

# **Mythical Symbols of Life, Death in Selected Poems by Daniel Moore**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine “myth” as a fundamental technique employed by Daniel Moore in his philosophical and mystic poems. It attempts to trace the history and importance of myth in literature and in poetry. Then the sources of myth and in Moore’s poems are investigated to examine the degree of development in his poems through the exploitation of myth. The paper attempts to discover how Moore has successfully managed to metamorphose the real world of his characters and their stories into a mythological counterpart seeking interpretations of such reality. It attempts to explore how Moore’s mythical symbols were varied with different tales and concerns. It also highlights the distinct philosophical attitudes towards famous issues such as life death and resurrection. This investigation shows that through the use of Greek, Roman and Elizabethan myths and symbols. For him, mythical symbols have become a sort of original language by which he could gain vision into human experience. Moore has employed symbols from nature such as “bees”, “snakes” and waves of rivers to raise philosophical ideas and problems. Moreover, nature has always kindled his imagination and excited his poetic inspiration. For Moore, myth, nature and poetry are interconnected. Therefore, a close reading of his poetry reveals a creative use of myth and nature in a mystic manner.

**Keywords:** Daniel Moore, myth, nature, poetry, Sufi poems.

## الرموز الأسطورية للحياة والموت في مختارات من أشعار دانيال مور

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### الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلي دراسة مصادر وأهمية "الأسطورة" كإستراتيجية أساسية استخدمها "دانيال عبد الحي مور" في قصائده الفلسفية والصوفية. من أجل القيام بذلك، حاولت الباحثة تتبع تاريخ وأهمية "الأسطورة" في الأدب والشعر. ثم ركزت على المصادر الرئيسية للأسطورة في قصائد "مور" لتدرس كيف طوع "مور" الأسطورة في أعماله لإيصال فكره للمتلقي. تحاول الباحثة اكتشاف كيف نجح مور في تحويل العالم الحقيقي لشخصياته إلى نظير أسطوري يبحث من خلاله عن تفسيرات لمثل هذا الواقع. تحاول الدراسة أيضا استكشاف كيف كانت أساطير "مور" متنوعة ولها حكايات وإسقاطات مختلفة. كما يسلط البحث الضوء على المواقف الفلسفية المتميزة تجاه القضايا العامة مثل الحياة، الموت والقيامة. يوضح هذا البحث أنه من خلال استخدام الأساطير والرموز اليونانية والرومانية القديمة، تمكن مور من إنتاج قدر كبير من الشعر الصوفي بإبداع. بالنسبة له، أصبحت الأسطورة الكلاسيكية نوعاً من اللغة الأصلية التي يمكنه من خلالها اكتساب رؤية و خبرة في تفسير التجربة الإنسانية. علاوة على ذلك، استقي "مور" من رموز الطبيعة مصدر أسطوري لأفكاره الفلسفية مثل النحل، الثعابين وأمواج البحر، لطالما أوقدت الطبيعة وصورها المتنوعة خياله وأثارت إلهامه الشعري. حاول "مور" استكشاف مصادر الأسطورة الكلاسيكية للتعبير عن الصراع البشري والنضال نحو الخلاص. بالنسبة لمور، الأسطورة والطبيعة والشعر كيان واحد لا يتجزأ. لذلك، تكشف القراءة المتأنية لشعره عن الاستخدام الخلاق للأسطورة والطبيعة بطريقة مبدعة.

### كلمات مفتاحية:

دانيال مور، أسطورة، طبيعة، شعر، قصائد صوفية.

The poem is itself first- hand,  
flowering out and echoing its  
meaning in its very language.

To see the world both close  
and galactic in its radiant  
divine aspect, in Blake's  
sense of it, with the Gates of  
Perception cleansed, our  
senses and our hearts, now  
through Sufi practice and  
revelational theology, open  
to all. (*The Soul's Home*, 10)

Daniel Moore (1940-2016) was an American poet and essayist. When he was 30, years old he converted to Islam and felt salvation in the Sufi tradition of his new religion. His most notable work included *Ramadan Sonnets* (1996) and *The Blind Beekeeper* (2002). He enjoyed writing and publishing Sufi poems and most of his work is self- published. Many of his poems tackled themes of religion, spirituality, nature, Sufism, Romanticism and mysticism. His poems were influenced by several cultures and backgrounds and were depicted through well- crafted use of mythical symbols.

