Pan's Labyrinth: Finding the Center

Abstract:

"Pan's Labyrinth" tells a modern story of war framed by ancient Western mythology. As the film opens, we hear a child struggling to breathe, and then see the child's face, blood coming from her nose, running backwards. As the blood disappears, the narrator speaks: "Long ago in the Underground realm, where there are no lies or pain, there lived a Princess who dreamt of the human world." Thus begins the tale of Ofelia's quest to save her newborn baby brother and to destroy the evil Captain Vidal. With each task she completes, she comes nearer to fulfilling her dream of returning to her father, the king of the lost kingdom from which she had fled so long ago. By couching this modern tale of war within the framework of mythology, the storyteller/director creates a virtual labyrinth for the viewer that is alien and yet achingly familiar. Although some reviewers have said that "Pan's Labyrinth" is most memorable for its special effects, these effects provide the frame through which the viewer enters the central story of sacrifice and heroism. As Ofelia discovers the labyrinth in the middle of the garden and encounters Pan who sends her on the quest that will restore order, we recognize the journey of Everyman through the labyrinth of life—from ignorance to wisdom, from innocence to its painfully mature counterpart. Ofelia and her stepfather inhabit two opposite worlds. Myth becomes the vehicle through which the world of Ofelia and the world of her stepfather collide, and the viewer is left wondering which is "real"—the world we can see, touch, hear, or the world we know through intuition? Myth pulls us into a world where logic is turned upside down—what should not "make sense" does, and although evil would seem to have the upper hand in the end, things are not always what they appear. Although myth may not seem to operate in the postmodern world, in "Pan's Labyrinth," we are reminded of its power to reveal truth by shaking us out of our reliance on pragmatism.

Key words: myth, labyrinth, journey, innocence, maturity, real, intuition, quest

It has been said that "The longest journey is the journey inwards" (Dag Hammarskjold). In *Pan's Labyrinth*, this journey begins with a little girl caught up in the cruelties of the Spanish Civil War. As the film opens, we hear a child struggling to breathe, and then see the child's face, blood coming from her nose, running backwards. As the blood disappears, the camera closes in on her dilated pupil, and the narrator speaks: "Long ago in the Underground realm, where there are no lies or pain, there lived a Princess who dreamt of the human world." From the narrator, we learn of Ofelia's true heritage—in the human world, this princess forgot who she was and, fully human, eventually died. As the camera pans scenes of the destruction of civil war, the narrator says: "Her father, the King, always knew that the Princess would return, perhaps in another body, in another place, at another time. . . .And he would wait for her, until he drew his last breath, until the world stopped turning" (script). As Corelyn Senn reminds us, "the . . .journey . . .is the arche-image for life, the cyclical pattern of life, enfolded in the nature of the universe and transcending human control" (125). Ofelia's journey follows this pattern, but only to a point. Traditionally, Senn tells us, " [the journey] begins in the human world, ventures aided and abetted by helpers and hinderers into the Otherworld where it obtains an object, performs a task and changes the journeyer and finally returns to this world" (125). However, Guillermo del Toro's tale reverses the traditional understanding of the quest—instead of

beginning in the human world, we discover that Ofelia's quest had actually begun in the Otherworld, and it is to this Otherworld that she will return once her quest has been completed. Her true identity lies outside of the "real" world and in order to reclaim this identity, she must complete an "inward" journey.

The Spanish Civil War provides the initial frame for Ofelia's quest into the Otherworld. The time is 1944. This is a particularly brutal time for the rebels—Franco's forces had essentially won the war; he was in complete power by 1940, and yet his soldiers continued to pillage the countryside and kill any pockets of rebels they could find. It is in the midst of this war that Ofelia and her mother find themselves. Ofelia's mother, pregnant with Captain Vidal's baby, is summoned to join him in the field where he will wage war on a group of rebel forces thought to be hiding in the forest. His mission is to squelch all resistance to Franco's rule. Vidal is the cruel stepfather, antithesis to the tailor father Ofelia lost. Where her father created, Vidal destroys. Beauty means nothing to him, just a means to an end. He cares nothing for Ofelia's mother—she is merely a vessel for his offspring, the son he longs for to carry on his legacy of hatred.

