CHAPTER FIVE

TRICKSTERS

Religious traditions tell creation myths to bring a sense of order to life and to provide a pattern of orientation in space and time. These myths also describe the separation between Absolute Reality and humans, perhaps due to a process of evolution into higher consciousness or a devolution from some pristine state. We are now going to consider a third element often found in creation myths: the helper in the process of creation commonly called the culture hero or trickster.

This mythic figure in most ancient form serves as a link between the heavens and earth, a channel to the gods. He bestows on humans gifts of their material and spiritual heritage and makes them aware of their godlike knowledge and their responsibilities to civilization. As cultures become more sophisticated, the trickster's role undergoes a transformation. No longer is he pictured as one who helped shape creation and furnish order; on the contrary, he comes to stand for the principle of disorder, irrationality, and arbitrariness. This second form is familiar to us: the trickster as serpent, as spoiler, who plays a variety of mean tricks on the world, and thus introduces disorder.

What the trickster is to myths, the clown is to religious rituals. We will see that clowns, especially at carnival time, help provide us with a period of release from rules and obligations of civilized society. By their fun, recklessness, and loosening up of proprieties, they provide feelings of relief and a general relaxation from everyday obligations. By highlighting the contrast between the realm of orderly belief and that of chaotic forces, they show the sense of relativity that clings to all of life and they help revitalize society by calling it to higher truths.

Tricksters and clowns bring out our utopian urge, our desire to live where we are all equals and where there are no social restraints. At the same time, they show the very need for rules, boundaries, and laws in human societies. Tricksters and clowns make it easier for us to live with uncertainty, to be resilient when we encounter difficulties in our plans, to consent to the arbitrary in life, and to admit our own self-insufficiency. They help us make contact with the numinous, integrate the demonic, and assent to the mystery of the universe which forever eludes and surprises us.

Maui-of-a-Thousand-Tricks

Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks performed many exploits that are still told by Oceanic peoples. Perhaps the most famous story, and the one told with the most variations, describes his theft of fire. In the Hawaiian version, Maui and his brothers see a fire burning on shore while they are out fishing. They try to slip ashore unnoticed to capture this fire, but the birds who made the fire are alarmed, put it out, and fly away to hide. After several unsuccessful attempts to surprise them, Maui hides on shore and sends his brothers back out in the canoe, hoping to fool the birds. They refuse to rebuild the fire, for they perceive that one of Maui's brothers is missing from the boat. At last Maui hits upon a stratagem. He and his brothers set up a dummy in the canoe. Then he remains ashore while the brothers put out to sea again. The birds are deceived this time and build their fire. Maui seizes the moment to grab one of them. He threatens to kill the bird unless it divulges the secret of how to make a fire. At the peril of its life, the bird tells him the correct sorts of wood to use, and thus the mystery of fire is learned.
Another myth of the secret of fire was even more widespread. Maui, the much-loved independent child, always full of mischief and able to trick and deceive his elders, usually without hurting them, visits the underworld where he meets with his grandmother, the owner and guardian of fire. When he begs her for a gift, she gives him one of her fingers in which the igneous element is concealed. Thanking her, he wanders out of sight and quenches the fire in a stream and returns for more. She gives him another finger, which he also extinguishes, and in this fashion he obtains all her fingers and toes, except the last. Just what happens next varies according to the storyteller. In one version, his grandmother, angry now, sets the world on fire. Maui has to enlist the forces of rain, snow, and hail to save it. Only with a great struggle does he succeed in putting out the conflagration, saving the world from total destruction. In another version, the fire-godless throws the last of fire into the trees. Since that time these trees have preserved the seed of fire, which can be called forth by friction. In a third version, Maui succeeds in bringing the fire back to earth by himself after he has stolen it. But since the fire is a good servant and a bad master, it burns down many houses before it is tamed as people learn to be more careful.

There are dozens of stories about Maui's exploits in helping to shape and transform the world. In the old days, the sun moved irregularly and traversed the world at speeds much faster than now. The people didn't have enough time to mend their nets or finish their other work because night fell too soon. The sun had to be brought closer to the earth so that it might more quickly heat the stones that the people used in cooking their food. So Maui determined to harness the sun. He resolved to cut off the legs of the sun so that it could not travel so fast. Maui's mother presented him with a magic club that would aid him in this. As the sun came up out of the underworld, Maui noosed its legs one after the other and tied the ropes to great trees. The sun could not get away, and Maui gave it a tremendous beating with his magic weapon. To save its life, the sun begged for mercy. It had been beaten so badly that it was unable to travel as fast as before. Still, Maui released the sun from its bonds only after it promised to go more slowly from that time on.

