Homo Monstrosus: Lloyd Alexander’s Gurgi and Other Shadow Figures of Fantastic Literature

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Homo Monstrosus: Lloyd Alexander’s Gurgi and Other Shadow Figures of Fantastic Literature

Abstract
Discusses Gurgi as the shadow archetype in Alexander’s Prydain Cycle and compares him to examples in other literature.

Additional Keywords
Alexander, Lloyd—Jungian analysis; Alexander, Lloyd. The Prydain Cycle; Alexander, Lloyd. The Prydain Cycle—Characters—Gurgi; Shadow (Psychoanalysis); Joe R. Christopher; Bonnie GoodKnight
many years ago and thought that Mr. Swann might be on his way to producing a masterpiece of fantasy some day. In short, if Mr. Swann's talent is still immature, it has been so for years, and may in fact be a case of arrested development.

Certainly "immaturity" can't be a completely satisfying way of describing the shortcomings of The Hot-World. If we think of another fantasy writer who, in the end, showed signs of immaturity, for instance, we can see some immediate contrasts. Ms. Sanders Anne Laubenthal, for instance, is a young fantasy writer, known to readers of Mythprint. Her first novel, Escalibur, published late in 1973, was both a delightful romance, and one containing many faults: at times, Ms. Laubenthal seemed imperfectly in command of her style and her plot. But the romance was vigorous and intense in its evocation of strange areas of the imagination, despite its weaknesses. I would predict that in time Ms. Laubenthal may be a powerful novelist in the George MacDonald/Lewis/Charles Williams tradition. And the point to be made here is that if Ms. Laubenthal had written about a haunted forest near Bristol, we would remember the forest as a haunting image. The witches Ms. Laubenthal would evoke would be searing memories, because Ms. Laubenthal believes in the power both of the demonic and of the divine.

Another question raised by Mr. Swann's unsatisfying novel is why the world of fantasy writing should be so dominated today by women. This is especially peculiar since so many of the great figures in the tradition of mythopoeic fantasy—Morris, MacDonald, Tolkien, Eddison, Lewis, Williams—have been men. Today, however nearly all the virile writing—if the ladies will permit such an adjective—is being done by women: Evangeline Walton, Joy Chant, Katherine Kurtz, Mary Stewart... The male myth makers seem to be in retreat or other fields.

Reviewed by Ed Chapman

SECTION INITIALS illuminated by Joe R. Christopher

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and other Shadow Figures of fantastic literature

by

nancy-lou patterson

In his analysis of human dreams, C.G. Jung developed the technique of amplification, in which he searched the literature of mythology and folklore for parallels, in order to understand motifs which could not be explained in terms of memory or wish fulfillment. This method has given rise in literary criticism to the seeking of archetypal sources for characters and events; perhaps most notably in Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism.

Frye's analysis of literature can exert a compelling power upon the reader quite out of balance with the space afforded to it, and when this happens, archetypal criticism can help to explain why it does.

Readers of Lloyd Alexander's five-volume fantasy cycle of Prydain—The Book of Three, The Black Cauldron, The Castle of Llyr, Taran Wanderer, and The High King—will be able to list the companions of the youthful pig-keeping hero, Taran. He is provided with a future wife, a musical friend, a wise old counsellor, and numerous acquaintances, mentors, enemies, and magical beings in the course of seeking out the secret of his ancestry and becoming High King. The companionship is more casual than the Fellowship of the Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, and lacks the basis of physical relationship of the Pevensie children in C.S. Lewis's Narnian Chronicles, but it falls well within the traditional structure. A much more mysterious figure among those companions has not been mentioned this is Gurgi.

I read the Prydain series at one gulping in tandem with my twelve-year-old daughter. It is certainly true that Alexander is endlessly inventive—both of characters and events—sometimes breathlessly so. In pondering the whole experience, I find that Gurgi remains most vivid. Fflewddur and his harp become a single joke strained to the breaking point, Eilonwy exudes a faint perfume of the stereotype, so that her delightful traits are gently patronized; and the old magician Dallben never rises, as do Merlin in T.H. White's Once and Future King, and Gandalf in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, to the level of the numinous. Even the splendidly-conceived triple Goddesses—Ordu, Orwen, and Orgho—repeat a mildly grisly running gag about Orgho's appetite. It is a failure of taste, I think, or perhaps a failure of nerve; in the end Alexander's blankist, whose hero must get on with real life, having rid himself of childish fantasies—all his magical companions pass away into the Summer Country except for Eilonwy, his future wife, who is reduced in the process.