Parallel to this world of blood and violence is Ofelia's world of fantasy and myth. Ofelia, as we learn in the opening scene of the film, is an avid reader of fairy tales. In a world of death and destruction, she finds solace in these stories. Minutes into the film, we see the caravan of official vehicles taking a pregnant Carmen and her young daughter, Ofelia, to Capitan Vidal; sitting next

to Ofelia on the seat is a stack of books, books of fairy tales. Her mother chastises her for reading fairy tales when they are going to the country where there is plenty of fresh air for her to play in.

Carmen: Fairy tales? You're too old to be filling your head

with such nonsense. (script)

Carmen then becomes ill and asks the driver to stop. As she is getting sick at the side of the road, Ofelia is distracted by an insect and follows it a short way into the woods. Some critics of the film have identified this insect as a dragon fly, while others have claimed that it is a praying mantis. Either one of these designations would lend even more symbolic depth to the tale. A praying mantis has been identified as a symbol of God, a prophet, or a seer, while the dragonfly symbolizes the butterfly and change, the idea of adaptiveness and a mature understanding of the self. At any rate, Ofelia suspects that this insect is really a fairy, having the imagination of many young girls her age. Her mother chastises her as she returns to the car, telling her to stop playing pretend, that it's silly. The contrast between their worlds is made clear by this short conversation between Ofelia and Carmen:

Ofelia: A fairy--I saw a fairy!!

Carmen: Oh--look at your shoes! They're covered in mud!

By situating this modern tale of war and destruction within the framework of mythology and fairy tale, Guillermo del Toro defamiliarizes both,

and thus brings to our awareness the paradoxical juxtaposition of realities and cruelties of war with the child's vision of fairies and happy endings. Furthermore, in this film, war is thrown into a new context; it now takes on universal meaning, the struggle between good and evil. Myth and fairytale, seen alongside war, takes on a more serious aura as well. The outcome of Ofelia's quest, whether she succeeds or fails, will have eternal consequences. The intertwining of these two stories creates a virtual labyrinth into the center of which we as viewers travel, along with Ofelia, towards the meaning of life itself, as well as the center of human desire. Karen Armstrong, in *A Short History of Myth*, provides a succinct and insightful explanation of mythology's power: "[In the premodern world] a myth was an event which, in some sense, had happened once, but which also happened all the time. . . .Mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality" (7). Myth, in other words, allows us to find our center. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* provides a rich context for the significant role that fairytales play in the life of a child. In a more recent study Laura Hubner calls attention to the subverting power of a fairy tale to "challenge existing codes and practices," as well as its use of fear "to purify and refine, to revert as much as to subvert, often embracing long-established boundaries and pathways" (6).

Both of these perspectives can help us to understand the interaction of these genres in the film. The mythic, fairy tale world into which Ofelia enters is

far from an idyllic world of sugar plum fairies and childish delights. As John Petrakis has noted, “One might assume that her fantasy world would be a withdrawal from the harshness of life into a gentle and understanding universe. But del Toro seems to be suggesting that even a child’s imaginary world smacks of menace and danger” (“Parallel Universe”). It is in some ways a frightening, dark world, but it is one that has boundaries and rules that a child can understand. The power of a myth or fairy tale lies in its ability to instruct as well as entertain. Again, turning to Armstrong, we learn that a way, myth. . .is a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us to glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’—a question which has also provoked some of our most important discoveries in philosophy, science and technology” (8). Although many myths and fairy tales were tales of warning, they still involved the imagination and a spirit of play. Armstrong argues that because “human beings are unique in retaining the capacity for play,” even as adults we “continue to enjoy playing with different possibilities, and, like children, we go on creating imaginary worlds” (9). Ofelia approaches her quest with childlike innocence. Although she is not comforted by Pan’s presence, he gives her specific tasks that once finished will bring an end to suffering and give her the happy ending she for which she longs. In some ways, this tale parallels certain religious rituals, such as a sinner’s penance in which he confesses his sins in order to become reconciled once more with God, or in the shedding of blood for sacrifice. Ofelia does not, of course, know that her journey will end in her own death, but her sacrifice begins when she takes up

