

Dissertation Proposal

Some notes on a sample

The Trickster Archetype, as portrayed throughout the myths and folk tales of a myriad of ancient narratives, shares many common characteristics with the role of the Modern Artist. Discuss these similarities using examples of the work of three artists or thinkers, within the wider context of the process through which disruptive imagination creates culture. (?)

What do we think of this question?

Do we have expectations about the themes that may be covered?

Introduction

Throughout the 20th Century, the Joneses breed like rabbits. My father's side of the family were no exception to this, and my Great Grandfather, Cecil Jones was busy doing so in the United States, which he migrated to in 1916 as a teenager. I was lucky enough to have met Cecil while I was young, and I used to enjoy taking visits to his elegant but decrepit Edwardian house in the Uplands during the school holidays. While my brothers enjoyed wrestling one another on the grounds of the overgrown garden, I preferred staying indoors in the company of Cecil, who would recount stories to me from the long and rich narrative of his life. Upon one such visit, he began to tell me about his experience of being a British migrant in the bustling and competitive atmosphere of New York. In an attempt to more clearly demonstrate the turmoil he witnessed, he directed me towards a VHS copy of Charles Chaplin's 1917 film *The Immigrant*.

I immediately identified with the character portrayed by Chaplin. This supposedly foolish, ridiculous looking tramp possessed a natural talent for outwitting his opponents. While he was constantly finding himself in the most horrendous circumstances, he managed to retain his livelihood through his effortless resourcefulness, born from a restless appetite for food, sex and mischief. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I had come across an embodiment of the cunning trickster spirit. I became apt at detecting the characteristics of the Trickster archetype while in my mid-teens, when I discovered a book by the essayist and writer Lewis Hyde called *Trickster Makes This World; How Disruptive Imagination creates Culture*. Hyde's writings dramatically altered my perspective on the role the artist within a given society or culture.

Setting the scene – the opening paragraph draws the reader in with a personal anecdote that leads to a selected example – one that will recur throughout the proposal.

What starts out as anecdotal and personal, becomes relevant to the chosen topic.

What do you think of the prose: how does it read, engage? Is it academic, informed, precise, or is it overwritten?

Does the writer have a 'voice'?

The Charlie Chaplin example is, in a sense, popular culture although, with age, a subject for academic discussion by both film and cultural historians.

The writer steps-up from a pop culture reference, seamlessly, to a more academic one (Lewis Hyde).

First Key Word – Appetite

[Sticking to the formula]

The first concept I would like to expand upon in association with the Trickster archetype is that of appetite. Under this umbrella term lies a concoction of different strains of hunger; the physical hunger for food and sex, melded with a desire for social, ethical and spiritual change. This meeting of oppositional desires is in line with the Trickster's school of thought, epitomized by the Native American Trickster Coyote, who's "seemingly asocial or amoral behaviours and actions" says Mead-Brewer, are "typically utilized for humorous and socially beneficial purposes." [Mead-Brewer, 128, 2008].

[colon]

whose - Possessive, no apostrophe

How do we feel about this paragraph?

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[colon]

Whose – Possessive, no apostrophe

How do we feel about this paragraph?

A very good elevation of ideas with references, in short order. No waste here: cutting to the chase.

In evolutionary theory, the physical hunger for food has been a driving force behind the development of intelligence, particularly in relation to the competitive relationship between predator and prey. As explored in the work of Henry Jerison's *Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence*, the cunning traps developed by the predator are a constant reminder for the preyed-upon to wise up [Jerison, 1973]. The process which links the development of intelligence with a physical hunger for food is widely reiterated within mythological stories and folk tales, in which the Trickster archetype occupies the main stage. Hyde puts forth the notion that hunger is the driving force behind the universal myth of trickster. Observing from his thorough research into the Trickster archetype, Hyde concludes that most narratives that revolve around this figure "... (begin) with a being whose main concern is getting fed and (it)

end(s) with the same being grown mentally swift” [Hyde, 17, 1998]. An example of this pattern of growth can be observed within the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* in which Hermes steals a herd of cattle from his half-brother Apollo, after experiencing a sudden desire to eat meat. The process through which Hermes carries out this act of theft while being left unscathed leads him to perform several 'tricks', which he uses to deceive Apollo. This close association between chicanery and appetite has its roots in ancient history. The oldest known use of the word “Trick” translates as “*dolos*” in Homeric Greek, which in turn refers to the bait of a hook. [Hyde, 18, 1998].

