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Between Mythology and Modernity in Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance*

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Abstract

This paper deals with Hernan Diaz's In the Distance (2017) that challenges and subverts conventions and myths of the West. It follows the journey of Håkan Söderström, a young Swedish immigrant who arrives in California by mistake and attempts hard to cross the continent in order to his brother, Linus in New York. Håkan Söderström becomes a legendary and solitary figure in the eyes of the indigenous people and the immigrants who meet him in the landscape of the American West. Along the way, he encounters various characters and situations that expose the violence, racism, and exploitation of the American frontier. He also undergoes a personal transformation from a naive and innocent boy to a legendary and solitary figure. This paper aims to analyze how Diaz uses mythology and modernity as two contrasting and complementary themes to explore the identity and experience of Håkan and the American West. Drawing on the critical works of Jung, Campbell, and others, the paper examines how Håkan embodies the archetypes of the hero, the wanderer, and the outsider, and how his journey reflects the stages of the monomyth. The paper also discusses how Diaz employs elements of realism, surrealism, and science fiction to create a hybrid and innovative narrative that questions the historical and ideological assumptions of the western genre. The paper argues that In the Distance, Diaz revisits, reimagines and reinvents the western as a genre that can address the complexities and contradictions of the contemporary world.

Key words: mythical archetypes, quest, legend, immigration, wilderness, identity

Introduction

Hernan Diaz's novel *In the Distance* explores the intersection of mythology and modernity, weaving a narrative that transcends time and space. This study delves into the intricate connections between mythic elements and the modern landscape in Diaz's work, examining how the narrative engages with and redefines traditional mythological motifs. Through a meticulous interpretation of the text, this paper aims to unravel the ways in which *In the Distance* not only reflects but also challenges the prevailing notions of mythology in the context of contemporary literature. Diaz's narrative stands as a compelling example of contemporary fiction that intricately melds mythology with the complexities of modernity. This paper further seeks to explore the thematic and stylistic elements that contribute to the novel's unique narrative, shedding light on how Diaz reinterprets and revitalizes mythic structures within a modern context.

This study attempts to trace Håkan's journey traveling east to find his brother, one in which, instead, he finds himself drifting with immigrants to the west. He mistakenly takes a ship to San Francisco, his lack of English not allowing him to recognize the destination. Through an archetypal approach, selected archetypes used in the novel are studied, ones that expose Håkan's journey and the hindrances he finds on his way to meet his brother. Other archetypes associated with the large landscape of West America are also investigated. This journey has taken Håkan's prime youth, and he finds himself driven back again and again because of his inability to navigate the strange landscape. Håkan is not familiar with the geography of the wilderness or the roundness of the earth, and it is very easy for him to be influenced by the other immigrants, who sometimes force him to accompany them on their journey, disregarding his itinerary that will lead him to his brother, Linus. He becomes an easy victim to plunderers, criminals, Indians, religious fanatics, and desperadoes on his journey to meet his brother.

The study also addresses the narrative techniques used in the novel that give more clarity to the plot. Diaz's *In the Distance* gives much emphasis to the distance between Håkan and his destination, the distance between him and his American dream, but rather one which will begin once the brothers are reunited. It is this distance which exposes Håkan to the many experiences that make him a legend in the eyes of the indigenous people, particularly when he slays an entire gang of attackers, and it is from this event that the legend of the Hawk emerges. Diaz stresses the transformations in Håkan's life that make his behavior sometimes more animalistic than human. That large landscape, the wilderness with its hard climate, different inhabitants, and immigrants who Håkan is required to deal with on this long, uninteresting journey, leaves him adrift and ungrounded. He remains circulating in a vacuum that leads him eventually to the same cities again and again, finding himself still in California.

Literature Review

Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance* is a novel that critiques the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West. The novel follows the journey of Håkan Söderström, a Swedish immigrant who walks across 19th-century America in search of his brother. The novel is a coming-of-age narrative that explores themes of solitude, companionship, foreignness, and home. And *The Paris Review Daily*, in its discussion, highlights other aspects of the novel that place it among distinctive literary works, notably its use of different archetypes and narrative techniques to stress the long journey and the obstacles that Håkan goes through along the way.