Perhaps this is the reason why Prydain for all its spectacular variety is not always quite a secondary world; not always absolutely real: there is a certain swashbuckling disregard of detail. On the one hand, events pour over us too rapidly to be remembered, and on the other, comic effects are simply repeated from volume to volume. There is a tendency to exaggeration: when Taran is mercilessly lashed by captors dragging him before the enchantress Achren in The Book of Three, there is little sense of his suffering, of the experience being more than a simple incident intended to lend drama and colour to the tale. The same motif becomes one of intense pathos when Frodo is trapped in the tower of Cirith Ungol in The Return of the King (yet he receives but a single stripe). And when the claws of Aslan mark Aravis with ten stripes, in The Horse and His Boy, her whole life is changed. The "throw-away" effect of Alexander's narrative diminishes its realism.

With the above comments I have exhausted my objections: they are minor in the face of Alexander's achievement, which is a major and authentic work of fantasy, and my purpose is rather to show his undoubted power at work. The aforementioned negative assertions might also be made about Gurgi—and yet he sticks in the mind—why? As C.S. Lewis said, the argument ad hominem is likely to mislead us, so I will not try to guess what Alexander meant by Gurgi. Instead, I will look at what he tells us about him.
RIEFLY STATED, Gurgi is a monster, of a species well known in literature and folklore. He is an ambivalent being, half animal and half human, half enemy and half friend. When he first meets Taran he attacks him, but in the end of The Book of Three it is he who finds the oracular pig, Hen Wen. He also finds the miraculous cauldron, for which The Black Cauldron is named, and in The High King he finds the coffer in which is hidden the secrets of human arts and sciences. He is, as it were, Taran’s left hand, the means by which occult power comes to him. Always hungry (at times he is killing Taran), he becomes the provider not only by finding the above-mentioned magic items, but by carrying a miraculous food-bag which is always full.

Here is Alexander’s account of Taran’s first encounter with Gurgi:

Overhead, the branches rustled. As he stopped and looked up, something fell heavily to the ground behind him. Two hairy and powerful hands locked around his throat.

Whatever had seized him made barking and snorting noises. Taran forced out a cry for help. He struggled with his unseen opponent, twisting, flailing his legs, and throwing himself from one side to the other.

Recovering from the attack, Taran studies his adversary: “...sprawled under the tree was the strangest creature Taran had ever seen. He could not be sure whether it was animal or human” (p.36). On closer examination, he decided it was both. His hair was so matted and covered with leaves that it looked like an owl’s nest in need of housecleaning. It had long, skinny woolly arms, and a pair of feet as flexible and grimy as its hands (p.37).

An immediate explanation of Gurgi’s role is provided by Northrop Frye:

The characters who elude the moral antithesis of heroism and villainy generally are or suggest spirits of nature. They represent parts of the moral matrix of the immediate world of nature and partly a world of mystery which is glimpsed but never seen, and which retreats when approached.

He continues:

Such characters are, more or less, children of nature, who can be brought to serve the hero, like Crusoe’s Friday, but retain the inscrutability of their origin. As servants or friends of the hero, they impart the mysterious rapport with nature that so often marks the central figure of romance. The paradox that many of these children of nature are “super-natural” beings is not as distressing as in logic, where the fear of death by starvation is omnipresent: note the following quotation from a Windigo story told among the Ojibwa of Canada (the complex layers of ambivalence and cross-identity will become apparent later):

Once upon a time an Indian was in his canoe, ... He came to a great big camp, and a man came out of the camp and said to him, “I would not do anything to you myself, but my brother is the one who kills all the Indians. I tell you what we’ll do: We have a big dish and I will hide you under it. I will put it upside down.” As soon as the Indian hid under this big dish the big Windigo came. His brother was outside the camp, he said to his brother, “There’s somebody here. Now, I tell you what we’ll do, we will have a wrestle, and if you bring me down I will believe you, that there is nobody here.” They wrestled, and the kind-hearted man put this big Windigo (his brother) down, and the Windigo said, “I believe you now; there is no one here.” So next morning he went away again to look for somebody that he’d kill to eat.

One thinks of the Collum/Sméagol conflict in The Two Towers.

When he eats, Gurgi’s delight is fulsome: “Gurgi, sitting cross-legged, devoured his food with so many outrites of pleasure and loud smackings of his lips that he seemed to be eating twice as much as he really did.” (Book of Three, p.105) There is a touch of the Windigo Monster from Sesame Street (not by direct influence, of course).