For the early Greeks, a “mythos” was a ‘word” or “story”, synonymous with logos and epos; a mythologos was a storyteller (Graft 2). Myth and legend are interwoven and are often interconnected. However, there is a difference between each of them. The legend sometimes may include some fragments of historical events or chronological facts. Also, the main aim behind the legend is to stress the factual events of the story and not the significance of the story within the context. Legends often contain pieces of morals and figures of heroic aspects. On the other, myths are examples of stereotypes and stories of religious, moral, historical or social situations.

A mythology of any country, religion or people consists of a group of myths. Myths by definitions are stories of the origin and destiny of communities and groups that are often used by writers to enrich their writings. Daniel Moore employed the original interpretation of myth that is mainly related to explaining nature, creation, history and life and death. In this way, mythology does not fit people’s description of it as mere imagination. Myths are interesting means of expressing realities. For Moore and several other Sufi poets, there are in the universe some questions which remain without answers. He was an avid reader and his poems include pieces of myths in an attempt to find answers to these unresolved problems.

The questions he was interested in were mainly about the creator of the universe, the attitude of the masses towards blessings and problems and the place where people go after death. Myth and religion are often interconnected and interwoven and both rest upon the fact that Allah, the Creator is the Supreme power and the highest power. In his poems, we find myths related to heroes, bees, snakes and religious figures to explain Man's greatest concerns about life and death. Also, Moore's myths aimed at explaining Man's relationship with all the elements of the universe. He used myths as references or credible stories out of which he could get a meaning from the meaningless life of the outer world. In this way, allusions were important to Moore's life in order to express mythical interpretations of life, rebirth and the spirit. "Rebirth" is a common motif in all spiritual and mythical writings:

Such as Thos in Egypt or Hermes in Greece, as the spiritual messengers necessary to guide the souls of the dead to their place... And Thos is the symbolic messenger of the life that has died to this world of material things or the illusion of *maya* and seeks rebirth into the life of the spirit. (Okes 25)

Mythological allusions are employed to deepen the readers' understanding of the work of art. Moore was interested in the allegorical use of such allusions to employ the symbols myths often contain. Myths can be of different types. For instance, there

are myths on deities and mankind which often describe the behavior of gods towards one another, their history, heritage, and their attitude towards humans. Also, there are hero myths which tell stories about the skills, stories and life events of particular heroes like Achilles. Vickery states that:

First, the creating of myths, the mythopoeic faculty, is inherent in the thinking process and answers a basic human need. Second, myth forms the matrix out of which literature emerges both historically and psychologically. As a result, literary plots, characters, themes, and images are basically complications and displacements of similarities elements in myths and folktales. How myth gets into literature is variously explained by the Jungian racial memory, historical diffusion, or the essential similarity of the human mind everywhere. Third, not only can myth simulate the creative artist, but it also provides concepts and patterns (Vickery, P. ix)

The Western culture contains a number of literary or narrative genres that scholars have related in different ways to myths. Examples include fables, fairy tales, folk tales, epics, legends and tales. Petrarch, Boccaccio and Dante were also interested in Greek myths and sought to enrich their work with mythical allusions and references. In Moore's *Underground Galaxies*, there is a poem entitled "The Long Journey" where Moore employed the image of "Noah Arch" to portray the preservation of human life:

We weren't sure we were going forward or backwards

Half the time whether it was  
The Arch of Noah sticking out the mountain's peak's sheer  
side in the  
Snow with demarcated animal pen outlines or an ambiguous  
betterment  
of mankind

(*Underground Galaxies*, 15)

Here the story is allegorical describing the preservation of human kind. The arch of Noah is the vessel mentioned in the Bible and the Quran through which God spares Noah, his family and examples of all the world's animals from the flood. In the Holy Quran it is referred to as *Safîna Nuh*. The structure of the Ark is interesting and symmetrical. The interpretations of the story serve the fact that the three internal divisions of the arch reflect the three-part universe: the heaven, the earth, and the underworld. It serves here as a mythical image of the preservation of human life. The main theme behind the poem is God's faithfulness and saving grace. It stresses the reward that God promised after his obedience. The surface meaning to readers is that God wanted to save his people from the flood but the reality is that He almighty wanted to save them from sin.