Maui pulled the land out of the sea with his magic fishhook. His brothers ignored his caution not to turn back to look at what they were pulling, and when they did, their line broke, and the mass of land fractured into the group of islands we find in the Pacific today. In another exploit, he raised the heavens to their present height in the sky. Before this time, the heavens had been held up by plants and trees, which owe their flat leaves to the pressure exerted on them. His greatest exploit, however, was one in which he was not successful: his attempt to secure immortality for humans. He wanted to bring to life those who had died. He determined that the way to do this would be for him to be reborn, and with this in view he tried to reenter his mother's womb. His mother is described as mother earth or as a volcano. Her eyes are bright red, her teeth as sharp and hard as pieces of glass, her hair like the tangles of long seaweed, and her mouth like that of a barracuda. He started the process of reentry, but the chatter of some nearby birds disturbed the mother. His head was crushed by her startled movement. Maui was killed just as the victory over the realm of death was all but gained. Thus there was to be no rebirth for humans.

The cycle of myths about the mischievous deeds of Maui tell us about a graceless creature, much beloved because he reflected the common human frustration with the rules of everyday conduct. A capricious and lovable fool, he broke every taboo ever known, but was always forgiven in the end for his thefts and lecheries. He was wrong to do what he did, but his unconventional actions—especially the gift of fire—had the most rewarding consequences for the human race.

Maui's exploits are reminiscent of Prometheus, the Greek Titan who stole fire from the gods to bring to humankind. Prometheus was a paradoxical character, as wise and kind as a god but still less than a god. Manifesting a native sympathy for law and order, Prometheus had originally espoused the cause of Zeus. But when Zeus found people hopelessly faulty and planned to create a new race in their place, Prometheus could no longer maintain his allegiance. He broke with Zeus and defiantly became the sponsor of the human cause. Since Zeus had deliberately withheld the gift of fire from humans, Prometheus, moved with pity, stole the fire from the hearth of Zeus (or from the fiery chariot of the sun, or from the workshop of Hephaistos, depending on the version) and gave it to humankind. Through this theft,
humans were enabled to begin life anew and, little by little, to evolve the arts and crafts.

But Prometheus paid the penalty for stealing fire. Zeus had him chained to a barren rock at the edge of space and time and appointed an eagle to gnaw at his liver, consuming each day what had been restored during the previous night. His fate was somehow appropriate. He loved humans very much and became involved in their lives. Thus he was destined to remain just out of their reach. Still, his spirit was not dimmed, for he was armed and comforted with the “foreknowledge” (as his name itself implies) that someday he would be released and that Zeus would be dethroned. In due time, he knew, Hercules would kill the eagle and break his shackles.

Myths about the theft of fire could be multiplied, but Maui’s and Prometheus’s exploits are sufficient to show the central place of the culture hero and the trickster in furthering creation. Fire is a most fortuitous gift for humankind. For example, the Greeks regarded all fire as originally divine, as the strongest and most subtle force of nature, and a most potent factor in the advance of humanity. Of course, we understand fire today as combustion, and we put it in the dictionary rather than in mythology. Still, we read these stories and ask ourselves, “What’s it all about?” And the way we use archetypal characters such as Maui and Prometheus tells us something about ourselves in our relationship to the Absolute Reality and to the cosmos.

Maui and Prometheus are both culture heroes and tricksters. They are both a link between heaven and earth, a channel to the gods. Their stories are about the interaction of the gods and humans. Fire was an appropriate gift to bring, since it has always been associated with the divine. Some felt that in discovering fire, humankind could rekindle the power of the sungod himself. Fire then, like the gods, was both feared and desired. As the gods’ secret, it could be both comforting and terrifying. Maui and Prometheus gave humankind a gift to reduce the power that fate and chance have over humans, who now have the power to determine their own destiny. Maui and Prometheus thus lead them out of an ignorant, innocent state, and give them godlike knowledge and an awareness of the responsibilities of civilization.

Types of Tricksters

To refer to Maui and Prometheus as culture heroes and tricksters is not quite accurate. The culture hero and the trickster really represent two quite distinct eras in the development of myths. Within the void or chaos, which is nearly always the starting point of creation myths, were contained the principles that would eventually be distinguishable as opposites, differentiating between persons and things. Looking at this vast horizon of “no meaning,” the early religious traditions attempted to provide some clue to the order that must be there. They devised myths to explain how the world and its inhabitants came to be. They treated basic elements, such as fire and water, not just as accidental aspects of life, but rather as important natural forces established at the beginning. Their myths provided clues about the source of evil, the separation from the Absolute Reality, and usually promised some kind of Golden Age where conflict and strife would end. The beginning of life, its present condition, and its fulfillment were all brought together in their stories.

The myths looked for the relationship between people and the world, for harmony within the totality of each person’s environment. They told of the roles and regulations that made their lives together coherent instead of chaotic and deadly. Their social arrangements were made intelligible by attributing them to the gods. The myths of the early traditions helped to give order and structure to their world and brought meaning and purpose to life. In their attempt to define and structure their world, they provided themselves with an appreciation and understanding of areas outside human control that affected their well being and destiny. They tried to discover a universal order that transcended all the separate parts of reality, to find some all-encompassing unity. They attempted to order their world by finding the source of unity that lies beyond the complexities, changes, and limits of this world.

