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TRIUMPH OVER EVIL: THE THEME OF EXILE IN CARIBBEAN FOLKTALES

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Synopsis:

The theme of exile in Caribbean folktales will be analyzed in this paper where the protagonists are often exiled from their community in order to learn important lessons about their cultural heritage. Oftentimes the protagonists must struggle against evil to learn these valuable lessons, thereby, becoming productive members of society.

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The theme of exile is paramount in Caribbean oral literature, especially in its folktales. Folktales underline the importance of tradition in the community. One of the most important aspects in society is maintaining group cohesion, thereby, teaching the values of the community. However because of the slave trade and subsequent colonization in the Caribbean, folktales from the region must deviate from this standard. Patrick Chamoiseau underscores this in his introduction of *Creole Folktales* stating that “While their ludic function is undeniable . . . when taken as a whole, these tales provide a practical education, an apprenticeship in life—a life of survival in a colonized land” (xii). Chamoiseau continues to emphasize that:

[t]he Creole tale says that fear is inevitable, that every blade of grass may conceal a monster, and that one must know how to live with this. The Creole tale reveals that overt force guarantees eventual defeat and punishment, and that through cunning, patience, nerve, and resourcefulness (which is never a sin), the weak may vanquish the strong or seize power by the scruff of the neck. . . . The hero is alone, and selfishly preoccupied with saving his own skin. (xii-xiii)

This characterization of creole folktales is essential in understanding the tales from the Caribbean. The protagonists in the tales oftentimes must fight, struggle, use their wit and cunning in order to survive and conquer the evils of slavery. If he must fight alone, so be it.

The protagonists must also fight against hunger. Chamoiseau stresses that “hunger figures as a constant torment in our Creole tales, which obsessively depict food as the most precious of treasures” (xiv).

Three Caribbean folktales that succinctly demonstrate these characteristics are analyzed in this study. “Célestine, la jolie marchande de fruits” (Célestine, the pretty fruit vendor) is found in *Légendes et Contes des Antilles* by Raymonde Céleste-Leroy. The theme of exile and the triumph over evil are viewed in the struggles of a young girl Célestine who must overcome the cruelty of an unjust stepmother. The other two stories come from the collection of tales, *Contes créoles des Amériques* by Raphaël Confiant. One is entitled “Jean Savant et Jean Couillon” where brothers Jean Savant and Jean Couillon overcome poverty and vanquish evil by using their wit and cunning after having left their home. The other folktale from Confiant is “Un père indigne” (An Unworthy Father). In “An Unworthy Father” children must conquer both an overbearing stepmother as well as an unworthy father.

What does it mean to be exiled from a community? Webster offers three definitions for *exile*: “expulsion from one’s native land or home by authoritative decree, [a] prolonged separation from one’s country or home, as by force of circumstance, and a person banished or separated from his or her native land.” In these three tales, the heroes are banished or separated from their home by an authoritative figure or they were separated by force of circumstance.

Célestine’s story: Célestine’s mother died when she was born. She is a beautiful young girl whose most admiral qualities are her kindness and her generosity. She sells the best fruit in

the market. Because her father was a drunk and her mother has passed away, Célestine's godfather (who is also her uncle) takes her in. His wife could not tolerate this beautiful and gracious young girl. Though the stepmother would give her the most difficult tasks, Célestine did the chores without complaining. Additionally, Célestine's stepmother would not give her enough money to buy a decent lunch. She was sent out with barely enough to survive. Her daily quest was to live and to exist on meager means. Each day she had to overcome the threat of starvation. How was she to survive this perpetual mistreatment?

Two brothers Jean Savant and Jean Couillon live with their sick grandmother. Jean Savant goes to work every day while Jean Couillon stays at home with the grandmother. One day the grandmother dies. She succumbs after Jean Couillon bathes her in water that is too hot. Now the brothers must flee. Jean Savant and Jean Couillon encounter a band of devils on route. Through trickery and deceit Jean Couillon defeats the band of devils. When the devils flee, they abandon their treasure which the brothers gladly take. They decide to split the treasure and go their separate ways. Jean Savant squanders his fortune whereas Jean Couillon becomes a rich businessman. Since Jean Savant is out of money he must look for a job. He comes across a cunning devil who makes a wager with him. Jean Savant is to watch over the devil's dog. However, if Jean Savant loses his temper with the dog, Jean Savant will lose his skin. The dog pulls many tricks on Jean Savant who indeed loses his temper; therefore, Jean Savant loses the bet and his skin. Jean Savant encounters his long lost brother who sympathizes with his plight. Jean Couillon goes to the devil's home stating that he needs a job. The devil makes the same pact with Jean Couillon but the latter beats the dog when the devil is out of sight. When the devil finds out how his dog has been mistreated, he loses his temper and consequently loses the