the first task. She has acknowledged a power greater than herself, for which she is willing to set aside her own desires to obey. Del Toro uses elements of ancient religious myth and fairy tale, the boundaries between the genres loosely constructed, in order to create a new kind of tale, one that is fit for the times in which we live. In analyzing the mythic aspects of this film, we can identify elements of many stories: the myth of the hero-quest, of Persephone in the Underworld, of Ariadne and the Labyrinth, Pan and Echo, Dionysius and even the birth, death and resurrection of the Christ. Del Toro doesn't tell just one story, however, or even one kind of story; he weaves different themes, symbols and myths into a unique kind of story, a story whose plot re-occurs. In this way, myth transcends time. Peter Travers, writing in *Rolling Stone*, observes "You leave del Toro's one-of-a-kind film feeling you've never seen the world before, not like this, not with such aching beauty and terror in the service of obliterating barriers of time, place, genre, and language." Although Jack Zipe, author of *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, questions the notion that fairy tales can help us through "dark times," he recognizes del Toro's aim in the film: "He wants us to see life as it is, and he is concerned about how we use our eyes to attain clear vision and recognition. Paradoxically, it is the fairy tale—and in this case, the fairy-tale film—that offers a corrective and more 'realistic' vision of the world, in contrast to the diversionary and myopic manner in which many people see reality" (236).

The labyrinth is the primary symbol in the film: it is at the center of the labyrinth that Ofelia meets Pan, here, she learns of her true identity and of her

history and here, she is assigned her quest. The labyrinth has traditionally been defined as a tool for meditation. Although sometimes confused with a maze, the two structures are actually different both in form and function. While a maze is "designed to trap and confound," the labyrinth "serves as a meditative space to be alone with one's thoughts and feelings; [time spent in the labyrinth] is a time to reflect on the many fractured emotions that drive us" (Episcopal Diocese of San Diego). By the time one completes the unicursal path of the labyrinth, he or she "is renewed with purpose and strength to complete life's journey" (EDSD). The maze is described as being constructed of "dead ends" and "blind alleys" (dovegreyreader), and as a "series of compartmentalized and confusing paths," and the objective is to "escape—as quickly as you can" (lawsagna). While mazes are "analytical puzzles to be solved," labyrinths are "a form of moving meditation" (lawsagna). While a maze "can be disorienting; labyrinths can be centering" (lawsagna). Some have said that the difference "between a maze and a labyrinth is that a labyrinth doesn't have choices, there's only one path in and the same path gets you back out. No dead ends, no tricks, no confusion" (thatsfit.com). The mythic symbol of the labyrinth works on several levels at once: structurally, metaphorically, and physically. The movements within the film reenact the movements of the walker in the labyrinth: once inside the labyrinth, the walker turns to the left and walks a few feet before turning back to the right, retracing her steps on a parallel path. To the first time visitor, it may seem that the progress to the center of the labyrinth is slow and ponderous. The walker gets closer to the

center, only to double back and walk outward again. The obstacles preventing progress to the center are a part of the experience—the idea is that once the walker understands that all paths to meaning are not straightforward, the meaning of the labyrinth itself is clarified. Although it may seem that the obstacles facing Ofelia in *Pan's Labyrinth* are not within the physical labyrinth, but generated by the quest that Pan assigns to her at the beginning of her journey, if we take the labyrinth as a structural device for the story of the film, the doubling and redoubling of Ofelia's journey become evident. For Ofelia, there is one way in, and only one way out, the "two steps forward and one step back" progress, not the way out that the audience hopes for, but it is the way out that best mirrors the progress of human beings and the one that best resolves the conflicts of the film, putting to rest Ofelia's wandering soul.

Ofelia's approach to the labyrinth in the garden occurs in incremental steps, just as her quest will proceed slowly. Soon after Ofelia and Carmen arrive at the mill, and Ofelia greets the stepfather, she sees the stick insect and follows it into the woods:

> *It fans out its multiple wings. Twice. Ofelia runs over and*
>
> *tries to catch it. But the Stick Insect takes off and escapes. The girl drops her books and goes after it. Ofelia follows the Stick Insect to the edge of a small rise. She follows it with her eyes and sees, about 100 meters away, surrounded by trees, the ruins of a garden labyrinth. The camera glides up for a better view. The labyrinth is*

circular, its paths overgrown and partially blocked. Ofelia enters the labyrinth through an archway. She ventures down one of its pathways and stops—

Mercedes: It's a labyrinth.