In describing the process of creation, the cosmogonic myths serve primarily to bring order out of the chaos the people found all around them. In their myths of the formation of the cosmos and of the first humans, they somehow involved the all-encompassing unity that brings order to their universe. This unity, this Absolute Reality, was often directly involved in the origin of particular components of the world: the sun and the moon,
animals, and humans. In many creation myths, however, this Absolute Reality plays only an obscure part. In some myths its role is relatively passive, and in others it doesn't appear at all. Once the primary creation has occurred, much of the work of shaping, assisting, and furnishing creation is attributed to another figure. This figure is the culture hero, a powerful figure that almost totally replaces the Supreme Being as the creator.

In his original significance, the culture hero transforms the world after its creation or assists the Absolute Reality in the act of creation. He may dive to the bottom of the ocean to bring up the first bits of earth, or he may put salmon in the rivers, or stars in the sky in a non-geometric pattern, or make rivers flow in one direction or the other. He changes the shape of the landscape — putting waterfalls here and hills there — and divides living being into animals and humans. In a word, he is the originator of many of the present conditions of nature.

This figure is called the culture hero, not because of what he does in shaping the cosmos, but because of the boons he brings to humans. He is the bringer of culture and the source of uniquely human institutions, such as agriculture, or language, or the technique of brewing beer. He bestows on humans their material and spiritual heritage, their arts and crafts, their laws and ceremonies. He is the mythical link between the original sacred realm in which time and space were first formed, and the mundane secular world of ordinary human life. From this “other” world he steals daylight, or the sun, or water as gifts for humankind. Typically he is the bringer of fire, that energy that turns the raw into the cooked, and rocks into metal. He is a monster slayer, helping rid the people of giant cannibals and other monstrosities. He is the agent of change, the transformer. He sets free humans who have been enclosed in a cave or imprisoned by monsters. He is the archetype of the hero, the giver of all great boons, the teacher of humanity.

As the creation myths became more and more complicated and as rituals were developed to bring some institutionalization and stability to the culture, it became obvious that no stories of a culture hero could adequately capture and explain the world sufficiently in terms of human knowledge. In trying to bring order to their world, the religious traditions unknowingly pointed to the very need for disorder. What this meant for the culture hero was that, in time, he came to be seen in conflict with the creator.

Perhaps the culture hero was seen to have a twin. Prometheus is one example, one bringing good and the other evil, one productive and the other destructive. Prometheus' dull-witted brother Epimetheus — “afterthought” — dispensed various qualities to animals such as swiftness, courage, and the like. He left nothing for humankind. So Prometheus gave them an upright posture like the gods, enabling them to survive.

But most often the culture hero is pictured as being in enmity with the creator. He degenerates into a symbol of what is evil and distorted in existence — a far cry from his earlier role as bestower of a cultural and spiritual heritage. He becomes responsible for inflicting misfortunes on humans, sometimes, it appears, intentionally. In his futile competition with the supreme being, he came to represent the somewhat capricious, dangerous, malevolent aspect of the supernatural.

The serpent in Genesis 2-3 has much in common with this degenerated culture hero. Tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit with the promise of godlikeness, he is responsible for destroying the perfectly harmonious relationship between the creator god and the first humans. Through him, death comes into the world, women suffer in childbirth, and men eat their bread by the sweat of their brow. Pandora, too, shares some of these characteristics. Her box marks the end of the Golden Age. Like the serpent, she is responsible for the destruction of sacred time and the human idyllic state. Through her, mundane time is initiated, and along with it, disease, labor, and death.

Evil and disorder could not be swept away as myths looked to find total order in the universe. The devilish individual, the spoiler who played a variety of mean tricks on the world, became more and more prevalent. Far from the original culture hero who displayed some of the more ideal characteristics of the supreme being, this irreverent and unpredictable being displayed ludicrous weakness, great deficiencies, and clumsiness in his competition with the divine being. And yet, he is still portrayed as a wonderfully comic figure, who knows nothing and yet everything, both manlike and animalike. He epitomizes the spirit of disorder and is the enemy of boundaries and definitions. He is ambiguous, arbitrary and capricious. The deeds attributed to him, the activities he is supposed to have set in motion, are not the result of some master plan or carefully calculated purpose or unfolding cosmic destiny. They are disagreeable and
unintelligible events, due to his weakness and fumbling, or they are the result of chance events, accidents, and mistakes. His stories personify our human inability to give reasons for things that settle once and for all why there is something rather than nothing, or why this particular thing rather than another, or why there is an incredible variety of things.

In the myths of religious traditions, the culture-hero-become-trickster is unmistakable, but his actions vary according to the cultural context. As a trickster, the comic side comes through, rather than the devilish. He is the image of the actual conditions of human life.

