaning but that meaning or essence it in the *outside*. Meaning is always an attribute of things, in literal sense that meanings are attributed to the things by human mind, not contained within them. Barry makes a verbal diagram of structural analysis as we can see below:



We are looking in the factors listed on the left and we expect to find that factors on the right.

The Story of King Ahab in the Bible

It is written in the Bible (King I 21: 1-29) that King Ahab was the most wicked king of Israel. He had a wife named Jezebel. Jezebel was known as a bad woman who worshiped Satan. One day, Ahab asked for Naboth's vineyard but Naboth refused it because the vineyard belonged to his ancestor. Ahab came back to the palace. He looked so sullen and refused to eat. Ahab told his wife that Naboth refused to sell his vineyard to him.

Hearing that news, Jezebel encouraged her husband to take the vineyard by force. It is written in the seventh verse that: *Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."* After that, Jezebel made a false claim that Naboth had rebelled the king

and God.

Finally, Naboth died and King Ahab could gain the vineyard. God heard what he had done, and He sent Elia the prophet to convey His message to Ahab. In verse 18-19, God says:

¹⁸“Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth’s vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it.

¹⁹Say to him, „This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? “Then say to him, “This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!”.

When Elia delivered God’s command Ahab was panicky and frightened. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. After God heard that Ahab had regretted his sin, God cancelled to give disaster to Ahab. He would bring the disaster in the days of Ahab’s son.

God did not only punish Ahab but also Jezebel. In the verse 23 it is said

²³“And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: „Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of ^[b] Jezreel.

²⁴ “Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country.”

This story results in the conclusion that King Ahab is the most wicked king of Israel who allowed himself to be controlled by his wife. It is a myth that is attached to King Ahab until now.

The fact is Naboth dies but the Almighty of God remains there. This story shows to the readers, especially the Christians, that Ahab loved worldly matters more than Him. The concept of punishment is also introduced. It is when Ahab realized that he had done a big sin. Do we need to commit sins first so that we can repent of our sins?

The Re-vision of King Ahab in *The Devil and Miss Prym*

The following table is meant to show the process of re-vision. Through characters of the novel, the revision can be identified. Coelho re-visions not only the characterization but also the concept each character brings (written in italic). The concept is the ‘signified’ and the form of signified is the ‘signifier’.

No.	The Myth of King Ahab in the Bible	The Myth of Ahab in <i>The Devil and Miss Prym</i>	Chantal Prym as the Re-vision of the Myth of Ahab
1.	Signified: Ahab <i>Superior, able to do anything he wanted</i> Signifier: A wicked king of Israel, a weak man, a murderer of Naboth, an unreligious man <i>Naboth died.</i>	Signified: Ahab <i>Superior, cannot do everything he wants</i> Signifier: a wise and kind-hearted leader, a firm person, a philosophical man, someone who brings peace to Viscos <i>No one is dead.</i>	Signified: Chantal Prym <i>Inferior, but able to do something great</i> Signifier: inferior, kind-hearted, ambitious and brave woman, love challenge <i>No one is dead.</i>
2.	Signified: Jezebel <i>A devil came as a lovely figure.</i> Signifier: an evil wife, a cunning person, a ‘bright’	-	Signified: Stranger <i>A devil comes as a religious figure</i> Signifier: friendly, charming, rich, seductive, impressive

	provocateur <i>A lovely wife</i>		man <i>A pilgrim</i>
3.	Signified: Elijah the prophet <i>Punishment; priest must be an angelic man.</i> Signifier: Loyal, patient man <i>Ahab repented of his sin; faithful to God .</i>	Signified: Saint Savin, <i>No punishment; priest must be an angelic man.</i> Signifier: A holy man, a patient and loyal saint <i>Ahab becomes a decent man; faithful to God.</i>	Signified: The priest <i>No punishment; priest is not always a good man.</i> Signifier: A wicked, slick priest who agrees to commit murder <i>The priest agrees to kill Berta.</i>
4.	Signified: Naboth <i>Death does not mean an end.</i> Signifier: loyal, gallant, obedient, superstitious man <i>The presence of God remains there.</i>	Signified: Saint Savin <i>Submit his life to God.</i> Signifier: a holy man, a patient and loyal saint <i>His life is saved.</i>	Signified: Berta <i>Submitting her life to be sacrificed.</i> Signifier: superstitious, resigned one <i>Her life is saved.</i>
5.	Signified: The vineyard <i>God is everything.</i> Signifier: The presence of God <i>Sacrificing Naboth</i>	Signified: Viscos <i>Being respected in Viscos is everything</i> Signifier: A good place <i>Viscos as a terrible place</i>	Signified: The eleven gold bars <i>Gold is everything.</i> Signifier: wealth, temptation, prosperity, happiness <i>Sacrificing Berta</i>
6.	Signified: The society <i>People must obey the rule's king</i> Signifier: Obeying King Ahab's rule <i>Naboth is dead.</i>	Signified: The society in Viscos <i>People may choose whether to obey the rule or not.</i> Signifier: Obeying Ahab's rule <i>People in Viscos turn to be a good people.</i>	Signified: The society in Viscos <i>People break the rule.</i> Signifier: Dare to make change <i>Berta is saved.</i>