Ofelia turns—the young woman stands by her side. Ofelia's books in hand.

Mercedes: Just a pile of old stones. They've always been there, even before the mill. Better you don't go near it—You could get lost.

A ray of sunlight breaks through the grey clouds and illuminates the old ruins. Mercedes hands her the books. (script)

The approach to the labyrinth, through a forest, is itself symbolic and has a rich tradition in mythology. Laura Hubner rightly points out that "Woodland signifies a space in-between, its liminality a pointer to something once seeming understood as primeval, prior to discourse, providing an insight into an archetypal understanding of human behavior" (3). This kind of imagery calls to mind the tales of Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, characters who either ventured into the woods or were held captive in the woods. At this point, Ofelia does not enter the labyrinth, although she is visibly intrigued by it. Interestingly enough, Mercedes warns Ofelia that she could get lost in the labyrinth, which indicates that perhaps

this labyrinth is more like a maze; however, later that same night, as Ofelia enters into it, the trees and leaves part to let her pass, indicating that rather than a maze with dead ends, this is a true labyrinth, one with a definite path in and out, and a definite center, both the beginning and the end. According to Carl Jung, the labyrinth "is a symbol both of the unconscious and the inward journey, as well as the underworld" (Armstrong). Laura Hubner argues that the labyrinth is a female symbol, "the infinite circular archways and interiors, and the shots of Ofelia's baby brother in the womb" (5).

The evening of their arrival, after Ofelia falls asleep with her mother, she hears something in the room. It is the stick insect from earlier that day. Ofelia is delighted and tells the insect that it must really be a fairy. As she shows it a picture of a fairy from one of her books, the insect takes on this shape, flies to the window and then signals for Ofelia to follow. Once outside, Ofelia finds herself in the woods and finally at the entrance of the labyrinth. When she arrives at the center of the labyrinth, after winding her way down the dark and overgrown path, Ofelia meets Pan.

Ofelia nears the edge of the pool.

Ofelia: Hello?!

The pool returns her cry, again and again. The tree trunks creak—and a cloud covers the moon.

Ofelia: Echo! Echo!

Then she hears the sound of something big clattering about on hooves, like a horse or a bull.

Voice: It's you. It's you. You've returned!

The Voice is cold and full of sibilance. The cloud moves aside. . .

On its hind quarters in the shadows is the twisted and sinister figure of a Faun. He's covered in roots and moss.

Ofelia backs away, speechless.

Faun: No, no, don't be afraid, I beg you!! Look!!

He opens a small wicker basket and from it emerge two more Fairies: one blue, one red.

Ofelia smiles.

Ofelia: My name is Ofelia. Who are you?

Faun: Me? I've had so many names. Old names that ony the wind and trees can pronounce.

The green fairy flies toward its colorful companions.

Faun: I am the mountain, the forest, and the earth. I am. . .a faun.

As he bows to her, moonlight dapples his body. His coarse hooves and the strange angle of his legs make his courtly manner clumsy yet oddly gracious.

It is significant that Ofelia's first venture into the labyrinth occurs at night by moonlight, indicating the mysterious and sobering nature of her journey. Even the setting of this initial journey into the labyrinth is fraught with mythic symbolism. According to one source, "The moon's waxing and waning have made it a symbol of time, change, and repetitive cycles around the world. One such cycle is the constant alternation of birth and death, creation and destruction. People have linked the moon with both birth and death" (Mythencyclopedia.com). Furthermore, "The energy of the moon is intuitive, deep, subtle, feminine and psychic," and "associated with clairvoyance and knowing without thinking" (Holisticshop.co.uk). Most significant, however, is that the moon has traditionally been associated with imagination and creativity. When Ofelia ventures out at night and follows the fairy into the labyrinth by the light of the moon, she is following an intuition and surrenders to the powers of her imagination.