In primitive religions such as the North American Indian traditions, the trickster is variously Raven, Coyote, Great Hare, Old Man, or The Foolish One. He is a spider, a mink, a blue-jay, a bat. Sometimes humanized and ennobled, the figure is usually the earthy, greedy, sensual child-animal who believes everything, tries everything, and finds nothing unnatural. A vagabond, erratic in purpose, he is exposed to all kinds of tortures. He survives by his own cunning and prowess. With his power as shape shifter, he has the capacity to turn himself into a variety of forms (perhaps becoming a bird, or invisible) to escape punishment for his tricks, sly jokes, or malicious pranks. He always manages to survive, to pick up the pieces and move on to another picaresque adventure. Thrown into existence, he seems doomed to learn through trial and error. He takes life as it comes, in all innocence, and never seems to learn from his experiences.

His left hand doesn’t know what his right hand is doing. He is sly and stupid at once, with a spice of idiocy about him. He is woman-chasing, gluttonous, scurrilous, playful, knowing nothing of good or evil. Wandering from one adventure to another, he is an itinerant hero with no clear place or clearly defined social identity. He fends for himself in a world of competing forces, with no foreknowledge of how best to proceed. He seems to hover between worlds, dwelling in a world of his own, a world without boundaries. Though he is easily outwitted, he is never entirely defeated or dispirited. He possesses a certain resiliency, taking the bounces as they come. Getting in and out of tight spots, continually bungling or being hoodwinked, he gropes and grasps his way along, wrestling survival from nature.

In the historic religions, there does not seem to be much room for the primitive form of the culture hero or trickster. Still, he is always present under some guise. In Hinduism, for example, the aspect that quickly sticks out is that of the change and unpredictability of the great Shiva. Shiva creates and destroys, gives gifts and destroys evil forces. Shiva evokes images of a wild dancer with serpent hair, accompanied by a retinue of ghosts. His consort is the grim Kali with her bulging eyes and tongue hanging out to lap the blood of her victims.

In Judaism, the trickster element is not so much the serpent, which is often called the Devil and confused with Satan; rather, it is the element of deception, found in many of the family stories in Genesis. The frequency with which the trickster role is enacted suggests that deception was socially legitimated behavior available to both men and women within the social structure. Thus Jacob tricks his father Isaac, and Rachel tricks her wily father Laban; Abraham tricks the pharaoh, and Lot’s daughters trick their father. In Christianity, the trickster’s arbitrariness is the theme of the song Mary sings in Luke’s infancy narrative. The proud will be scattered, and the humble shall be exalted. Also, Jesus performs in the manner of the culture hero who creates good things for humankind from his own deprivation. He suffers and, in dying, gives a share of his life.

Clowns and Carnivals

The culture hero and trickster developed in proportion to how much order and purpose the various religious traditions attempted to bring into their teachings, rituals, and myths. They welled up in the unconscious as a sign of the inherent human repugnance against putting too much order in life and a sign of the natural rebellion against a life that is totally predictable or one-dimensional. They are the mythical vehicle for persons to come to terms with the arbitrariness of life without any elaborate attempt at rationalization. Culture heroes and tricksters are a way of underlining that the whole of a culture is an artifact whose structure is logically arbitrary: It could have been otherwise. Not only is the non-rational a part of life, but the very fact that we have chosen one lifestyle and world view rather than another is itself non-rational and arbitrary.
Culture heroes and tricksters are paradoxical. They bring the gifts of civilization, and yet they break every taboo and shatter every moral boundary that civilization sets up. While bearing the gift of fire, and with it, reason and enlightenment, they represent the principles of inevitable chaos, disorder, and the irrational. More than symbolizing human complaints and despair over the basic needs and difficulties of life or human attempts to rationalize mysteries, the culture hero and trickster are reminders of the original unity of humans with Absolute Reality. They conjure up images of the separation from the original oneness and recall human hopes for some kind of perfect world other than the one we know and experience every day. They serve as a release from the pressure of having to find a reason for everything in much the same manner as many today try to outwit evil forces, encourage good fortune, and obtain guidance by a miscellany of techniques, such as reading tea leaves or diligently consulting the daily horoscope or engaging in State lotteries.

Rituals in many religious traditions also celebrated the nostalgia for paradise and provided a sacred period of release from the roles and obligations that came with civilized society. These rituals, with clowns and other masked figures playing the key role, were associated with springtime and harvest rituals, where the joy of life was paramount and the renewal of life through food and fertility were celebrated. Trying to recapture and reinstate a Golden Age, a time or condition in which limitation and renunciation did not exist, the people permitted debaucheries of every kind and transgressions of what, at other times, were the most sacred sanctions. This festival was a time of parenthesis, a holiday period in which nightmare images sprang to life and released a breath of madness. The mechanisms for this uninhibited world of carnival were similar everywhere — in the Greek Dionysian orgies, the festival of the Saturnalia in Rome, the Feast of Fools in France, and many other comparable rites of reversal.

In the Revels of Dionysius, the ancient Greeks stalked the alleys and squares of Athens in honor of the god of wine, madness, and rebirth. This ritual centered around the mystic experience of death and rebirth associated with the springtime regeneration of the earth. Masked and shrouded in animal skins, a whirling procession of men in women’s garb blended enthusiasm, merrymaking, violence, eroticism, and the ridiculous into a profound drama of death and rebirth. Groups of women streamed out of Athens in disguises and roamed the mountains for several days, tearing to pieces with indescribable savagery any living animals they caught. These festivities centered on the god Dionysus who, born with goat’s horns, brought up as a girl, and raised on honey, was driven mad by the goddess Hera and wandered over the world with a wild mob of satyrs, bringing people the gift of wine and leaving a trail of murder and insanity in his wake.

