

12-15-1983

Mythopoesis: A Column

Sarah Beach

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Recommended Citation

Beach, Sarah (1983) "Mythopoesis: A Column," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 9: No. 4, Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss4/10>

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Mythopoesis: A Column

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Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

Creation (Out of Chaos)

"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth" (Gen. 1:1)

God began the Primary Creation by ordering from the beginning the contents of that Creation. For the Sub-Creator, however, it is hardly so easy. We are, after all, imperfect creatures. A writer who begins with "I will make a world" usually ends up with a hollow or uninteresting creation. The impulse which moves a writer to creation is usually to tell a particular story, one that has suddenly insisted on its existence. It is a sudden firing of the imagination.

Tolkien says that this happened to him when he encountered the lines beginning "Eala, Earendil." The sudden light of the morning star, invoked by the Anglo-Saxon words, filled the sky of his imagination. When his mind's eye had cleared, he found that the star had fallen in among his invented languages and had begun generating tales.

Within each person is a chaos of possibilities. They are born of our experience, our background, our loves and hates. To bring order to this chaos, to sub-create, to engage in mythopoesis requires a willingness to submit to the demands that arise from these possibilities.

Achieving order in one's imagination is no easy process; especially if one is making a coherent fantasy world. One can either impose an order on the miasma, or wait for its natural order to grow. Waiting, of course, means that the story generated by the first inspiration may have to wait to be told as well. That can, indeed, be frustrating to a writer. And frustration can lead to attempts to impose an order, so that the writer can get on with his story-telling. But if one is truly interested in sub-creating, patience is more fruitful.

Tolkien is an incredible model in the activity of mythopoesis. I find it hard to imagine how anyone will ever completely match his accomplishment. Where is there another who is so in love with words and language to totally invent a language, and then go on to invent a literature, a world for it? There may be such story-tellers, but are they linguists and philologists? There may be such philologists and linguists, but are they story-tellers? His accomplishment may never be duplicated, but it can easily inspire sub-created worlds which are equally loved by their creators.

For love is, at the bottom, the moving force of a "true" Sub-Creation. It is "the secret fire at the heart of the world." If the writer does not really love his world, he is only telling tales. However well such an author may write, because he loves not his creation, it will sound hollow and uncomfortable. But the writer who does love his creation, can fill it with great delights and awesome terrors. Would the loss of Gandalf in Moria feel as terrible in a world where its Creator did not care about him?

True mythopoesis is an act of love. Myths were generated in ancient days by a desire to understand both Man and the World around him.

Mythopoesis is a capacity that Man has not truly lost. We have only let it get dusty, because it seemingly is no longer needed. "Science" is explaining our world to us -- even though scientists themselves discover more questions about the Universe than they do answers. But if each of us draws on our own desires, what a variety of sub-creations will open up their understandings to us! We learn from each other, and mythopoesis can be a means of communicating our understanding and love.

Derivation (Users and Lovers)

Where does a story idea come from? There are, after all, only a limited number of Stories in the world, though there are infinite varieties of tales. Individual stories are as numerous as all the leaves on all the trees that ever were, are, or will be. Any one story that any one person may tell will only be a "Leaf by Niggle."

Inevitably, derivation will enter into the process. Too often, however, that word -- derivation -- is used in a condemnatory fashion, to scold a writer for "lack of originality" or sloppiness of technique. But that is an exceedingly crippling attitude to take, for are we all not derived from Something Else?

Derivation can affect a sub-created world in two ways. One can impose a motif on one's world, because that motif has been successful in previous works of literature. Or, one can begin with a love, an appreciation of a motif (although it may be a character, event, or object) for itself, a love which weaves itself into the fabric of the writer's imagination.

A writer cannot help but be affected in some manner by his encounters with literature in general. Memory alone quite easily sends up images from older leaves of the Tree of Tales. But when love, affection, or even a simple interest in such an older leaf affects the writer, how much more powerful will be the influence upon his won writing. In the act of sub-creation, a writer has only himself to draw on, only what he is, and only what he had absorbed.

It is the manner in which a writer draws upon his "learning" which determines the type of derivation which will be evident in his work. When a writer chooses to impose a motif (or whatever) on his sub-creation, the work takes on a mechanical atmosphere -- there are no real surprises to the story, though there may be sudden twists. Such a writer is a "user" of derivation. When a motif (or whatever) suddenly starts spilling out of the end of the pen, in the middle of something else, it becomes evident that it was "always" a part of the sub-creation, "from the beginning", even though the writer did not know it.

Just because a critic can point to a previous work of literature and say "the author derived x from y", no sub-creator should fear being derivative. If one has an affection for the image, what outsider can say that it does not belong in one's sub-creation?

