Tree Transformation in Myths and Stories

A common motif found in world literature is the transformation of a human being into a tree. While at first one may write off this occurrence as a bizarre twist to a story, its prevalence in innumerable literary narratives forces readers to consider the meaning and significance behind these transformations. Through the works of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, *Inferno* by Dante, and the tale of *Leila and Majnun,* it becomes clear that tree transformation is not simply an arbitrary device, but rather is full of implications. I believe this specific change of state, from tree to man, can vary in meaning according to the story in which it is told, coming to symbolize escape, permanence, punishment, and constancy. However, there are also some overarching ideals that lead to the widespread employment of this device, namely the physical similarities of man and tree, societal perceptions of life and death, and cultural and religious beliefs in terms of souls and immortality.

The first transformation is found in *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, in the tale of “Daphne and Apollo.” Apollo has become inflamed with desire for Daphne and chases her through the forest. As Apollo nearly catches up to her, Daphne cries out to her father, a river god, for help. In fact, she requests a transformation, saying “’then transform, dissolve my gracious shape, the form that pleased too well’” (Lawall and Mack 1141). Her wish is granted as, “a heavy numbness grips her limbs; thin bark begins to gird her tender frame, her hair is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs; her feet- so keen to race before- are now held fast by sluggish roots; the girl’s head vanishes, becoming a treetop” (Lawall and Mack 1141). The imagery in this passage is strong, allowing the reader to see each component of the human being turned into a component of the tree. This piece by piece process accentuates the physical likeness of human beings and trees, specifically with chest and trunk, hair and foliage, arms and branches, feet and roots, and face and treetop. In this case, the purpose of the transformation is simply a means of escape. Rather than disappearing through death, she is transformed into an inhuman object that cannot be a victim of Apollo. Yet even though the tree is not human, Apollo is still capable of loving it with the same intensity. It is clear that the tree still holds some part of Daphne. It is said that Apollo could feel “the heart that beats beneath the new-made bark,” and that the wood “shrinks from his embrace” (Lawall and Mack 1141). Interestingly, “the more translations that we look at, the more we see that Daphne exists in a sort of spectrum, with tree-ness at one end… and humanness… at the other” (Ardam 2). Specifically, the pronouns used to describe Daphne in her tree form vary, with some translations using “she” and “her” and others only using “it.” The physical displacement and embodiment of a new form also allows us to question what constitutes gender and humanity. This idea of gender and sexuality is also important because Daphne was essentially escaping from sexual assault. Her transformation into a new form was to prevent Apollo from raping her. I think this represents the patently unfair and unjust thinking of society in the days of Ovid and unfortunately still today that the woman and her form or beauty is at fault in rape. Apollo does not have to change, but rather Daphne is the one who must undergo physical transformation. Relating still to this idea, we can analyze Apollo’s behavior at the end of the story, when he declares “’I shall always wear your leaves’” (Lawall and Mack 1141). This implies him forcibly removing the tree’s branches and leaves, which is in a way a violation as well. As Ardam questions, “If Apollo’s substitution of Daphne with the laurel wreath is a move into representation, into culture, can we read his actions as a cultural rape?” (3). One could even go so far as to relate this to how humans interact with nature on a daily basis, equating deforestation and pollution to assault, which is an issue far more prevalent in our current society.