In "Practicing for Death", Moore once again recalls a mythical figure in order to express the same fall of the modern man today. The poem is formed upon contrast such as "criminal and saintly one", "firstness and lastness" and "life and death". Through the use

of opposite and contrasting words and ideas, Moore wanted to make his argument stronger. Contrast helps in the dramatic effect of the poem through shock and pairing:

Adam and Eve filling the rolling golden hills each face of  
the multitude  
Distinguishable from the other  
The arch criminal standing next to Florence nightingale  
The anonymous perfect saintly one just to the left there of  
Your mother whose face through her looks more  
Radiantly ethereal than it did in life

.....  
Flatten for amount to pre- Renaissance conceptions  
Simplifying everything into a single snap of fingers  
Of firstness and lastness  
Life and death

(*Underwater Galaxies*, 22)

The father and mother are now preparing for eternity. They are filling “golden” hill of the multitude in the road for afterlife. Each one is different from the other. The hills are golden are radiant with perfection. “The perfect criminal” is now standing next to the nightingale watching as the world ends. As there is a symbol of evil, there is a symbol of goodness represented in the “the perfect saint” on the left of the “mother”. The mother’s look now seems more charming and ethereal than it did in life. The whole scene is like a snap from Pre- Renaissance photo. The whole message behind life is now simple, colorful and ready. The poet is

still searching for the door way between life and death: the beginning and the end.

Here again, Moore uses figures from ancient mythology in order to express his anxiety about life and death. Adam and Eve according to mythical stories were the first man and woman. The poet wanted to return to the basis and the very beginning of life. The story of “Adam and Eve” is central to the belief that humanity is in essence a single family. They also provide the basis for the doctrine of the fall of man and original sin that are important beliefs in both Christianity and Islam. God created Adam from dust and placed him in the Garden of Eden. Adam is told that he is free to eat freely of all the trees in the garden except for a tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve is created from one of Adam’s ribs to be his companion. However, a serpent deceives Eve into eating a fruit from the forbidden tree and she gave it to Adam. This act enabled them to experience shame, evil and guilt that led to the result that God banished them from the Garden.

A considerable number of poets were influenced by Greek mythology such as Milton and Shakespeare. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century romanticism which was part a revolt against aristocratic and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment. Thus, we find in England a great period of new translations of Greek tragedies and Homer. These inspired poets like Keats, Byron and Shelley. Also, modernist American poets believed that myths would provide education with pleasure and held that the study of the classical

myths was essential to the understanding of English and American literature. For a number of centuries, writers in English have been able to draw upon a common stock of mythological stories, characters, and images with the confidence that their readers will recognize and understand their illusions and archetypes. Moore asserts:

The imaginal truth of the spiritual path that points to the North World after death is perhaps indisputable but our lives, upon reflection, sometimes thrown overboard and barely making it to shore are a living proof of this world tasting of the Next World Experience. (*Next Life*, 10)

Myth appears in Moore's poetry as an integral body of his poetry because it is there in the mind of the author who does his best to keep both literary bodies in harmony along the process of creation. In Moore's poems, myths are sacred stories often linked to religion or spirituality. In Moore's "Golden Bees", he illustrates:

Golden bees like drops of honey with wings  
Appear at the open windows  
of our heart  
It's always a bright summer day there and  
Light seems to come from a non- dimensional source  
.....  
These bees bring messages from supernatural flowers  
Whose multicolored flames are just visible in the  
Nearby meadows and rolling glades

(*Underwater Galaxies*, 25)

Here the meditation is related to the bees which are like drops of honey with golden wings and often appear at the doorways of our hearts. In the heart of a true believer, there is always light and summer indicating purity and clarity of vision. Within this heart, bees bring messages related to the supernatural with flames nearby meadows. In mythology, the bee is the symbol of the afterlife and abundance. Furthermore, it was believed to be the sacred insect that bridged the natural world to the underground. Also in Greek mythology, bees often portray priestesses. Moreover, ancient tombs were decorated with bees' shapes to indicate immortality. The mythology of bees is related with goodness, light and meditations of afterlife. This was indeed a recurring theme in Moore's poetry.

In the above-mentioned lines, Moore employs the mythology of "the black swan" which refers to the sudden change of events, attitude and destiny. The phrase "black swan" derives from a Latin expression; its oldest known occurrence is from the 2nd-century Roman poet Juvenal's characterization in his Satire VI of something being ("a rare bird in the lands and very much like a black swan"). The importance of the metaphor lies in its analogy to the fragility of any system of thought. A set of conclusions is potentially undone once any of its fundamental postulates is disproved. In this case, the observation of a single black swan

would be the undoing of the logic of any system of thought, as well as any reasoning that followed from that underlying logic.