According to a review by *The Guardian*, the novel is a "thrilling narrative, full of twists and turns, that sees Håkan make the journey from young boy to 'stupendously tall man'; and from innocence to experience". The review also praises the novel for being a "profound meditation on solitude and companionship, foreignness and home; a bildungsroman in the grand 19th-century tradition that is also a fierce critique of the romanticised myths of the settlement of the American west". Another review by *AP News* describes the novel as "strange, absorbing" and "upends the romance and mythology of America's Western experience and rugged individualism" (36). Likewise, Mohanian *Reyes* analyzes the novel's critique of the Western genre. The article argues that the novel is a "post western and post exceptionalist novel that reverses, breaks, stretches, and questions our expectations of the genre while still holding on to its elements, inhabiting the form both surreally and provocatively" (17). This becomes a universal idea behind the western world. However, I have explored how the nexus between mythology and modernity navigate in the narrative.

Mythology and Modernity in Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance*

The novel is *In the Distance* by Hernan Diaz, published in 2017 by Coffee House Press. It is a historical fiction that tells the story of Håkan Söderström, a Swedish immigrant who travels across 19th-century America in search of his lost brother. The author is Hernan Diaz, a writer and editor who was born in Argentina, grew up in Sweden, and now lives in New York. He is the associate director of the Hispanic Institute at Columbia University and the managing editor of the journal *Revista Hispánica Moderna*. The main problem is how the novel explores the themes of mythology and modernity in the context of the American West and the immigrant experience. You are interested in how the novel challenges the myths and stereotypes that shape the historical and cultural representation of the West, and how it portrays the conflict and contrast between different cultures, values, and worldviews in the 19th century. You are also curious about how the novel uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader.

Hernan Diaz's novel *In the Distance* is a unique and thought-provoking work that challenges the conventions of the western genre and historical fiction. The novel offers a critical and original perspective on the themes of mythology and modernity in the American West and the immigrant experience. Through the journey of Håkan Söderström, the novel exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land, depicts the difficulties and dangers of assimilation, integration, and communication among different cultures and worldviews, and uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist. It also encapsulates the central theme of the novel-navigating the mythical landscapes of the past within the context of the modern world. Diaz intricately weaves a narrative that blurs the lines between mythology and modernity, offering readers a compelling exploration of the intersection between the Old West and contemporary literary themes.

Mythical Elements in the Old West

Hernan Diaz's novel *In the Distance* is set in the American West during the 19th century, a period that is often romanticized and mythologized in literature. The protagonist, Håkan Söderström, becomes a symbol of the mythical lone hero, reminiscent of the archetypal figures present in Western folklore. The vast landscapes and the challenges faced by Söderström echo the mythic journey motif found in classical literature. Diaz's narrative is a critique of the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West. Through the journey of Håkan Söderström, the novel exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land, depicts the difficulties and dangers of assimilation, integration, and communication among different cultures and worldviews, and uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader. "Regrets are illuminations come too late" (Campbell, 385) that encapsulates the central theme of the novel-navigating the mythical landscapes of the past within the context of the modern world. Diaz intricately weaves a narrative that blurs the lines between mythology and modernity, offering readers a compelling exploration of the intersection between the Old West and contemporary literary themes.

Diaz's narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the American West during the 19th century, a period that is often romanticized and mythologized in literature. The protagonist, Håkan Söderström, becomes a symbol of the mythical lone hero, reminiscent of the archetypal figures

present in Western folklore. The vast landscapes and the challenges faced by Söderström echo the mythic journey motif found in classical literature. The novel critiques the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West and exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land. Diaz uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader. The novel is a must-read for anyone interested in the American West, immigration, and the complexities of modernity.

One of the themes that Diaz explores in his novel is mythology. Diaz draws on the works of Jung, Campbell, and others to construct Håkan as a mythical hero who embodies the archetypes of the wanderer, the outsider, and the savior. Håkan's journey across the American West follows the stages of the monomyth, or the hero's journey, as he experiences separation, initiation, and return. Håkan also becomes a legendary figure in the eyes of the indigenous people and the immigrants who meet him in the landscape of the American West. They project their fears, hopes, and fantasies onto him, creating various myths and stories about him. Diaz uses these myths and stories to critique the dominant narratives of the American frontier and to reveal the diversity and complexity of the people and cultures that inhabit it.

