Kennedy in the land of heroes

Robert Brain looks at the creation of a new myth.

How long does it take to transform a historical figure into a mythical one? At about the same time that Lee Oswald was being dismembered from a grave that he was suspected of not being in, an Italian student of mine informed me and the rest of the class that it was well-known in American government circles that Kennedy never actually died and was never buried. The wounded president disappeared somewhere on the way back from Dallas to Washington.

So Kennedy lives! Like so many mythical figures as Lenin and Jesus. Is he the kind of stuff that real myths are made of? Since anthropologists are supposed to be experts on myth, I decided to have a closer look. The themes required in a classical hero-myth were first suggested by the anthropologists, Otto Rank and Lord Raglan.

Every hero has a similar pattern of abnormal birth. He is usually the child of a wealthy or aristocratic couple who are related, but not closely. Birth is preceded by difficulties, like sterility on the father's part, or virginity or sterility on the mother's. During pregnancy a prophecy may caution the parents against the child, and predict danger from it to the father or mother or another member of the family. After birth it is common for the baby to be exposed: placed on the water in a box (Moses) or tied up by his feet (Oedipus). He is saved from danger by lowly beings: animals (Romulus and Remus) or shepherds (Oedipus), and cuddled by a female animal or a humble woman. The childhood of the hero is usually uneventful, but in young manhood he finds his parents again, kills monsters or performs other heroic deeds, becomes king, and marries a princess. His reign is as uneventful as his childhood, although a code of laws is often attributed to him.

Finally, a tragic crime or sin precedes his abrupt downfall, and he is toppled from rank and power. Death is violent. After losing favour with the gods, the hero is killed, always away from home and often on the top of a hill. The body is not buried in the common way, although there are one or more holy sepultures. After the hero's death, his kin rarely succeed or inherit. In many of the myths, the hero's younger brother kills himself or is murdered. No single hero-myth possesses all of these themes, of course. Jesus scores rather badly, Oedipus well. In the case of Oedipus, the first clue is the name itself. In Greek, Oedipus means "swollen foot" and this obviously refers to his lameness after being tied up and exposed as a baby. Primitive mythmakers describe the time of creation, when the hero emerges from the earth in an incomplete form. As in the Oedipus myth, the hero shows signs of having difficulty in walking. In the modern Anglo-Saxon world, we are short of really satisfactory heroes. Over the past few years, we have seen a number of myths struggling to survive. James Dean became an instant hero to millions. He was a young man who achieved little apart from playing himself in a few movies. It was not a symbolic character, however. The hero which made him a hero but the combination of the mythical themes of Outsider and Violent Death. The story of his something made of the way he lived and died; like Dean, he left the picture young, dying a violent death; like Dean, his mythical status was an ephemeral one.

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One of events which demonstrate the shift from history into myth in myth creation, if the facts don't fit they will be made to fit.

The American President, once elected, takes on a certain divinity lacking among Prime Ministers and Premiers. Eisenhower said: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt faith, and I don't care what it is."

The sacred nature of the office is such that the President's health and the prosperity of the nation are mysteriously connected. The President must be seen, at least from a decency distance, as a bronzed and bright-haired athlete, a trim figure with a calculating smile. The most unworthy Presidents partake of the shining glory of this divine office. In Africa, the disc of the earth sways with the weight of the President. In the United States, shares fluctuate with the President's pulse.

Most Presidents regain their human nature when they lose office. But, in rare cases, the shock of assassination starts them off. For a while, young men and women dressed like him, combed their hair like him, and adopted his mannerisms, speech patterns being episodes of bitter alienation, soured of the way they killed themselves. The same seems to be true of Che Guevara, who also became a mythical figure in an extraordinarily brief period of time. Like Dean, Guevara also became a hero because of the way he lived and died; like Dean, he left the picture young, dying a violent death; like Dean, his mythical status was an ephemeral one.

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Kennedy's adolescence was presumably a quiet one. His bravery during a war against fascist pigs and Asiatic pigs may well be developed into monster-slaying on the same level as sphynx and minotaur-killing.

After qualifying for the throne by riddle-guessing or rain-making, the hero achieves no further feats as king. He does not even extend the boundaries of his kingdom. But sacred laws or a code, like Moses' ten commandments, are attributed to him.

Kennedy was eligible through the magic of election promises and the ridelles of electioneering. The legislative achievements of the Kennedy administration were insignificant. It remains to be seen whether in the distant future a code of laws, such as the New Deal, will be attributed to him. Remember, Moses was not the originator of the Mosaic laws or ten commandments.

The sacred hero is a murdered king.

Kennedy was assassinated. Immediately after his dramatic death, mythical wheels were set in motion. The whole nation mourned, sharing a religious and emotional moment as historical time became mythical time—into millions of TV sets. The mass media made sure that not only Americans, but people all over the world, mourned Kennedy as if the divine king had been sacrificed. I was in Africa at the time, two days' walk from the nearest road, and the local chief sent out the message of mourning—"The King is Dead!"—on his great drum. Then, during the preparations for the funerary rite, the whole of the United States saw another element in the archetypal myth as Lee Harvey Oswald, charged with the hero's murder, was shot down by the police in Dallas.