Mythical symbol of “rebirth” is an important mythical idea that has captured the attention of many writers in the modern world. It was also a common thought to modern readers. Rebirth is commonly meditated in the natural cycle of life. Plant, for instance, is mainly used to mirror the idea of rebirth and returning back to life and reproduction. The most common type of mythical rebirth that appeared in Moore’s poems is the notion that even though the human body has not died, yet, there is rebirth. It means renewal. The entire human body does not change, but it can be healed and strengthened through purification and believing in God. He stresses the idea that God and devil are the embodiment of goodness and evil. After all, for Sufi poets, literature is mainly for finding the right path for educating people and for salvation:

In Sufism, the “wine” of God’s light. Knowledge and gnosis, is that the glorious intoxication that leads to liberation and arrival (in Allah) (Fillah)... Yet, also, in Sufism, and in particular that of Shaykh Junaid of Baghdad outward sobriety conceals inward intoxication, rather than the other way around. (Stitched out on Amethysts, 12)

Myth has the ability to regenerate fictional world based on its symbols, incidents and rituals. Interest in myth is not a new trend. Carl Jung gave a great interest to mythology and its true

value to human psyche. For him, significant mythology and dreams in human life and not just for purification but they provide an ample portion of self- knowledge. In this way, myth acquires certain conscious indications. Moore was familiar with the ancient Greek, Roman and modern European literatures. He delved into reading old mythology. He experienced two world wars and many setbacks a long half a century of his life. As a human being, he was traumatized by the destructive consequences of those massive wars and the shocking effects of the aftermath. As a poet of religion, nature, death and birth, Moore employed fascinating Greek and Roman myths in order to explore humanity's most critical issues: self, birth, death, afterlife and the Divine power. Like modernist poets, Moore's myths universalized his deepest personal experiences. He was interested in exploring different myths in relation to man's life and to God. After all, the main function of myth is to teach morals and lessons and to explain historical events. Throughout history, authors of great literary works have often taken their stories and themes from myths. Myths and mythical symbols lead to creativity in literary works. In Moore's religious poems, myths were often related to Gods, demigods, the supernatural, rites and practices.

In this the world's soul envelope has been  
turned inside out, revealing itself in images of  
light. Rather than invoking metaphors for  
experience, my project has been to "move from

the word as symbol toward the word as reality (as W. C. Williams said about the poetry of Ezra Pound), words not standing from an already completely experience, physical or spiritual, but in the act of writing itself revealing the core, the poem's very details being in themselves the experience between seen and unseen, with transitive imagination the active aesthetic practice, as much as Allah inspires and allows. (*The Soul's Home*. P, 10)

Moore was skillful in his manner of formulating myths as realities in his poems. He depicted the capacity of man to reach reality can only be done through the power of imagination and meditation. It was the same reason behind poets' exploitation of myth in their narrations. Myths have always helped man in supporting and enforcing the existing moral and social values beneficial for one's survival.

Myth is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest but a narrative of primeval reality told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, and assertions even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function, it expresses, enhances and codifies belief, it safeguards and enforces morality. It vouches for the efficiency of rituals and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. (*Myth* in Encyclopedia Britannica, 134)

Mythology is a vital pillar in "religion". The main aim behind examining mythology is the study of the main factors of

life such as spirits, dreams, laws of nature, divine powers. These factors have always been of high importance to any group of community. These narratives support, justify and formulate believers' identities planting a sense of fear and gratitude of the Creator.

It became Alchemy. The Chemicals that scoured through me, scrubbing and destroying, targeting the culprits but with collateral damage, didn't come directly from an alchemist's laboratory, but God is the major alchemist. His creation at all times under His command, our hurts and our Healings, our diseases and cures, and His methods might be gentle or harrowing... I have had light shed on me, for which I can only be grateful. (*Down at the Deep End*, 9)

For Moore, the mythical belief was true. He believed that the fact is clear and one could reach heaven by climbing a tree. It was once a state of bliss that was destroyed by the fall of Adam. In his religious poems, he made use of the triangle of God, heaven and hell in order to ensure conformity through the promise of eternal bliss and the fear of eternal suffering. His myths always show Hell as a terrifying place through a set of terrible image indicating eternal punishment. However, it was not a new trend. The Hindu, the Greek, the Islamic and the Christian religions have a whole number of myths woven around the same triangle to reinforce existing faiths.

Archetype is a Greek word related to the meaning of a recurring motif in poetry. It is interesting to note that archetype has both a cultural and literary interpretations. The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious indicate the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. In “Blood Songs” (2012), Moore illustrates that he is wishing the snake who knows the secret of standing on one leg speak of the secret of eternity if it could. In the mythical world that Moore created, we can see elephants that we wish could tell us the secret of crouching so low in the grass. Continuing the same contrasting image, Moore explains that maybe the flame who knows the secret of coolness of the running water speaks of the truth if it dares. Humans only want safety and warmth. He is wondering how people can speak of true words while they are lost within cold storms. With all the anxiety and weariness that modern man feels and suffers, the long snake of night hanging from a distance watching our changing fate. Even at the end of time, Moore believes that the ancient fire shall not find us worthy of warming our fingertips.