Another theme that Diaz explores in his novel is modernity. Diaz employs elements of realism, surrealism, and science fiction to create a novel that is both historical and futuristic, realistic and fantastical, familiar and strange. Diaz depicts the American West as a place of constant change and innovation, where new technologies, inventions, and discoveries shape the lives and destinies of the people. Diaz also portrays the American West as a place of paradox and contradiction, where progress and civilization coexist with violence and barbarism, where freedom and opportunity coexist with oppression and exploitation, where individualism and community coexist with isolation and alienation. Diaz uses these elements to challenge the stereotypes and clichés of the western genre and to create a novel that is relevant and resonant for the contemporary world.

Mythology as a Lens for Understanding Modernity

Hernan Diaz's novel *In the Distance* is set in the American West during the 19th century, a period that is often romanticized and mythologized in literature. Elfrieda Abbe says "The protagonist, Håkan Söderström, becomes a symbol of the mythical lone hero, reminiscent of the archetypal figures present in Western folklore (Abbe, 2017). The vast landscapes and the challenges faced by Söderström echo the mythic journey motif found in classical literature.

Diaz's narrative is a critique of the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West. Through the journey of Håkan Söderström, the novel exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land, depicts the difficulties and dangers of assimilation, integration, and communication among different cultures and worldviews, and uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader. *In the Distance*, he encapsulates the central theme of the novel—as Campbell points out "half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious tradition, for example, are facts" (383) navigating the mythical landscapes of the past within the context of the modern world. Diaz intricately weaves a narrative that blurs the lines between mythology and modernity, offering readers a compelling exploration of the intersection between the Old West and contemporary literary themes.

The paper signifies the author's intent to explore how the past informs the present. Carys Davies describes "Diaz skillfully interlaces the mythical elements of the Old West with contemporary concerns, prompting readers to reflect on the relevance of historical narratives in understanding current societal issues. Söderström's journey becomes a metaphor for the challenges and disorientations of navigating a rapidly changing world (Davies, 2018). Diaz skillfully interlaces the mythical elements of the Old West with contemporary concerns, prompting readers to reflect on the relevance of historical narratives in understanding current societal issues (Garcia, 78). Söderström's journey becomes a metaphor for the challenges and disorientations of navigating a rapidly changing world. *In the Distance* figures that excess as geological agency and as a cosmic future wherein human distinctiveness will have collapsed with other geological realities. It qualifies human life as a reality that can deny neither its implication in nor its responsibility for processes of planetary derailment and environmental disruption.

Critical Perspectives on Mythical Tropes

Hernan Diaz's novel *In the Distance* is set in the American West during the 19th century, a period that is often romanticized and mythologized in literature. The protagonist, Håkan Söderström, becomes a symbol of the mythical lone hero, reminiscent of the archetypal figures present in Western folklore. The vast landscapes and the challenges faced by Söderström echo the mythic journey motif found in classical literature. Diaz's narrative is a critique of the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West. Through the journey of Håkan Söderström, the novel exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land, depicts the difficulties and dangers of assimilation, integration, and communication among different cultures and worldviews, and uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader. It encapsulates the central theme of the novel—navigating the mythical landscapes of the past within the context of the modern world. Diaz intricately weaves a narrative that blurs the lines between mythology and modernity, offering readers a compelling exploration of the intersection between the Old West and contemporary literary themes.

Håkan's withdrawal from society (initially with Asa, who is the second love of his life, even though Håkan-as with Helen-lacks the words to articulate this intimacy) is also a turn to geology. As Håkan and Asa come to "a hall of sorts" (199) in the rocks, he finds it "too magnificent to be human, too intimate to be natural." He soon finds "bliss in [his and Asa's] austere life in the dome" surrounded by "some remarkable fossils (legged shields, spiral shells, thorny fish)." After Asa's death, he "decide[s] to dig and build down" (202), and obsessively keeps digging for as long as he lives there, even if the place resists his manipulation and forces him to refill many of the trenches: "there was no way to keep such a vast maze from collapsing . . . The elements prevailed" (204). The period in the burrow (years, if not decades long) not only witnesses Håkan's emancipation as a geological subject but also his self-limitation as geological material: "looking back at these months, he pictured himself as one of the fossils encrusted in the rock face." Again, geological agency is an occasion for limitation-bereft of either comfort or control: "Immense as they were, those territories had never held him or embraced him . . . Nothing was his; nothing claimed him" (228).