The rituals of the church

The President's funeral was stage-managed as the apotheosis of a hero-king. The theatrical rituals of the Catholic church mourning for a dead child, and the political ones mourned for a dead king. In Washington, the military ceremony—with their covered coffins, firing squad, and a riderless horse representing a fallen warrior—can be traced back to the ceremonies of pre-Christian Asiatic emperors. In this solemn hero, entering the company of other mythical heroes, is an image which is a potent one in the mythical myths of all states.

The hero of myth is uncumbered by close relatives, such as siblings.

In the myth, while younger brothers suffer a violent death after the assassination, elder ones (if there are any) must disappear from history. When Robert F. Kennedy was murdered during his ill-advised (from a mythical point of view) bid for the throne, we slot another piece in the mythical jigsaw. Another younger brother is defeated in 1980 at the presidential primaries.

All very well, but what about incest, the essential "tragic event." Oedipus kills his father and sleeps with his mother. Jason kills his uncle, Perseus his father. John F. Kennedy has yet to be shown to have been a pericard or incestuous. Yet since death in myths is always a punishment for sin, what shall we invent for Kennedy?

The Kennedy sin may well be pride, possibly a more serious sin in democratic America than incest. Joseph P. Kennedy proudly willed that his son should become President of the greatest nation in the world. Instead of patriarch as the "tragic event," we have fillicide. Instead of the son leaving the stage blinded as in the case of Oedipus, a stroke makes (father Kennedy paralysed and speechless at the end of his son's first year as President. Joseph P. Kennedy is cast as a god, and his two sons are violently murdered as punishment for his proud ambitions.

What about the hero's woman? In the Oedipus myth, Jocasta becomes the wife of her own son. Subsequently, overwhelmed by the knowledge of incest, she kills herself. In the Kennedy story ("myth"), the hero marries a Bouvier, an American princess. After the assassination, she plays the role of tragic widow, before leaving the arena of myth to marry into the profane world of international celebrities. Her "American Majesty" becomes Jackie O!

The international celebrity is hardly the same personage as the blood-splattered princess who sat beside the murdered king. More important for the final Kennedy myth may be his rumoured relationship with an other legendary figure, Marilyn Monroe.

As 1981 comes to its close, the Kennedy story is still more history than myth, but the elements are being slotted into place. Modern anthropologists, however, are more interested in form than themes: for Levi Straus, the real logic of the Oedipus myth is not contained in its universal thematic structure but in the presence of formal binary contrasts.

Binary contrasts help myths work as easily-remembered tales. In the New Testament, for example, Sir Edmund Leach has shown interesting oppositions between the birth and death of the paired heroes, John and Jesus. In both cases, while conception is abnormal (as the classical hero-tale requires), John's mother, Elizabeth, is a woman past child-bearing; Jesus' mother is a woman before child-bearing, a virgin. The two mothers are related, but while John descends from a priestly line, Jesus is a royal, descended from King David. John is a prophet who lives in the wilderness and dresses in animal skins, eating insects and wild honey—a man of Nature. Jesus is also a prophet but he is called "king," eats normal food in a normal world—a man of Culture. The context of John's violent death is a royal feast at which his severed head is served up on a dish as if it were food. The context of Jesus' violent death is the Jewish feast of the passover at which Jesus identifies his own body in blood and wine.

Similar ideas may be applied to historical narratives which have almost become myth. The technique of teaching the children uses black-and-white oppositions between good and evil, love and hate.

Learning about the Tudor kings of England we don't just follow the facts of succession—Henri v to viii and Edward iii to vii. We have, instead, a vivid "mythical" picture of Henry vii as a potent male head of state who married many women and killed them; he is contrasted with the feeble Edward vii who remained a virgin until he died. We see Mary Queen of Scots as a dark-haired and unsuccessful female monarch who married many men and murdered them; but we see Elizabeth as a bright-haired, successful male monarch who remained a virgin until her death. Here history uses the technique of myth by forgetting facts and contrasting male and female monarchs, potency and impotence, being married or unmarried, black or red.

In the Kennedy story, we already have the first glimmerings of a similar scheme. Contrasts are emerging, so that the myth will eventually fall into place as a system of contrasting pairs. As President, Kennedy was a king whose radiant youthfulness was exaggerated in portraits. His blood innocence has to be contrasted with the dark guilt of a successor, an ageing profane villain discovering all the dirty crimes. And so—instead of Bad King John and Good King Richard of crusader fame—we have good President John Kennedy and bad President Richard Nixon. Nixon's fate as a black anti-hero is assured, since the Watergate file is still being wound up.

Nixon, of course, was not Kennedy's immediate successor. His real heir, the good Lyndon Johnson, must retire from the lime-light in the interest of clear-cut binary oppositions. And this despite great efforts to mythologise Johnson. After his death a mighty Texan propaganda machine attempted to immortalise the ex-President. In vain. No amount of money and plastic replicas can make a universal hero or even a successor to a universal hero. In the myth, Radiant Jack must be followed by Dirty Dick.

Every day the Kennedy image becomes more and more "sacred." In memorial services, textbooks and biographies, the mythical elements are subtly emphasised, and pre-fame incongruities and unnecessary facts are erased from the picture. John Kennedy is joining the ranks of Hercules, Oedipus, and Romulus and Remus.