These gruesome activities were softened when they were translated to Rome. They became the rituals of the Saturnalia, a festival celebrated at the winter solstice. Rather than destructiveness and unbridled license, the emphasis shifted to fun and reckless spirits and a general loosening up of proprieties. There was a humorous reversal of roles, for example, where slaves were served by their masters (a practice still evoked on Boxing Day in England and in Sadie Hawkins dances). The annual feast commemorated the reign of Cronos (or Saturn), a time of release from everyday obligations (as some still do on Saturn’s Day, Saturday). It was a momentary return to a Golden Age when all persons were equal and the good things of life were held in common. It was a time of happy anarchy, a time when no war could be begun nor criminals be punished (for what was war and who were criminals in the Golden Age?).

Early Christianity also had ritual ceremonies that abrogated rule and provided for a reversal of socially accepted roles and values. The old pagan festivals were again transformed. Saturnalia became Carnival (carne vale means ‘Farewell to the flesh’) and was moved to the days preceding the lenten period of austerity. This ritual period grew wilder, madder, and more menacing with the centuries, culminating in the medieval Feast of Fools and Feast of Asses.

The Feast of Fools was an obscene and blasphemous burlesque of the ceremonies of the church. A ritual of undisciplined wildness, unrestrained wantonness, and irresponsibility, it was a mockery of the ecclesiastical structure. The priests who took part elected a Pope of Fools and appeared at the liturgy either wearing masks or dressed as women. While the priest celebrated Mass, the people danced, played dice, and sang indecent songs. At the singing of the Office for the Feast, the priests and clerics
again donned monstrous masks and danced in the choir. They incensed the congregation with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes and roused the laughter of bystanders with indecent gestures. In the later Feast of Asses, an ass, or a man wearing the mask-head of an ass, was introduced into the sanctuary during Mass. The Song of the Asses was sung, accompanied with the congregation chanting "hee haw, hee haw." At the end of the Mass, the celebrant, instead of singing "Go, the Mass is ended," brayed three times, and the congregation, instead of responding "Thanks be to God," also brayed three times.

The more ridiculous the ritual, the greater the enthusiasm with which it was celebrated. Such rituals were eventually banned, but only over the course of centuries. Even then, many of the practices were retained in profane theatrics. Indeed, many of these elements, stripped of their ritual context, still survive today. April Fool's Day with its pranks, and New Year's Eve with its paper hats and charades are only pale reminders of the medieval Carnival. But the giants on stilts with hideous grinning masks, crudely fashioned dragons and mishapen beasts, horses trampling on crowds, men painted up as women and women swaggering in men's clothing, and the general drunken revelling that occur during Carnival time in New Orleans and Rio and during Fasching season in Germany are direct descendants of these medieval rituals.

Ritual clowns still survive today, in particular, among many of the North American Indian tribes. Playing out their hilarious activities during the public performances of annual festivities, these clowns perform an important ceremonial role. Their buffonery and frivolous pranks help ease the pressure brought on by the tense and solemn atmosphere during the sacred ceremonies. Early observers were slow to recognize the importance of the clowns' religious role, probably because their sensibilities were threatened by the shocking behavior and because they felt such conduct had no place in civilized society. They did not realize that it was precisely because of their deviations from the norms of social behavior that the clowns stimulated feelings of relief and malicious joy among the people.

The ritual clowns go by different names in the various North American religious traditions, names such as Funny Men, False Faces, Fool Dancers, or Contraries. Their humor often centers on gluttony. They are willing to do anything for something to eat, and they eat constantly throughout the days of ceremony, consuming amazing quantities. Their fare is often dirt, live mice, sticks, stones, or whatever is considered offensive and defiling. Their sexuality is exaggerated. They enact skits portraying aspects of human sexuality, or they appear nude and engage in explicit sexual activities, even in the most sacred places during public ceremonies. Their antics are often done expressly to annoy spectators. They might smear mud or excrement over their bodies or drink urine and pour it on one another. They might drop live coals or ashes on people, scoop handfuls of cinders and spray everyone in sight, or plunge their hands into boiling water to demonstrate their power. Sometimes the clowns will act in a contrary fashion. They might reverse the world of language by talking backwards and saying no when they mean yes, or they might ride backwards on a horse, put their boots on the wrong feet, or wear heavy clothing in summer.

