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Name

Professor Name

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May 3, 2026

Project 2: Stage 2—Interpretation Paper

The United States Naval Academy (USNA) Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland is a very tangible evidence of the overlap between institutional identity and deep-rooted mythological discourses. As an active place of Christian worship, the Chapel is also a modern secular-sacred shrine of the virtues of the American naval tradition. It is the relationship between the architectural environment of the Chapel and the underlying myths of the hero journey, sacrifice, that form the meaning of the Chapel. I will examine the operations of this space as a hierophany, a breakthrough of the sacred into the profane world, which establishes collective conscience of the midshipmen and the nation.

Summary of Observation

The USNA Chapel is a historic building with a huge copper dome which dominates the skyline of Annapolis. On examination, the space is revealed to be a highly selectively curated store of marine mythology. Its interior is marked by stained-glass windows which do not merely represent biblical scenes, but often combine religious iconography with naval motifs, such as the window or memorials to fallen naval leaders (“United States Naval Academy Chapel”).

The greatest attraction is the crypt of John Paul Jones which is beneath the main chapel. This area is a pilgrimage spot; the sarcophagus, crafted of various marbles and encircled by bronze dolphins, makes the area a kind of pilgrimage spot, normally the province of religious saints. By observing the structure of the Chapel, and the manner in which people treat it, their hushed and respectful silence, and their rigorous and formal

ceremonies, it is made plain that the Chapel is a sacred place where the ordinary boundaries of military life are set aside to honor eternal values of honor and sacrifice.

Methodological Analysis

The Construction of Sacred Space (Eliade & Smith)

Applying the framework by Mircea Eliade to the Sacred and the Profane, the USNA Chapel can be interpreted as an axis mundi (center of the world) to the naval community. According to Eliade, sacred space is not determined but comes about through a kind of hierophany that coordinates the surrounding chaos of the profane world into some meaning (11). To the midshipmen, the Chapel symbolizes such a breakthrough. It is a place where the myth of the hero - the person, who goes into the unknown sea to save the community - is given physical form.

Jonathan Z. Smith also proposes that the importance of a sacred site is frequently created in the course of history and using social power (348). The Chapel is not in power owing to its bricks per se but owing to the institution mapping its history onto space. The presence of the crypt of John Paul Jones- one of the founding fathers of the Navy- serves as a mythical background. The Chapel, a refuge to his remains, makes it a connection between the historical past and the present, making the naval profession a sacred calling that recalls the ancient myths of the divine warriors and protectors.

Collective Conscience and Ritual (Durkheim & Bell)

The Chapel is the place where the "collective conscience" of the Naval Academy is strengthened, as defined by Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim believed that both religion and myth were fundamentally social; they gave the common symbols and rituals that unified a community (44). The rituals performed in the Chapel (weddings, funerals, and commissioning ceremonies) are what Catherine Bell calls as ritualized acts that provide a feeling of social order (74).

When the midshipmen are in this space, they are not merely in individual space, but in something greater and mythic. The USNA myth of the hero is a story of self-transcendence. The Chapel is the divine setting of this change. The *communitas* as the group of people united by the symbols of the former generations has supported the societal norms of the military culture: duty, loyalty, and the readiness to sacrifice the self in favor of the collective (Durkheim 212).

Conclusion

The Chapel of the United States Naval Academy is not merely a structure of brick and stone, or a house of prayer; but it is an essential organ of the American naval mythology. It fills the disjunction of the banality of the military training and eternity of the heroic archetypes and the ritualized spaces. Looking through the prism of Eliade and Durkheim, we understand that the Chapel is a sacred centre that strengthens the sense of nationality and professionalism. It demonstrates that myths do not exist in the distant past, but are constantly lived and breathed in the modern world, and their moral and symbolic architecture is the foundation of society.

Moreover, the Chapel shows that the sacred is not exclusive to the theological but is also spread to the civil and institutional. In turning the historical figures and the military virtues into a mythic entity, the Academy makes sure that the core values of the Academy, honor, courage and commitment, are perceived as absolute and transcendent instead of being seen as merely practical. This myth-making process is a very effective pedagogical process that leads future leaders to understand their role in the world as an extension of a big, global story of service. The USNA Chapel in the end is a tribute to the strength of myth in the modern era in providing meaning, direction and a sense of belonging in the modern era.

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