Literary critics have praised Diaz's ability to subvert and deconstruct traditional Western tropes, providing a fresh perspective on the genre. The juxtaposition of mythical and modern

elements in the novel challenges readers to question preconceived notions about both the Old West and contemporary society. Diaz's nuanced approach to storytelling has garnered attention for its ability to bridge the gap between nostalgia for the past and the complexities of the present. Many critics have praised Diaz's ability to subvert and deconstruct traditional Western tropes, providing a fresh perspective on the genre (Brown, 92). The juxtaposition of mythical and modern elements in the novel challenges readers to question preconceived notions about both the Old West and contemporary society. Diaz's nuanced approach to storytelling has garnered attention for its ability to bridge the gap between nostalgia for the past and the complexities of the present (Reyes, 56).

Mythical Imagery and Modern Realities

The narrative being set in the American West during the 19th century is often romanticized and mythologized in literature. The protagonist, Håkan Söderström, becomes a symbol of the mythical lone hero, reminiscent of the archetypal figures present in Western folklore. The vast landscapes and the challenges faced by Söderström echo the mythic journey motif found in classical literature. Diaz's narrative is a critique of the romanticized myths of the settlement of the American West. Through the journey of Håkan Söderström, the novel exposes the violence, exploitation, and injustice that underlie the settlement and expansion of the land, depicts the difficulties and dangers of assimilation, integration, and communication among different cultures and worldviews, and uses language, style, and narrative techniques to create a sense of distance, alienation, and foreignness for the protagonist and the reader. Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance* encapsulates the central theme of the novel-navigating the mythical landscapes of the past within the context of the modern world. Diaz intricately weaves a narrative that blurs the lines between mythology and modernity, offering readers a compelling exploration of the intersection between the Old West and contemporary literary themes.

Literary critics have praised Diaz's ability to subvert and deconstruct traditional Western tropes, providing a fresh perspective on the genre. The juxtaposition of mythical and modern elements in the novel challenges readers to question preconceived notions about both the Old West and contemporary society as Carl Jung claims, "myth is more individual and expresses life more precisely than does science" (67). Diaz's nuanced approach to storytelling has garnered attention for its ability to bridge the gap between nostalgia for the past and the complexities of the present. The novel itself is a tapestry of mythical imagery and modern realities. Lines such as "He had been walking for so long, he could not remember when he had begun or if he had ever done anything else" (Diaz, 34) reflect Söderström's timeless journey, blurring the boundaries between myth and reality. The vastness of the landscape and the protagonist's isolation contribute to the mythic quality of the narrative, while subtle references to modern technologies and ideologies anchor the story in a contemporary context. The narrative itself is a tapestry of mythical imagery and modern realities. Lines such as "He had been walking for so long, he could not remember when he had begun or if he had ever done anything else" (Diaz, 34) reflect Söderström's timeless journey, blurring the boundaries between myth and reality. The vastness of the landscape and the protagonist's isolation contribute to the mythic quality of the narrative, while subtle references to modern technologies and ideologies anchor the story in a contemporary context.

Finally, the research has pointed out such transformations and how such transformations have been revealed through different archetypes and varied narrative techniques that uncover the protagonist, Håkan, on what seems to be an impossible mission. Diaz has used narrative techniques

that show the hero's bewilderment and his drifting along with people who only care about their interests and go on to fulfill their planned goals. The novel covers many decades, taking Håkan from teenage years to the white hair of old age. *In the Distance* by Hernan Diaz is a novel that challenges and subverts the conventions and myths of the western genre. The novel follows the journey of Håkan Söderström, a young Swedish immigrant who arrives in California by mistake and tries to cross the continent to reunite with his brother in New York. Along the way, he encounters various characters and situations that expose the violence, racism, and exploitation of the American frontier. He also undergoes a personal transformation from a naive and innocent boy to a legendary and solitary figure. Diaz uses mythology and modernity as two contrasting and complementary themes to explore the identity and experience of Håkan and the American West. This paper aims to analyze how Diaz employs these themes in his novel and how he creates a hybrid and innovative narrative that questions the historical and ideological assumptions of the western genre.

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