Social Reversal and Release

Maui and Prometheus were helpers in the process of creation, bringing to humans the gift of fire, a symbol of enlightenment and civilization. With the beginnings of civilization, life became more complicated and sophisticated. The Golden Age, a time of simplicity and innocence, faded away. People lost their close union with the creator, the Absolute Reality, and with it their sense of harmony and balance with the world and with each other. Chaos dominated, and they had to introduce more and more order, rules, and regulations into their society for things to run smoothly. In the attempt to dispel disorder, they almost shut out an essential part of their lives. Taboos became rigid; guilt and embarrassment accompanied their human clumsiness; and the arbitrary and unpredictable had no legitimacy.

The tricksters, clowns, and carnivals came along with the phenomenon of cultured societies. The more primitive groups had no need for an outlet against too much regimentation and reason, for the return to chaos was something that loomed over them at every hour. In cultured societies, however, these figures developed as social outlets for humans to protest against the obligations connected with their social order. The movement from culture hero to clown was the movement from ethical lawmaker to ethical lawbreaker.
With their excessive behavior, the tricksters and clowns are earthy disruptive merrymakers who help elicit an ambivalent laughter from the members of cultures and religious traditions. They stimulate feelings of relief and malicious joy in a ritual context because of their many deviances from the norms of social behavior. They know the taboos and can break them with impunity. Though their function includes entertainment and comic relief, it is much more profound than merely providing a spirit of play in a world of seriousness. Their role is essential and ful of religious significance. In poking fun at the establishment, whether at police officers, priests, or politicians (as the comedians — our modern tricksters — do very well), they might appear to weaken the very fabric of society, but actually they are revitalizing it by calling attention to higher truths.

During the 1968 student riots in Paris, someone had scribbled across one of the large advertising signs that line the subway walls: “Attention all anarchists. There will be an organizational meeting next Monday night at 7:30 in the foyer of the Sorbonne.” Paradoxical as it was, the students felt that they needed to organize, even in the very act of trying to bring down the organization. In their protest against regulations that are concomitant with living in a civilized society, they institutionalized their protest against that institutionalization. This was a mythic act worthy of tricksters and clowns.

As soon as the conditions of stability for living in a civilized society become oppressive, then the need for a compensating period, a time of anarchy and license, however brief, becomes manifest. Most societies recognize this need and channel it, containing it within the specified dates of their local calendar. We see this, for example, in the revelry of Halloween, and Mardi Gras, and New Year’s Eve, and even in the pageantry of the Superbowl. Tricksters and clowns manifest the human desire and human struggle to be free of rules, to be unbound and without limitations. They personify a utopian urge to return to a time prior to obligations, a desire to be unconfined, even while admitting that we have to live by society’s rules if we are to escape chaos. Ironically, they offer relief from too much order, and relief from too much freedom. They question our established ways and our ability to question.

Tricksters and clowns, as well as our modern comedians and political cartoonists, are profaners, offering an ironic and essential contrast between the realm of orderly belief (with its tendency toward one-dimensional, the reliable, the dependable), and the realm of chaotic forces (with its celebration of ambiguity and randomness). They act as an officially sanctioned exception clause, keeping society from taking itself with ultimate seriousness. They profane the ideologies and myths of society and balance excessive order by conveying a sense of the relativity that clings to all of life.

In their revelry and mock ridicule, the tricksters and clowns turn the distinctions of rank and status upside down. They deflate the pompous, skewer the self-righteous, and chide the hypocritical. They subject authority figures and ceremonial regulations to wild burlesque, enabling people to give way to great outbursts of pent-up repression. They temporarily turn society inside out with the shrewdly permitted license of the holiday of the vacation period. Striking a blow against law and order, they reach out for a state of pure freedom, a return to the time prior to repressive laws and other civilizing influences. They reverse social roles and social norms in the extravagant joy of overthrowing those restraints and inhibitions that are the price for civilization. The world becomes, for the moment, a place where discrepancies disappear and all become equal. The joy of the beginning, which has been irrevocably lost from the earth, is made present for the moment. In the dissolution of the stiffened traditional order, there is a reactivation of the boundless power and creativity of the beginning.

The real irony, though, is that by doing the forbidden, by representing the forces of chaos and disorder, the tricksters and clowns are thereby creating a meaningful world. By openly flaunting social customs and compromising cultural values, they are actually revealing the very need of the boundaries that give order. By flaunting cultural restraints, they make people aware of their need for restraints. They encourage assent to the regulations of society by negative example. Their actions discourage actions by exposing them. They reinforce the status quo in the act of providing temporary relief from it. They introduce and define elements of a culture’s world view in the act of defiling them. Their “civil disobedience” presupposes authentic civil obedience and recognizes the authority and office both of the state and the religious tradition as legitimate but to be taken with provisional, rather than ultimate, seriousness.
Laughing at Ourselves

Maui and Prometheus and their successors, the tricksters and clowns, keep us from taking ourselves too seriously. In offering themselves as objects of laughter, they take upon themselves the imperfections of us all. They are the foil for our own insecurity. We jeer, knowing that their failures are really our own. They poke fun at our grandiose schemes by showing that some, after the fashion of the Merry Prankster, Till Eulenspiegel, and the bumbling TV detective, Columbo, will achieve through their bungling and stupidity what others fail to achieve through their best efforts. How clumsy we really are. Who of us hasn’t held the door open for someone only to have it slip out of our hands just as they are walking through it? Who hasn’t offered a box of candy to another, only to have it drop out of our hands at the worst possible moment? We cannot tame or order or control everything. The best laid plans go awry. The tricksters and clowns point to our own need for resiliency when we encounter difficulties in our plans and fail to carry them off smoothly.