The Factors that Cause Re-vision

The results of the re-vision is not only in terms of characters and characterization. Based on the close reading of the novel, some nearest possibilities of why Coelho did a re-vision can be concluded:

Firstly, the truth that our life cannot be separated from myth. Eliade argues that myth reports realities and events from the origin of

the world that remain valid for the basis and purpose of all there is (Eliade, 1987: 263). It is why myth is always talking about the process of creation something including every single thing in our nowadays.

Our life today is the result of the myth in a very primitive time. We use knife to cut beef because our ancestor used pebble to cut the beef too. The matter is not in the knife or the pebble but it is in the idea to cook beef. We

have to chop it first into pieces in order to make it easier to cook.

Similar case is seen in the novel. In the Bible, a sinner must be punished. The matter is in the way we accept the idea of punishment. Punishment is acceptable when it is given wisely; when it involves respect and trust so that there is a chance to betterment.

Secondly, myth is regarded as a system of communication. "It is laden with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter" (Barthes in Sontag, 1986: 94). Coelho steals the image of Ahab, and re-vision it, to communicate his criticism and point of view. Many people are trapped by the thought that people cannot change. Ahab is Ahab. He was an immoral and arrogant king. Coelho tries to revise it: people may change. Ahab can be a good even better person. In addition, myth is a semiological system in which myth is in a second order semiological system. It always requires people to see something critically.

The Function of Re-vision

Frye differentiates the function of myth into two: the myth of freedom and the myth of concern. Under the light of Frye's theory, *The Devil and Miss Prym* can be categorized as the myth of freedom because it offers some new perspectives to the old myths (concepts, ideologies). It is generally agreed that someone who did a mistake must be punished. However, through the character of Saint Savin, Coelho offers a different perspective. A priest must be a perfect religious man; gold promises happiness; devils appear as an evil person. They are concepts people have accepted, and they have been internalized in people's thought.

Through *The Devil and Miss Prym*, the readers are invited to think rationally and realistically. Frye states that the myth of freedom appeals to such self-validating criteria as logicity of argument, impersonal evidence, and verification (in Good, 2014). In this story for instance Chantal and people in Viscos decide not to kill Berta. They break the myth that "gold is everything". They prefer to give an honor toward his ancestor and

themselves that they never kill somebody who merely tries to get the gold bars. *The Devil and Miss Prym* is a portrait of people in Viscos who struggle for their destiny, to get out of their box, i.e. to get out of the concepts the society have constructed for them.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the discussion *The Devil and Miss Prym* above, several points can be put forward:

First, the facts that the characters in both stories are parallel, and that Coelho makes some changes in his characters. In the Bible the characters are King Ahab, Jezebel, Elijah the prophet, Naboth, the vineyard, and the society. In the novels there two layers of characters. In the first layer are Ahab (as a myth in Viscos), Saint Savin, and the society. In the second layer are Chantal Prym (as the re-vision toward King Ahab's myth), the stranger, the priest, Berta, the eleven gold bars, and the society.

The re-vision occurs in each character in the novel. Ahab becomes a good and wise person. This is strengthened by Chantal is a kind-hearted, ambitious, and brave woman. Jezebel, an evil, cunning, and 'bright' provocateur, appears to be a lovely figure for her husband. Saint Savin agrees to commit murder. Berta and Saint Savin are, as opposed to Naboth who was not.

The eleven gold bars is the form of the re-vision for the vineyard and Viscos. The re-vision occurs when Coelho changes the temptation. It is not about keeping the vineyard and Viscos anymore, but gold which promises wealth and prosperity. The re-vision of the society in the Bible can be seen clearly when Coelho makes Viscos a good society.

Second, there are two factors underlying the re-vision. The first factor is the fact that our life cannot be separated from myth. What we have today is the heritage of what we had in the beginning of the creation of the world. The second factor is the power of myth which can lead us to improve things that lack of meaning.

Third, following Campbell's theory, the myth in *The Devil and Miss Prym* shows its functions when it grants continuity and stability to a culture, i.e. the stability of Ahab's myth. It also presents guidelines and role models for living by illuminating, among others, how people in Viscos have a deep respect to to their ancestor and Ahab, how people do not like Chantal because she does not conform with others, and how myth shows people to set their free. A good example of this is Ahab who brings peace to Viscos.

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