Possessive its – no apostrophe,
certainly not s-apostrophe

This physical hunger for food directly relates to the circumstances often portrayed in the films of Charles Chaplin. Chaplin's fictional character possesses many similarities with the “unusually consistent and distinctly defined” trickster, not least of which lies in his physical hunger for food. [Lieberman 1994]. Professor of film studies, Evan Lieberman, argues that Chaplin's 1917 film *The Immigrant*, is “composed of Charlie's machinations as he tries to get, eat, and pay for dinner”. In typical trickster fashion, Chaplin is seen baiting a fish with a hook in the first opening shots of this film, an act which immediately identifies Chaplin with the ancient art of deception. The positioning of this act at the beginning of the narrative also mimics the structural layout of ancient trickster tales, reiterating the observations of Hyde when he remarks upon the universal pattern of the attainment of intelligence, with hunger as its root cause [see above for wandering stop]

Very accomplished cross-referencing of diverse cultural forms – classical and popular culture. Evidence of wide research in bringing these forms, with referenced support, together. Possibly based on references given in a primary text source but convincingly written as from an informed perspective. Importantly, ends by signposting relevance of argument – the pervasiveness of the chosen archetype.

In his infamous work *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg depicts the various appetites of himself and his contemporaries. It is their hunger for spiritual, political, sexual and intellectual freedom which both 'elevates' the minds of Ginsberg's contemporaries to an imperative status within the cultural history of America, as well as leaving them 'destroyed', 'mad', 'raving' and 'hilarious' [Mead-Brewer 2008]. Seen within the context of the **prudent** attitudes of Western culture which were rife during the Cold War period, Ginsberg's desires to explore the peripheries of his sexuality, as well as to challenge the spiritual outlook of America, can be appreciated as a **daunting** endeavour. He makes light of this “oppressive mainstream rhetoric” towards sexual disposition, argues the author Katherine Mead-Brewer, through his use of humour [Mead-Brewer, 130, 2008]. When discussing the sexual act, Ginsberg adopts a series of exuberant, hyperbolic linguistic terms. This method of articulation, Mead-Brewer goes on to say, serves to “criticize how and what others may label as “perversion”” [Mead-Brewer, 130, 2008]. With regards to his attitude towards America's political endeavours, he directly addresses his anxieties surrounding the Cold War and his appetite for immediate change in his 1956 poem *America*: “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” [Ginsberg, 1984].

What do you think of all the adjectives?

Malapropism Klaxon! Prudish - not 'prudent' - the appropriate word.

While Ginsberg's poems highlight the absurd habits of repressive American culture towards sexual fluidity in an explicit manner, Chaplin's fictional tramp character (whose face **aired** the screens of the public theatres long before Ginsberg's poems **illuminated** the pages of publishing houses) strived to attack the **prudent** attitudes of audiences towards this subject

Malapropism Klaxon! Prudish the appropriate word.

during the inter-war period. Although Chaplin's treatment of the subject looks mild when

compared to Ginsberg's explicit descriptions of "cock and endless balls", the actor's sexually implicit gags would have shocked viewers during the early decades of the Twentieth Century. An example such an incident lies in the factory scene of the 1936 film *Modern Times*. Having worked for several hours straight on a ridiculously demanding factory line, Chaplin suddenly breaks away from the constraints of work to **make** chase after several female colleagues. With his two spanners in his hands, Chaplin's repetitive gestures with these props subvert their original function from practical work tools into phallic objects [O'Brien 1983]. The sexual appetite demonstrated within the work of both Ginsberg and Chaplin is yet another consistent characteristic associated with the trickster archetype. This uncontrolled sexual desire is represented through Native American mythology by the "fantastically huge" penis of the Winnebago trickster, which "possesses a mind of its own as it takes off across a lake and embeds itself inside the king's daughter" [Lieberman, 19, 1994].

Interestingly, little mention so far of psychoanalysis despite the overall subject's clear associations with Jung's writings on archetypes and mythology, never mind the Freudian intent of Chaplin's spanners.

Second Key Word – Chance

It is the trickster's appetite for a change of conventional order, whether it serves his immediate wants (i.e. hunger) or if it's success is socially beneficial, which leads him to create an atmosphere of **happen-stance** and uncertainty [Mead-Brewer 2008]. It is within this air of disorder that trickster, as well as the artist, thrives. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here the contingent circumstances in which James Joyce's *Ulysses* was published. While Joyce was based in France during the work's creation, the novel itself reflects Irish life during the early Twentieth Century. During this period, Ireland was adjusting to the realities of political

independence after hundreds of years of English domination. At the same time, she remained a divided country, with six of her counties remaining under the governance of the United Kingdom. This left Ireland in a situation described by Stephan Dedalus as “no longer something, not yet something else” [Dedalus in Hughes-Kersnowski, 50, 1998]. As a direct result of its fluctuant status as a country, argues Hughes-Kersnowski, “Ireland herself is a trickster” [Hughes Kernowski, 50, 1998]. The spirit of trickster is therefore embedded into the national character, chronicled by Hughes Kernosnwski as “an indelible refusal to accept life that can be restricted to a simple, direct statement” [ibid 50, 1998]. Joyce, the quintessential Irish man (who referred to himself as a trickster) channelled this presence as “shape changer” into his 1922 novel *Ulysses*, which is itself an exemplification of disruptive imagination [ibid 50, 1998].