The tricksters and clowns are teaching us about ourselves. Many of their purposely exaggerated actions mock those needs and drives which are distinctive human. Often gluttonous or greedy to the point of destroying what they are unwilling to share, often making the same mistake repeatedly in the failure to see the obvious, they are reminding us of a childlike element in ourselves. They are saying that we are all too often too serious. We have forgotten how to be children. Sometimes we should have no aspirations beyond the present moment. Occasionally we have to defy the universe to live in joy, and for that moment at least to ignore any ultimate purpose in life. When children are outsmarted or act stupidly, they are not entirely defeated nor dissipated; they bounce back without grudge or malice, a little bruised or hungry perhaps, but also a little wiser. They don’t feel hemmed in by regulations. If the score is lopsided in their pick-up ball game, they’ll quit, choose up teams again, and start over. Children are not weighed down by misfortunes or limitations or by the apparent inequities and injustices of life. For them, life is a challenge and they make a game of it. Winning or losing — these both lead to laughter as well as to tears and dismay.

The trickster and clown enable us to embrace ourselves and each other as humans. They reaffirm our human condition and reduce life to the basics. Our requirements are simple: a good meal and restful sleep, freedom from anxiety and bodily problems, the enjoyment of sex and the laughter of children, the satisfaction of work and the pleasure of play, the conviviality of friends and internal peace.

Still, we cannot be “up” all the time. Some moments are moments of unrestrained joy; at other times we are sluggish, gloomy, grave, leaden. We are at times jovial or saturnine, moonstruck or mercurial. Recognizing our basic needs and realizing that we cannot always achieve them, we consent to a larger vision of humanity, a more inclusive acceptance of the many-sided self and other selves. In this, the world does not seem as inflexible and confining as it did before.

In the celebration of our common humanity, we find that being human is not a heavy weight that drags us down or lays a curse on us, but something potentially delightful. We are saying yes to the tricksters and clowns in ourselves, clothed in the awkward innocence of essential humanity. Not a lofty comedown from some idealized image we have of ourselves, it is a reaffirmation of our totally human condition, not as impure, or profane, or shameful, but as fundamentally good.

The trickster and clown not only give us a larger vision of our common humanity, they also bring to consciousness many of the human instincts of our undeveloped state. They provide at once a mockery of the over-heroic life and a corresponding mockery of a life that is merely natural. The tricksters, and especially the clowns in their rituals, open us up to another reality, the dimension of the numinous and the mystical. By evoking fright and terror, or by prompting laughter, they open people to experience not mediated by rational or scientific explanation. They bring the primordial, subliminal elements of our selves to the conscious level in a mythic or ritual setting.

The trickster and clown often represent behavior that is not approved by our conscious minds. The more civilized we are, the more we pretend to ignore their importance, or even their existence, usually with disastrous consequences. We have to somehow make room in our selves for the reality they evoke — the reality of demonic power, of Satan, of suffering. Rather than trying to explain away all the manifestations of the demonic (due,
we might say, to black cats, rabbit’s feet, jinxes, gaffes, bad luck),
the trickster and clown mythically and ritually express our need
to admit and to harmonize it into our lives. They give the
demonic its due, and help us integrate it rather than repress it.
They represent the goblins and ghosts of Halloween night that
balances with All Saints’ Day; the suffering of Good Friday that
balances with Easter; the fun and games of Mardi Gras that
balances with the austerities of Ash Wednesday. By recognizing
the demonic both in our unconscious and in the world, we admit
our own self-insufficiency. We acknowledge that ultimately we
have no control over the world and open our selves to help from
a savior in our quest for the religious self.

Topsy-Turvy World

Admitting the demonic in ourselves, we recognize that no
matter what efforts we take at shaping things into a rational,
orderly, meaningful whole, life is not intelligible or predictable
or just. Although we may attempt to define the significance and
value of this or that aspect of life or assign causes or develop
a logic of relationships, we recognize that a fundamental arbi-
trariness is quite transparent. No matter what stories we tell to
bring purpose and order and no matter how “advanced” our
technological society, we still cannot control the quirks and
accidents of life. The need for balance always asserts itself. There
will always be the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the
disadvantaged. Some of us will live short lives, others long lives.
Randomness sorts us into the intelligent and the retarded, the
attractive and the unattractive.

The tricksters and the clowns help us to come to terms di-
rectly with the unpredictable. They make us accept arbitrariness
as essential to life itself. The theologies and philosophies of the
world’s religious traditions, which define cosmic order, divine
plans, historical patterns, and ultimate destinies, are all attempts
to help us cope with this uncertainty. By contrast, the tricksters
and clowns do not offer some well-hidden cosmic plan nor do
they attempt to justify the ways of the gods to our ways. Theirs
is not the language of sin and judgment, of providence and
predestination, of karma and reincarnation, of the fates and the
stars. They invite us, instead, to play in the rough and tumble
of life, without glossing over what is not always pleasant.