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¹⁵Logically, this paper should have a second part which discusses the use science-fiction writers have made of Dodgson's works, primarily the Alice books. But I do not know enough to do more than suggest in this footnote a few beginning place. There are a number of works I have not read. For example, Kate Wilhelm's "With Thimbles, with Forks and Hope" (1981) takes its title from The Hunting of the Snark (1876), but I know nothing of its content. Titles are sometimes misleading. Henry Kuttner's "The Voice of the Lobster" (1950) has nothing Carolingian. On the other hand, Evan H. Appelman's "'Twas Brillig" (1951) has a functional title in terms of meaning, but without allusion to Carroll's works.

Henry Kuttner wrote at least two stories with Carolingian content. In "The Fairy Chessmen" (1946, as by Lewis Padgett), there are at least an allusion each to Carroll and to Through the Looking-glass--although Kuttner incorrectly has a character think that Lewis Carroll had "a thoroughly elastic mind, one not bound by conventional values." Kuttner's more famous Carolingian story, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" (1943, as by Lewis Padgett)--in which Dodgson appears briefly as "Uncle Charles"--also has a flaw: it assumes that the introductory stanza of "Jabberwocky" was told Dodgson by some young pre-Alice "in the latter half of the nineteenth century"; actually, it was written in 1855 (which barely fits the allotted time) at Croft, Yorkshire (where Dodgson's father was parish priest from 1843 until his death in 1868). Dodgson was about 23 when he wrote that stanza, and there is no reason to think he was, as yet, cultivating the friendships of little girls. Since Dodgson started keeping a diary in 1854, this is fairly certain. (The diary had not been published when Kuttner wrote his story, of course.) I should add, to be strictly correct, that Dodgson had an eye for girls' beauty and character even then--cf. the entries in his diary for 21 August, 27 August, 4 September, and 11 September. The use of "Uncle Charles" probably only occurs later; Dodgson certainly signed a letter to Isa Bowman that way on 4 April 1889.

The mention of a proto-Alice reminds me that Alice Liddell is revived from death in Philip José Farmer's Riverworld Tetralogy--To Your Scattered Bodies Go (1971), The Fabulous Riverboat (1971), The Dark Design (1977), and The Magic Labyrinth (1980); perhaps a fictional version of Alice's non-fictional self is worth mentioning. And the appearance of Dodgson in "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" is a suitable enough reason to mention his appearance in the thirty-fourth chapter of Robert A. Heinlein's The Number of the Beast (1980)--Don Sherwin has a review of this chapter in Jabberwocky, 10:2/46 (Spring 1981), 50-51 (he does not comment on Dodgson's lack of a stutter when talking with strange adults--something I wondered about--nor has he noted how Heinlein condenses Dodgson's career, combining the episode of tale-telling to the Liddell sisters, 1862, and an interest in sorites--Dodgson's interest in logic began later, I believe, and one finds his discussion of "soriteses" in The Game of Logic, 1887).

Perhaps as an associational item from the SF field, Pawn to Infinity (1982) is an anthology edited by Fred Saberhagen, with Joan Saber-

hagen. I do not think any of the science-fictional chess stories mention Carroll, but the final item in the book is an essay on the chess moves in Through the Looking-glass.

And then there are the ones which got away. There was a paperback called Alice's World perhaps ten years ago; I ordered it after a late review suggested its connection with Alice's Adventures, but it had gone out of print. I no longer have the author's name (I think he was European), although I could start looking through the Cumulative Book Index. Also, I am haunted by the memory of a story (in the later days of Astounding or the early days of Analog, I think) which began "The Slithy Toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe"--it was a spaceship coming out of hyperspace.

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Smaug, as an example of favorable derivation, has a fairly obvious line of literary pregenitors. The dragon in Heinlein's Glory Road is equally derivative, but unfavorably so. The difference lies with the imaginations of the authors. Tolkien said "I desired dragons." One cannot hear Heinlein saying that. The desire for such things, in and of themselves, justifies its presence in the tale. The use of such things, because they traditionally appear in that kind of story, only makes its presence in the tale sound hollow.

Who would accuse C.S. Lewis of "using" Christ in forming Aslan? The writer obviously had deep feelings for the Original and its derivative, a feeling which made Aslan native to Narnia. The links the writer's imagination desires to make should not be denied, should not be condemned. A surprising (to the writer) connection between two previously separate, though enjoyed, ideas should be encouraged for the fruit it may bear. Who could imagine Middle-earth without hobbits? Yet Tolkien originally meant them to be two different things. His affection for both refused to acknowledge the barrier, and he suddenly found his comfortable, homey hobbits dropped into High Matters dear to his heart.

An individual's progress in mythopoesis is not and should not be predictable. If it were, we would never have had, let alone be able to love Frodo the Ringbearer. The surprises of derivation in the process of mythopoesis are the Creator's gift of delight to the Sub-Creator.

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