In Dante’s *Inferno,* the tree situation is very different from that in Ovid’s narratives. In the second round of the seventh circle of hell, those who committed suicide reside in trees. In this case, tree transformation is a form of eternal punishment. As Pier della Vigna explains to Dante, their souls will never be reunited with their bodies because “it is not just to have what one has stripped” (Alighieri 135). In the act of suicide, these people willingly forfeited their bodies and therefore do not deserve them any longer. On a level, this is similar to the previous situation of Daphne, as in both stories the humans are looking for a way to escape. The difference lies in the fact that Daphne was escaping unwanted love and sexual advances of another, while the suicides were trying to escape themselves, their depression, and their lives. The tree form in this case is used to highlight the complete lack of control the suicides now have over themselves, as the roots render them completely immobile. The physical form of the tree is again important in its similarity to the human form. Yet in this case, when Dante snaps a twig from the tree, “from the splintered limb came forth at once both blood and speech” (Alighieri 131). Whereas in the comparison of tree to man, one can equate tar with blood, it is interesting that these trees still bleed human blood. This emphasizes how human they still truly are, as does the fact that they can hold conversations. As opposed to the story of Daphne, there is no question that the human souls reside in these trees, and that, though physically transformed, they are still very human. As Vanacker says about Daphne, “Metamorphosis, in her case, means salvation: it is a way to avoid the choice between life and death. By becoming a laurel, in other words, Daphne only puts an end to her life as a human being” (435). With the suicides, transformation into tree is the exact opposite of salvation. This is the most significant difference between the two situations: Daphne transforms in order to survive; the suicides transform because they cannot will themselves to survive any longer.

The last representation to consider is in the story of “Leila and Majnun.” In this tale, Leila and Majnun love each other deeply, but are prevented from being together by their families. At the end of the story, Majnun waits for Leila in the Sahara desert for years, sitting propped up against a tree. After a time, “the hands that were holding the branches became branches themselves; his body became part of the tree” (Khan 155). When Leila finally returns to him, she sees that “flesh and blood had already wasted, and the skin and bone that remained, by contact with the tree, had become like its branches” (Khan 156). Again, we see the physical similarity of humans and trees, specifically with the arms and branches. However, in this tale, transformation is not a means of escape, but rather a means of remaining in the world. Similarly to Daphne, Majnun becomes a tree in order to survive. A human could not live in the desert for that long, but by becoming part of the tree, part of Majnun can remain in the physical world, at least until he is able to see Leila once more. This whole ordeal magnifies the depth of his love, as the roots signify how long he has been waiting for her. A tree can remain unchanged for hundreds of years, which demonstrates his constancy and faithfulness. When she finally comes, he says “I am Leila” (Khan 156). There is a parallel seen here in the physical transformation of Majnun into a tree and his belief that he has become Leila. His love has made him see no separation between himself and the one he loves and soon there is no separation between his human body and the tree.

All of these tales share similar elements in tree transformation, while also differing in some ways in terms of meaning. Yet overall, one must ask why this metamorphosis is so prevalent in literature. The physical likeness of humans and trees is important. However, on a more metaphorical level, the tradition can likely be attributed to the association of trees and life. As noted by Garry and El-Shamy, “a source of food, fuel, and shelter, trees are also symbolic of eternal life (the evergreen) or cyclical rebirth as they lose their leaves and sprout new one every year (deciduous trees)” (464). The practically unlimited uses for trees have given them a lasting level of importance in our world. But more importantly, there is an idea of permanence associated with trees. They can thrive for hundreds of years, already far outlasting humans, and after they eventually perish, they simply become part of nature again, and a new tree will likely grow in the same location in due time. The tree is an unobtrusive and constant component of our world. There is also the simply idea that a tree is living. While it is not a human being or an animal, it is still alive, and therefore it is infinitely more appealing than an inanimate object with no semblance of life. Metamorphosis into a tree allows the individual to still be alive in a sense. In other words, a degree of immortality is gained. We can also see the idea of returning to the Earth, from where we came in the first place. As said in the Bible, “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Genesis 3:19). Even if one is not religious, many see the appeal in returning to nature upon the end of life.

In today’s world, it has become a more popular trend for people to request their ashes to be buried and a tree planted in that spot upon death. This is a modern way of partaking in a certain type of tree transformation. While we may not be able to physically transform ourselves into trees when our time comes, we are able to essentially grow a tree out of one’s ashes. This hope is again related to a desire to return to the natural world upon death, as well as the perceived permanence of trees. We want to leave something lasting and living in this world and leave a part of ourselves. A tree is the perfect vessel for this human quest of immortality.

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