The tricksters and clowns live in us all, for they represent
the principle of uncertainty, and their manifestations are univer-
sal. We conjure them up when we cross our fingers, knock on
wood, blow on dice, or buy dashboard saints. We acknowledge
them when we admit down deep that no matter how much struc-
ture and order we give to our lives, no matter how much mean-
ing and direction we see or think we see, no matter how suc-
cessfully we believe we are making progress, our lives and our
stories still manage to move in mysterious and unforeseen ways.
We consent to them when we admit that no matter how much
progress in science and technology we have made, we cannot
bring things under control. Paradoxically, the more we bring
greater predictability and security to our lives, the more we ex-
pose our selves to the unpredictable: What would nuclear winter,
power blackouts, and oil tanker spills have meant to those in
earlier cultures?

Order and chaos are both essential for our full selves. We
can never say that a time will come when there is absolute pre-
dictability, when precise calculations will eliminate all the element
of mystery. If we were to demand such absolute points of
reference, then we would opt for absolute monotony. We would
refuse the adventure, risk, challenge, and drama that the trickster
and clown personify and completely close our selves off from,
and not be free to truly laugh before, the mystery of the universe,
which forever eludes and surprises us.

Consenting to the arbitrary in our lives, we are playing the
game for the sake of the game. Rather than striving for a perfe-
tionism that can infect or cramp our lifestyle, rather than being
involved in cutthroat competition, we can now celebrate our com-
mon humanity. Instead of having to be experts, pursuing even
our hobbies with a vengeance and treating our play and our
games as a burdensome job, we say yes to the curious business
of being fully human. When we realize that there are no ultimate
answers, and that the thing to do is to live, we are freed from the
burden and the awesome responsibility of having the last word.
We are freed from the impulse to play God relative to the uni-
verse. Being human is not a curse, but potentially delightful, a
“happy fault.” Those who recognize and consent to the tricksters
and clowns inside themselves are saying yes to all sides of their
humanity and are not pretending to a divinity that they have
not yet attained. They embrace themselves as they are.


Review Questions

1. Why do you think trickster myths are so prevalent in world mythologies?
2. Trace the development from culture hero to trickster.
3. What are the major characteristics of the trickster? Which of these elements do you find in yourself?
4. What are the major functions of tricksters in myths?
5. What is the relationship between tricksters and clowns?
6. Explain: By representing the forces of chaos and disorder, tricksters and clowns are creating a meaningful world.
7. Explain: Tricksters make it easier for us to live in a topsyturvy world?
8. What is the nature and purpose of the ritual of carnival?

Discussion Starters

1. "The source of unhappiness lies in man’s effort to control his destiny, thereby impeding the natural flow of spontaneous events."
2. "I find comfort in things like earthquakes and eclipses of the moon because I have no hand in them. They relieve me of responsibility. I find comfort in fatalism and inevitability.” (James Taylor)
3. "It is always good to be distinguished by something. I ask nothing better than to be pointed out as the only one in our serious age who is not serious.” (Kierkegaard)
4. "The moment you begin to tell your stories you may find that memory is a trickster who picks and chooses scenes. What happened to you in the past has yet to be determined.”
5. "In Trickster is embodied the human struggle against the confinement felt by being bound to place, even within the obvious necessity of such definition in order to prevent chaos. In many of his adventures, Trickster permits people to experience the vicarious thrills and freedom of a utopian existence. But his folly reveals the very meaning of the boundaries that give order to human life.” (Sam Gill)
6. "In the fragment of a lost play by Aeschylus, the bisexual god Dionysus is greeted by cries of 'Where have you come from, man-woman, what is your country? And what is that garment?' — questions which incidentally might well be addressed to a contemporary teenager. This deliberate confusion of sexes is also a part of the basic aim of Carnival which seeks, however crudely, a dissolution of the stiffened traditional order, a reversal of all accepted values, and a reactivation of the boundless power and creativity of the Beginning.” (Alan MacGlashen)
7. “For those who require clean lines, precise calculations, absolute points of reference, and clear and distinct ideas, clownish revelations may not be so amusing. But for those who are not pretenders to thrones that are not theirs or to a deity they have not attained, or even to some superior form of humanity, the clown enables us to embrace ourselves and one another as the luminous lumps that we are.” (Conrad Hyers)
8. “In Halloween a strange alliance is formed between the innocent and the wicked, between children and witches... Their masks insure the children anonymity and endow them with the powers of monsters and supernatural beings.... They purge the community by the terror of trick or treat, as if a touch of sin and evil were necessary for building community: There is always a happy fault at the heart of any religious system.” (Victor Turner)
9. What movie and TV characters today remind you of Trickster? If you could meet one of the tricksters in religious myths, which one would you choose? Why?