bet. The devil has to give up his skin and return the skin of Jean Couillon's brother. Jean Couillon has no problem in also taking the devil's money.

In the *Unworthy father*, one sees the plight of three children (two boys and one girl) who must overcome an evil stepmother. Their father is a widow. He eventually, at the daughter's encouragement, marries a woman who, before the marriage, was very kind toward his children. But very soon after the marriage, she begins to mistreat the children. She tells her husband that there is not enough food. She instructs him to abandon the children in the forest so that they will not be able to find their way back home. The daughter overhears this plot and the children drop white stones along the way so as not to get lost. The children find their way back home and hear the parents talking. The stepmother says that if the children were home, there would be plenty of food for them to eat. The children rush in after hearing this since they believe that they are now welcome to return. The next morning one of the children overhears the stepmother instruct her husband to again return the children to the forest. This time he must take them deeper into the woods to insure that they do not return. Instead of taking stones to find their way back home, one of the sons takes grain which is eaten by animals. Consequently, they get lost this time, unable to return. They come across a woman who appears to be kind, who takes them in and feeds them well. But this woman is only trying to fatten them up so she can eat them at the appropriate time. The children are warned by a kind woman in the forest who tells them how to get rid of the woman who will do them harm. After they succeed in saving their own lives and killing the woman, they take her belongings and become rich. Later on, their parents fall on hard times and the children forgive them and take the parents into their care.

Célestine and the three children are exiled or put out of their home because of the wishes of an evil stepmother. Whereas Jean Savant and Jean Couillon must leave by force of circumstances, for Jean Couillon caused the grandmother's demise.

So what is the purpose of the heroes being exiled? They all must conquer debilitating circumstances (banishment and hunger) in order to survive.

Joseph Campbell outlines this quest for survival in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The stages of the adventure of the hero are: Departure, Initiation and the Return. These steps will unlock the mystery of the journey quest and aid the hero to defeat evil.

The first stage of the departure is the "Call to Adventure." It "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero . . . to a zone unknown" (Campbell 58). Célestine must leave the house each day, to the unknown. Where will she find food to eat? How will she succeed in escaping the tyranny of her stepmother? The three children in "An Unworthy Father" not only must overcome the wrath of their stepmother but also must deal with the fact that their father has abandoned them. Their unknown territory takes them into a forest where there seems to be no hope in finding their way back home. They also find themselves, unknowingly, into the hands of an evil woman who plots for their demise. Jean Savant and Jean Couillon must also go into an unknown land after the death of their grandmother.

Another stage of the Departure is receiving "Supernatural Aid." The hero has "a protective figure who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 69). The figure also represents the "protecting power of destiny" (Campbell 72). Célestine often has the assistance of two market women who offer her some of their produce so that she will not starve. Thus, they enable her to survive. The three children are assisted by the good lady in the forest who warns them of the true intentions of the woman who

has taken them in and helps them to escape what would have been their demise. As for Jean Savant and Jean Couillon, they survive through the cunning and trickery of the brother, Jean Couillon.

The next stage of the Departure is “the Crossing of the first threshold.” The hero must pass this threshold even if he encounters life-threatening obstacles (Campbell 82). Célestine must each day overcome the obstacles of daily starvation and mistreatment from her stepmother. The three children must overcome the old lady who seeks to kill them. The two brothers must overcome the devils they encounter along their path.

After the departure, the second stage of the hero’s adventure is the “Initiation.” This is the stage where the hero must survive a succession of trials (Campbell 97). As mentioned earlier, Célestine must face her stepmother and starvation every day. The three children face the trials of wanting to return home after being abandoned. They also must overcome the old lady attempting to eat them. And Jean Savant and Jean Couillon must fight two sets of devils after they flee their home. Each of the heroes survives their trials. They never give up their journey and they continue their paths.