Let the snake who knows the secret of  
Standing on two legs speak if he can  
The elephant who knows the secret of  
Crouching so low nobody notices him in the grass  
Let the flame who knows the secret of the coolness of  
Running water speak if it dares

.....  
How can we raise our voices filled with words  
While a cold wind blows?  
.....  
And the long snake of night is hanging from  
A low bough  
And the distant fire  
May not warm our fingertips (Blood Songs, 17-18)

The behavior of snakes and their facial features seemed to imply that they were intelligent, that they lived by reason and not instinct. In most cultures, snakes were symbolic and symbols of healing and transformation. The snake dance is a prayer to the spirit of the clouds that the rain may fall. Snakes were often associated with immortality because they were observed biting their tails to form a circle and when they coiled, they formed spirals.

In classical myths, there are often snakes in the act of eating their own tails. Moore relied on the archetype of “the snake” in order to express the cyclical nature of life and death. He employed “snake” in many of his poems about afterlife. This is mainly due to the fact that snakes were regularly regarded as guardians of the underworld or messengers between the Upper and Lower worlds.

These archetypes naturally play a prominent role in the life of man, and no domain of study claims freedom from them. Moore tried to portray the same psychological analysis in his mystic poetry. Also, he portrayed the notion that if one sows evil, he can

only get a harvest of darkness. The minor archetypes which are also related to it are the shadow archetype, archetype of Hell, hero archetype, animal archetype and archetype of conflict between good and evil.

Symbolism occupies a huge space in Moore's poetry. He was enchanted by the symbolist power of the animal world. Like many modernists who were fascinated with the symbol of light and darkness, Moore relied heavily on these symbols to convey spiritual revelation.

The word amethyst derives from a Greek root meaning: not intoxicated, and I suppose one of its healing properties, even when heated, include the cooling or "de-toxing" of pain-producing energies (it's purple color deriving in Greek myth from Dionysius' wine-colored tears falling on the statue of a beautiful maiden named Amethystos whom he'd been lustfully chasing, and who'd been turned to stone by the protective goddess Artemis in order that she remain chaste." (*Stretched out on Amethysts*, 12)

Light is another mythology in Moore's poetry. Light an energy and a medium that illuminates an object or entity. In Christian symbolism, it means among other things the revelation of wisdom. God is the great Creator of light that is clear and pure. Moore's use of light showed his Christian tradition. Moreover, to see and to have sights are literal and figurative activities. He

stressed the metaphoric meaning signified in physical beings. Meaninglessness is portrayed as darkness unlike meaning which signifies light. A symbol has always been an integral part of poems by French poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in modernist poetry.

Through using symbolism, Moore managed to add obscurity, complexity, excessive allusiveness and deeper meaningful approaches. Moore's use of symbolism was not the result of a metaphysical inquiry only but a mystical inquiry too. He also used symbolism in order to depict interesting direct and indirect comparisons. Sleep is often related to death. Night often suggests darkness, death, or grief. Dreams are linked to the future or fate. Seasons often represent ages as the Romantics and Neo classical poets employed them for the same reason.

### **Conclusion:**

Daniel Abdul Hayy Moore believed in the social role of poets in exploring and interpreting aspects of the universe in order to help readers recover from the cruelty of the modern world and the industrialization of modern man. His poems are often described as mostly religious, varied and full of colorful imagery from different myths and from nature. Myths include the narrative technique in which the story is told for its own sake. Myth is often used by writers and by poets in particular for the purpose of the enrichment of meaning. The Western culture contains a number of

literary or narrative genres that scholars have related in different ways to myths. Examples include fables, fairy tales, folk tales, sagas, epics, legends and etiological tales.

Between the universal and the personal experience, Moore found poetry a fertile soil for exploring the mystery of death. To do this, Moore reviewed traditional patterns of belief and compared them with experiences of modern individuals. The selected poems in this paper provided a rich record of mankind concerning death, life and afterlife. Moore employed bees, snakes, Adam, Eve, black swan and Noah Arch in order to enrich his poems with mythical interpretations for enrichment. He was acquainted with the old Greek, Roman and modern European literatures. He delved into reading old mythology. He experienced two world wars and many setbacks a long half a century of his life. As a human being, he felt sorry for the destructive consequences of those massive wars and the shocking effects of the aftermath. It was once a state of bliss that was destroyed by the fall of Adam. In his religious poems, he made use of the triangle of God, heaven and hell in order to ensure conformity through the promise of eternal bliss and the fear of eternal suffering.

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