This idea of intuition and imagination develops as Pan, the faun, tells her of her true history—she is not the daughter of mortals, nor is she any ordinary little girl—she is the daughter of royalty. According to Pan, she is "Princess Moanna, daughter of the King of the Underworld" (script) When Ofelia questions this proclamation, he tells her to look at her left shoulder where she

will find a birthmark in the shape of a moon. In order to prove that she has not lost her immortal "essence,", and in order to return there and reclaim her place next to the King, she must fulfill three tasks. Once these three tasks have been completed satisfactorily, says the faun, she will be returned to her lost kingdom. With this, Pan gives her a large book. "This is the Book of Crossroads. Open it when you're alone and it will show you your future—show you what must be done" (script). This is the standard fare of folk and fairy tales. Order will be restored once the quest has been fulfilled.

Throughout the film, Ofelia hangs onto her belief in myth and fairytale, to the frustration of her mother and her stepfather. When Carmen becomes even more ill in her pregnancy, Pan tells Ofelia to submerge a mandrake root into a bowl of milk, and then to prick her finger, allowing a few drops of blood to fall into the bowl. This bowl must be kept underneath Carmen's bed. This, he says, will make her mother well again. When Vidal discovers the mandrake root, and Ofelia says that Pan told her it would make her mother well, he leaves the room in a fit of rage. Even Carmen is disappointed in her and throws the root into the fire, refusing to see the magic that Ofelia so believes in.

Ofelia asks adults if they believe in fairytales, or why they do not, if they don't. The day after her initial meeting with Pan, Ofelia, dressed in her new green dress for the banquet that night, wanders down to the kitchen and then follows Mercedes out to the barn As Mercedes milks the cow, Ofelia questions her.

Ofelia: Mercedes, do you believe in fairies?

Mercedes: No. But when I was a little girl, I did. I believed in a lot of things that I don't believe any more.

Ofelia: Well, last night, a fairy visited me. And it wasn't alone, there were lots of them—and a faun, too.

Mercedes: A faun??

Mercedes picks up the bucket and fills a wooden bowl with milk.

Ofelia: He was very old, very tall and smelled like dirt.

Mercedes: My mother warned me to be wary of fauns.

As aware as Ofelia is of the "other world" she doesn't understand why adults cannot see what she sees. Or why they wouldn't want to. As she looked in the Book of Crossroads, her tasks begin to reveal themselves to her. Ofelia is determined to carry out her mission, risking everything, because of her firm faith in the story of her origins. Her true identity awaits fulfillment.

As Bruno Bettelheim claims in *The Uses of Enchantment*, fairy tales, folk tales and myth play a significant role in the child's life and development. Sara Stohler writes that the "cognitive development of a child is linked with myth" and cites Bettelheim as saying that "the fairy tale. . .is a very helpful tool for working through conflicts" (29). Myth works in the same way. According to

Stohler, an "important feature of myth is that it provides an order with which to begin to arrange the many bits and pieces of information about the world" (30). In *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia's quest is essentially to make meaning out of the chaotic world she finds herself in, and does so by relying on fairy tale and myth. Northrup Frye says that the very core of education is to "articulat[e] the dream of a lost Paradise," and that education is actually concerned with two worlds, "the world that man lives in and the world he wants to live in" (31). Furthermore, according to Frye, "Children learn early the most comprehensive and central myth that incorporates the theme of a lost identity that is still sought" (31). In this film, these themes of lost identity and the search for a lost paradise underlie Ofelia's belief in Pan's tale and her longing to find a true home.

It is tempting to read this film as a re-telling of the mythic hero and the quest; the journey of Persephone into the Underworld, or a Dionysian myth of resurrection. Just as we associate the labyrinth with the myth of Theseus, the Minotaur, Ariadne and Orpheus, we tend to associate Ofelia's journey into the labyrinth and, finally, into her underground kingdom, with Persephone. However, it is not fruitful to draw such one-to-one comparisons with these myths and with the story of Ofelia. Del Toro's tale brings together elements of myth, but also fairytale, weaving these elements together in an entirely new way, for a new age. The age in which we live is in many ways more violent and more cruel than any age before. The weapons of warfare are far more damaging than ever before. Death can come in many more terrifying ways than ever

before. In order to live in such an extraordinary world, we need extraordinary faith and a belief that cruelty and suffering will not have the last word. Del Toro has said that Ofelia entering the maze is linked to her discovery of herself: "Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is actually a constant transit of finding, not getting lost. It's about finding, not losing, your way. . .[one important meaning] of the labyrinth in the movie is. . .the transit of the girl towards her own center, and towards her own, inside reality, which is real" (Interview).

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