On the road of trials and tribulations, the hero must make “atonement with the father” (Campbell 130) another stage of the journey. This stage is difficult, for the hero must abandon the attachment to ego itself. “One must have a faith that the father is merciful and then a reliance on that mercy. It is in this ordeal that the hero may derive hope and assurance from the helpful female figure” (Campbell 130). Célestine’s demeanor is always happy for she knows that she will be provided for. She receives assistance from an elderly woman. Their meeting will soon be described. The three children also receive assistance from an elderly woman. As for Jean Savant, just after losing a devastating bet with the devil, he seeks out his brother who he did not

know had become a very successful businessman. Once he explains to his brother how he was duped, his brother does not hesitate to help him. Instead of a female figure helping him, Jean Savant is assisted by family—his brother. During this stage of initiation, the child grows up and becomes an adult.

In the next stage of the initiation, the hero comes to the realization that “instead of thinking only of himself, the individual becomes dedicated to the whole of *his* society” (Campbell 156). Rebirth makes us more than what we were (Campbell 162). One day Célestine offered an elderly woman, free of charge, one of her best pieces of fruit. She respected the lady because of her old age and had pity on her because she was poor. Célestine does not think of herself and the punishment she will receive from her stepmother when the latter finds out that she has given up her profit to help someone. Célestine does not think of her own hunger. She generously gives to another. Her selfless act helps her to become an adult. After the three children are free from the woman who tried to destroy them and they become wealthy, the children do not hesitate to help and forgive their parents who had abandoned them in the woods. Jean Savant grows wiser through the selfless act of his brother who helped him without hesitation. He can now become true to his name “Savant” which means, in French, “wise” or “one who is well-informed.” The heroes in these tales break through their personal limitations, thus, growing and developing spiritually (Campbell 190). The many obstacles and trials help them to conquer their fears and their limited horizon, going forward to an “ever-expanding realization” (Campbell 190). This is the ultimate gift.

The third and final stage of the adventure of the hero is the “Return.” “When the hero’s quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, the adventurer still must return home with his life-transmitting

trophy” (Campbell 193). According to Campbell, some heroes refuse to return home. Célestine returns home with the wealth that the lady bestowed upon her. The three children and the two brothers have made a new life in new homes and therefore do not return home. With their wealth, the children help their parents. In the case of the two brothers, Jean Couillon has shared his wealth and wisdom with his brother, Jean Savant.

There is then the “magic flight home.” This stage of the adventure is supported by all the powers of a supernatural patron. All of the heroes are blessed at the end. After helping the poor woman who is impressed by Célestine’s kindness, the old woman gives Celestine a small stone. The next day, the stone turns into a large diamond. The boon or gift the hero brings back, restores the world. The gift received releases her from both her stepmother’s tyranny and from daily starvation. The children become wealthy through the aid of a supernatural woman and they are released from the tyranny of the old woman who tried to kill them. They are also released from hunger and the fear of parents who had abandoned them. Jean Savant is aided by the powers of his cunning brother. His skin is returned to him and he can live a successful life because his brother has helped him.

“The Crossing of the return threshold” is another stage of the Return. The hero’s return is described as a coming out of a supernatural zone. Campbell emphasizes that “here is the great key to the understanding of myth and symbol—the two kingdoms are actually one” (217). The supernatural world and the real world are one in the same. Thus the heroes’ voyages have been journeys of self-knowledge.

The Freedom to Live is the last segment of the “Return.” What is the result of the miraculous passage of trials and then the return? The heroes bring back wealth. This wealth unburdens them forever. But the true power they received was the power to be released from

tyranny and hunger: two defining symbols of the yoke of colonization. They receive their freedom. Célestine, the children and the two brothers are no longer under the power of tyranny and despair. Their journeys and the various trials to which they were subjected are symbolic of life's journey.

In conclusion, the adventure of the hero guides one to the knowledge that one must go beyond one's limitations. One must not only be generous and giving but one must also go past the fear of the unknown. One must be willing to be cunning. One must be willing to use wit and one must be willing to struggle in order to survive. Going past these fears and stepping out onto faith are lessons imparted by these Caribbean folktales where one learns to triumph over evil.

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