

Symbols of Water - exploring the Visual Representation

Maria TEODORESCU¹

Abstract: *Water is essential to our very existence not only from a purely physical and functional perspective, but also from a cultural and spiritual point of view. Established as a universal cosmogonical energy in all primitive cultures, this natural element has kept its magical aura up to present times and people are still cultivating its magic in daily rituals we are often no longer aware of. My article aims to explore aspects relating to various religious views and rituals descending from these, as well as popular culture, represented mostly by fairy tales and popular short stories. Our present existence, although significantly more developed and sophisticated, still holds on to the fantastic characteristics of water as a matter and realm of mysterious and magical powers.*

Key-words: *water; religion; tradition; ritual; culture*

1. Introduction

Having had a constant preoccupation in studying the feminine symbols and archetypes and the way they are revealed in visual arts from all times and cultures, I have observed steadfastness in the way they infuse major cultures of the world and rituals as old as time. Constant throughout millennia, they are so deeply rooted in our collective consciousness that one can rarely identify and separate them from our logical daily performance and acts of habit.

The realms of water are associated with the human subconscious, people are said to have an oceanic memory and that just like the abysmal depths of the great masses of water, the subconscious cannot be penetrated to its depths. The feminine psychology resonates with water symbols such as the sea, the ocean, the lake etc. and all other cold or warm liquids, concrete matter or ethereal that can flow or stagnate in a stable shape. Water is a consonant element of femininity and acknowledgement of woman's role: empathy, intuition, creativity, sensitivity, support etc.²

All these first-hand features of water, one of the universal cosmogonical elements of all primitive and modern cultures, have a magical and supernatural symbolic potential, that is sometime exaggerated up to the point of panacea and even immortality.

2. Birth, rebirth, purification

If we briefly immerse in mythology, we might discover a lot of firsthand representations of the birth water or with a role in rebirth (mainly spiritual) and implicit rituals. Moreover, this ancestral connection is perfectly justifiable even to modern culture, in which people learn early on in school that, from a scientific point of view, life on this planet appeared in the primordial ocean. So even with the information available today, we can associate primordial water with a universal uterus, in which the first life forms developed in the amniotic fluid of the planet,

¹ PhD candidate „George Enescu” National Arts University, Iași, Romania, maria.a.teodorescu@gmail.com

² I. Mitrofan, L. Petre. 2013. *Artenograma. Diagnoza și terapia unificatoare transgenerațională*, Sper, pp. 205-206.

before being prepared for terrestrial existence. Water precedes the apparition of earth in most cosmogonical myths.

The first actual contact between a mother and her child is mediated by the amniotic fluid, water of life, a primordial soup reduced to a microcosmic dimension. It's interesting that even nowadays, when a mother seems to encounter difficulties in connecting with her baby and therefore faces impediments in proper nursing, consultants recommend a practice that is equally scientific and magical, the *rebirth bath*. This practice or ritual involves an act of safe immersion while the mother and child are in close contact and is supposed to improve the sensorial connection between the two and re-establish the emotional link and milk flow. While this very practice had its supporters as well as its opposers, it is soothing the very least.

Water seems to be the birthplace of the entire world as described in the Old Testament and Christians were prone to have borrowed the imagery of genesis from the myths of other preceding religions. "Christianity was also inspired in its liturgy by the aquatic cults of the former religions. Baptism is literally an *immersion* in the waters that regenerate and purify, giving forces to life and removing the germs of evil" as Odon Vallet points out³. The very fact that Jesus himself chose to be baptized is a confirmation of the purifying characteristic of water and at the same time a reinstatement of the ritual. Christianity is very clear on the importance of the baptism and the fate of the souls that are not purified from the ancestral sin. Some confessions even believe that pure souls that have not received baptism are not allowed into heaven and spend eternity on a middle ground between heaven and hell, waiting for the absolution provided by Christ's second coming on earth.

The transformative capacity of water, as well as its symbolic versatility is present throughout the Holy Bible, in key scenes such as the wedding in Cana where Jesus performed his first visible miracle, the act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet before the last supper (John 13:1–17), Pontius Pilate symbolically washing his hands of the responsibility concerning Jesus' fate and many others.

"In Hebrew and Christian traditions, water symbolizes the origin of creation first. The Hebrew letter men (M) symbolizes actual water: it is mother and matrix".⁴

³ O. Vallet. 2007. *Primele religii*, Univers, p. 84.