Consistency in referencing – ibid; copy and paste; simplify to date:page

This state of uncertainty can be seen to be expressed through the physical portrayal of Chaplin, who's most famous image comes from a depiction of him walking along the road at the end of the 1915 film *The Tramp*, “neither here nor there but existing some place in between.” [Lieberman 1994]. There also exists a mental state of ambiguity in which intelligence is “most at home” [Hyde, 128, 1998]. This conceptual aimlessness of thought preoccupied the attention of Pablo Picasso, whose pioneering work within the Cubist movement symbolises a shift of the artist’s approach from translating perceptual information into creating a conceptual language, influenced heavily by the emotional and intellectual responses of the audience [Wayne 1996]. The still- life s created by Picasso during this period are not an attempt on the artist’s behalf to formulate a visual reconstruction of what is directly in front of him, but “an imaginative transformation of the visible world” which relied as

much upon the participation of the viewer to formulate meaning from the final work [Green, 44, 2009]. The intentionally obscured representational methods employed by Picasso during this period enabled him the freedom to experiment with contingency. An example of such lies in the interchangeable depictions of heads and guitars, sprawled amongst Picasso's sketchbook pages from this time, and described by Christopher Green as illustrative of "...*both guitars and heads*, not equivocally one or the other" [Green, 62, 2009].

Still well-written but the relevance of 'chance' not as convincingly argued as 'appetite'. A few 'contingencies' added for good measure.

The final key word that will be considered within the context of the characteristics which define the trickster archetype is **deceit [why not heading?]**, with emphasis upon the act of theft. While trickster relies heavily upon his ability to recognize the opportunities presented to him through happenstance, it is his ability to master the art of deception that ultimately increases his intelligence. As mentioned previously, Hermes developed an ability to deceive after experiencing a sudden "hankering for meat" as a child [Hyde, 17, 1998]. This skill was in turn passed down to his son Autolycus, who went on to teach Hermes's grandson, Odysseus. The author responsible for the invention of the deceptive character of Odysseus is Homer. Upon recollecting Homer's teaching methods, Aristotle, former pupil of Homer, wrote that students were first taught "...art of framing lies the right way." [Nemerov, 20, 1959].

As an academic side-note, most modern 'Homeric' scholars, treat Homer's existence as ambiguous, pointing to differences in the Odyssey and Iliad that are irreconcilable, and noting that multiple writers are 'Homer'. This

perhaps means, avoid the absolute.

This creative deception is also a prerequisite of art, emphasized by Picasso through his memorable quote “art is a lie that tells the truth”. Indeed, “Picasso’s readiness to switch styles made him...the clearest possible manifestation of...deceitfulness” [Green, 60, 2009]. This deceitful manner is celebrated by Ginsberg in *Howl*, in his expression of a fantasy centred upon “trapping the American trappers (the F.B.I)” to gain the freedom to trick others and create new social realities [Mead-Brewer, 140, 2008]. Lieberman stresses the importance of the trick within Chaplin’s comedic act, as well as underlining the lack of advantage that Chaplin acquired from carrying out these tricks. While on the surface, these acts appear to be motivated by a sinister amorality inherent within trickster’s personality, his actions can be said to possess “a moral purpose that transcends his amorality” [Leeming in Lieberman, 21, 1994]. A fourth example of a character who shares characteristics with the trickster archetype is Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who’s disruptive activities within the state of Denmark are particularly interesting when seen through the lens of Freud’s theories concerning sexual repression. About time.

Contextualization of Question

Each of these key words are characteristics associated with descriptions of the trickster archetype, represented throughout mythology and folk law traditions. Breaking this archetype down into three basic personality traits allowed me to begin to develop persuasive connections between the mythological culture hero and the role of the Modern artist.

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What is wrong with this?

The order is out, the formatting wrong, but it is alphabetical and extensive

Feedback

A well written and intriguing proposal _____; it will be interesting to see how it develops. Your writing is academic yet it is not without creative flourish, which makes it all the more engaging.

As a topic it could have the potential to become unwieldy, so you may want to think about the structure fairly early on. Make sure you represent divergent viewpoints. Picasso is a very good example of this phenomenon. You may want to also question whether this archetype is more difficult to identify in the present cultural and political climate. _____ second marked this proposal, and she suggested that you look at Jung's trickster archetype and links with subversive cultures.

No illustrations

Lack of Jung seems odd

Very good research and excellent writing but I'm not entirely convinced by some of the examples. Joyce may be a self-proclaimed trickster but the writer doesn't seem entirely convinced – there is a lack of clarity to the argument. The evidence used to justify Picasso's inclusion is also a little undercooked.