

# The four functions of myth: tao te ching

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The Four Functions of Myth: Tao Te Ching According to Joseph Campbell, a renowned scholar on Mythology, a myth fulfils four fundamental functions: Metaphysical or Mystical; Cosmological; Sociological and Pedagogical. The first function is to arouse us to the wonder and miracle of creation and to awaken within us the awareness of something greater than ourselves, something mystical. The second function is to explain to us the shape and design of the 'cosmos' and give it a meaningful existence for us to be able to comprehend it. The 'sociological' function is to lay down the traditional law of that particular culture so that future generations may follow it. The 'pedagogical' function is to teach its readers about the various rites of passage that are required for them to pass from one stage of existence to another (Esch 'Myth').

The Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu contains a few elements of myth, especially a kind of creation myth that fulfils all four functions laid down by Campbell. The Chinese creation myth as envisioned by the Tao philosophy is laid down in Tao Te Ching. The very first verse describes this creation myth. According to the J. Legge translation, this is as follows:

The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

(Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things (Lao Tzu 1).

This verse shows us that it fulfills the mystical or metaphysical function. By speaking of the paradoxical and intriguing nature of the universe, this verse of Tao Te Ching awakes within the reader an awareness of the mystical nature of Genesis. The reader is told that the true essence of Tao and the

universe is the Tao that cannot be 'trodden' and the name that cannot be named. This kind of paradoxical logic confuses and intrigues the reader to continue reading about the ineffability of creation.

This verse also fulfils the cosmological function as it begins to describe the nature of heaven, earth and of all creation. The cosmological function of myth serves to begin ascribing meaning and reason behind the existence of the universe. This function carries on into the second chapter as well, where we are told:

All things spring up, and there is not one which declines to show itself; they grow, and there is no claim made for their ownership; they go through their processes, and there is no expectation (of a reward for the results). The work is accomplished, and there is no resting in it (as an achievement) (Lao Tzu 2).

This explanation of the nature of how things work in our universe is an extension of the same cosmological function of the myth.

A later verse, on knowledge and humility, fulfils the pedagogical and sociological functions of myth.

He who knows other men is discerning; he who knows himself is intelligent. He who overcomes others is strong; he who overcomes himself is mighty. He who is satisfied with his lot is rich; he who goes on acting with energy has a (firm) will.

He, who does not fail in the requirements of his position, continues long; he, who dies and yet does not perish, has longevity (Lao Tzu 33).

These instructions to the reader to know humanity, to know oneself, to be disciplined and practice self-control, to pursue both contentment and

ambition, to be duty-bound, are all examples of the ‘teaching’ or pedagogical function of myth. They also serve the sociological function as they describe what, according to Lao Tzu, is the ideal society. The moral and ethical codes prescribed by Lao Tzu are thus laid down in Tao Te Ching in this verse, as well as many verses following it.

We see therefore that the classical Chinese text on Taoism, which is essentially a religious tract, performs and fulfils the four criteria of mythology as established by scholar Joseph Campbell.

#### Works Cited

Lao Tzu. Tao Te Ching. Trans. J. Legge. Sacred Books of the East Vol. 39. 1891. Web. 26 Nov. 2011.

Esch, Stacy Tartar. ‘Myth’. Topics in Literature: Mythology. Web. 28 Nov. 2011