⁴ J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant. 2009. *Dicționar de simboluri - Mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*, Polirom, Iași, p. 81.



Fig. 1. *Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci, Baptism of Christ, 1472-1475, oil on wood, 177x151 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy*

(source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Baptism_of_Christ_\(Verrocchio_and_Leonardo\)#/media/File:Verrocchio,_Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Battesimo_di_Cristo.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Baptism_of_Christ_(Verrocchio_and_Leonardo)#/media/File:Verrocchio,_Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Battesimo_di_Cristo.jpg), retrieved on 05.05.2021)

In Egyptian culture, the aquatic element is subject to a multiple symbolism, water being a precious natural resource and its availability being dependent on the life and prosperity of the ancient people. As in other cultures, its symbolism was multifaceted: cosmogonic matter from which the whole world was born, a purifying and conditioning element of reproduction. Hapi was the god of overflows; the fact that the Egyptians had designated a particular god to whom they worshipped for this unique natural phenomenon demonstrates how important this moment was, vital to the fertility of the earth, a distinct characteristic of the goddess Isis.

Furthermore, Tefnut, the Egyptian Goddess of life-giving dew, often represented with the head of a ram or a lion, marks another specific generative quality of the water⁵. Even her name is eloquent, derived from the word *tfn*, which means *to spit*. The act of spitting is regarded very differently in many cultures, even in Romania, it might be an act of shame and disregard for the person spat upon, or it might be an attempt at protecting that certain person against evil eye.

In the myth of creation of the ancient Greeks, dew has a dual role: generational and nutritional; it was believed that it fertilizes flowers and meadows, that insects are born of it. According to Hesiod's writings, the muses poured sweet dew on the princes' lips to make them expressive. Euripides wrote that spring water can be like dew, if it is pure and blessed by the gods⁶, so capable of living. The Greeks also associated life itself, but also youth with liquid elements (water, blood, sweat, semen, etc.), and dryness was specific to the old age.

⁵ R. Adkinson. 2009. *Sacred Symbols*, Thames & Hudson, London, p. 26.

⁶ M. Ferber. 1999, *A dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

3. Healing, eternal youth and immortality

In ancient Egyptian folklore there are numerous references to the gesture of drinking water from rivers in order to acquire prolonged vigor, but also in the Book of the Dead such references are made, with the desire of eternal life or perhaps of rebirth. Paradoxically, also in the Book of the Dead, Hapi, the god of the Nile overflows is represented with an ambiguous sexuality, which can urge a dual interpretation of its attributes (a male figure, but with prominent breasts and abdomen): flowing, dynamic waters are usually attributed to the male character of the universe and are often governed by gods with a strong masculinity, while the concept of fertility of the earth, liquid food (breast milk) unquestionably relates to femininity⁷. The exact moment of the Nile's overflow and the unitary representation in person but dual in symbolism might make of this deity the visual materialization of how the Egyptians understood the harmonious collaboration of male and female energies, with necessary manifestations, alternately or simultaneously, to ensure the natural balance and well-being of the people.

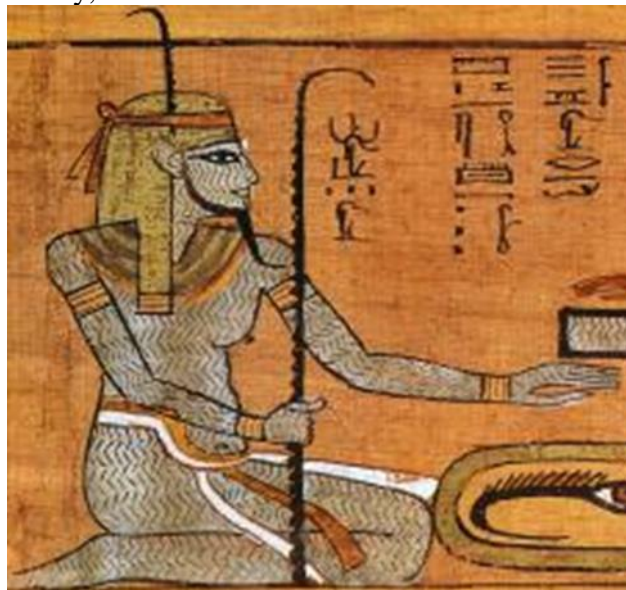


Fig. 2. Detail from the Book of the Dead at Pennesuttawy, 1070-712 BC

(source: Ronnberg, A., Martin, K., 2010, *The Book of Symbols. Reflections on archetypal images, The archive for research in archetypal symbolism, Taschen, Köln, p. 43, retrieved on 05.05.2021*)

The belief that waters hold the key to long life and maybe even immortality derives from the early acknowledgement of their essential role in our wellbeing. Although the term *spa, salus per aquam* or *sanitas per aquam* was established by our Latin ancestors, the benefits of water had been long known before. According to Hippocrates, there was a close correlation between vital fluids (humors) that determined human health or disease (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) with the four primordial elements – earth, water, air and fire – so that phlegm in the human body corresponded to water.

Fear of sickness, old age and death, mostly fear of not knowing what lays beyond, have made people develop quite complex rituals early on, where water is almost always present, as part of the recipe. The discovery of miraculously healing waters has amplified the magical aura of this natural element; soothing mineral spring such as Warms Springs in Georgia, God's Acre

⁷ A. Ronnberg, K. Martin, 2010, *The Book of Symbols. Reflections on archetypal images, The archive for research in archetypal symbolism, Taschen, Köln, p. 43.*

Healing Springs in Blackville, South Carolina, Arima Onsen in Japan, KANGAL Hot Springs in Turkey, Bath in UK and hundreds of other locations around the globe (tens of them in Romania), discovered since antiquity or more recently, have sparked the interest and imagination of all cultures and assured water became one of the elixirs of eternal health and youth.

The mythical spring of eternal youth, as some called it, the fountain of life, according to others, have fuelled the desires for immortality of many brave explorers, such as Juan Ponce de Leon who, encouraged by the stories of Arabian alchemists, has crossed the ocean in search for the Spring of Youth and subsequently discovered the land we now call Florida⁸.



Fig. 3. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, oil on oak panels, 205.5x384.9 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights#/media/File:The_Garden_of_earthly_delights.jpg, retrieved on 05.05.2021)

Our Lady of Lourdes in France has led another saint woman, through a mystical appearance, to a magical spring that has reportedly provided healing from different afflictions and even the officials of the Catholic Church are researching into these miraculous healings. Although positive mindset and faith have proved to be an invaluable support in fighting disease, even incurable, the miraculous healings reported by those who visit the spring have exceeded any medical statistics.

All major cultures have sought the magical water that provides unbreakable health and prolonged life, each of them building a unique and specific mythology based on this cosmogonical, magical matter, with multiple ramifications for each of its unique features.

Some of the purest and unspoiled descriptions and depictions of this element (although sometimes lacking elevated context) that the magical symbolism of water has infused successfully is folk culture and the bedtime stories for children. The old emperor from the tale „Fântâna Sticlișoarei” [The fountain of Sticlișoara]⁹ sent the most courageous men to find the

⁸ A. Șerbănescu. 2013. *Ideea de Nemurire. Imortalitatea și tehnologia digitală*, Ex-Ponto, Constanța, p. 31.

⁹ D. Stăncescu. 2010. *Basmele românilor*, București, Curtea Veche Publishing, pp. 67-72.

source of the miraculous water that could instantly rejuvenate even the oldest most decrepit of men.

Water in the shape of tears dripping from a religious depiction of Virgin Mary enables the empress from Mihai Eminescu's fairy-tale to finally conceive a son, therefore revealing the miraculous characteristic of this element. It is indeed believed and supported by statistical data that some lakes, springs, fountains provide water that, through its unique set of features, are capable of addressing specific diseases. In our country, the healing waters of lake Sovata are said to treat fertility issues, along with severe rheumatism and aid in muscular and nervous post traumatic recovery.

4. Conclusions

Since there is scientific research to confirm the specific benefits of spa places with centuries of tradition and reputation, where minerals in the water, geothermal and other characteristics have proven to have curative capacities, there is actually no wonder that worldwide culture is so infused with tales and myths praising water as a miraculous natural element. Our perpetual fascination with water is justified by all these, plus the new arguments that contemporary scientific research provides.

The essential role that water, with or without its mystical aura, plays in our life is revealed by the fact that even in our quest of colonizing other planets, one of the first arguments in classification of the interesting prospects is the presence of water, in any form, or at least of its traces on the planetary surface.

Worldwide mythologies, popular culture, from ancient times to recent representations, reveal water as a complex element so rich in symbolism and contextual interpretation and gives way to abundant artistic imagery.

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