It is the motif of hunger which provides the transition of the ambivalent Gurgi from enemy to friend:

One leaf lay Gurgi’s tiny portion of honey-comb.

“For great Lord,” murmured Gurgi, “Gurgi is not hungry for crunchings and munchings today.”

Taran looked at the eager face of Gurgi. For the first time they smiled at one another. (Book of Three, p.126)

He is rewarded by Gwydion in the end of the first book in a manner appropriate to his faithfulness and valiant spirit. Gurgi shall be given a wallat of food which shall be always full.

Guard it well; it is one of the treasures of Prydain!” (p.218)

An effort to discover the possible source of this “treasure of Prydain” was one of his presumed inspiration, The Mabinogion, yielded the following: its “Pwyll Prince of Dyfed” and “The High King” and “Olwen” and “Gwydion” and “Pwyll” and “Mabon” and “Hen Wen” and “The Black Cauldron” and “The White Cauldron” that Gwydion gave to Gurgi are credited to a Maelquin, and in The Mabinogion, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, J.M. Dent and Sons (London: 1957), p.14.


tied up inside. The same theme of trickery and enclosure appears in "Branwen Daughter of Llyr," when the Irish plan a ruse in which armed men are hidden inside bags affixed to pegs on each of the hundred pillars of the house. The plotter is defeated when Finnian squeezes the head of each warrior (in the manner of cannibalism. As Jung says, "the contents of the collective unconscious are invariably archetypes that were present from the beginning." He states that "On this lower level with its unconscious are invariably archetypes that were present from the beginning."

He would have pointed out that the "primitive" to which Jung is referring is an archetypal one, for real primitive people—for instance, the Ojibwa who originated the Windigo story—fight desperately against the awful temptations of starvation, and take a vigorously moral and supporuing attitude toward cannibalism. Such people control their emotions by elaborate social means, of which the telling of Windigo stories is an example.

There is a "primitive," however, of which what Jung says is perfectly true: it is that other side of ourselves which we repress or fear to face and which Jung called the "Shadow." Gurgi embodies Taran's own fear, as we have seen, and also his hunger, which is more than physical. We may approach this understanding through the motif of the bag, which can be given a Freudian interpretation, as it is by Anton Ehrenzweig:

"It may be that defensive homo may accept the castrated male as a true equivalent of the devouring mother of whom he stands in excessive fear. The cunning humorous companions of the hero also stand for the threat of oral castration."

"For "castrated," one may read "fearful," for "cunning," we read in The Book of Three, "A crafty look gleamed in Gurgi's close-set little eyes" (p. 38). He knows his own nature: Once away from the Crochan, Gurgi regained some of his spirits. "Crafty Gurgi found it," he cried. "Oh, yes! He always finds what is lost! He has found piggies, and now he finds a great cauldron of wicked doings and brewings! Kind master will honor humble Gurgi." Nevertheless, his face wrinkled with fear.

He is afraid because the cauldron can cook dead men back to life. Not surprisingly, it is in the possession of the three enchantresses: the Mother Goddess (who often appears in triple form) gives not only the first life of man from her womb, but the second life, from the tomb. The "fear of oral castration" can be seen as a figure for death, in which the tomb's mouth devours the reanimation. Mr. Stowe was to tell about the Negro, in each it is guilt that speaks, the guilt of the whole community—of Cannibals, of sin, or rather this mythical element, which is sometimes suggested as the greatest hero-quest—of the Negro. The ambivalence of the companion figures (of whom more below) is well known.

That, incidentally, is the last we hear or see of Gurgi in the Prydain cycle.

Ehrenzweig is especially interested in the racial aspects of this symbol—he writes, "Cooper tells precisely the same sort of truth about the Indian that Mr. Stowe was to tell about the Negro, in each it is guilt that speaks, the guilt of the whole community—of Cannibals, of sin, or rather this mythical element, which is sometimes suggested as the greatest hero-quest—of the Negro. The ambivalence of the companion figures (of whom more below) is well known."

The grim demon who was called Grendel, a notorious ranger of the borderlands, who inhabited the fastnesses of moors and fens. This unhappy being had long lived in the land of monsters, because God has damned him along with the children of Cain. (before AD 1066) the medieval devil are not complete in Tolkien's mind; he "inhabits the visible world...he enters the houses by the doors" (Beowulf, The Monsters and the Critics, p. 33). Tolkien says that Grendel is not an allegory (though he represents certain Darwinian tendencies):...he is perhaps most compelling.

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He companion in this form has found its most significant expression in American literature (in which Lloyd Alexander's works must be included) in the figure of the Negro. The ambivalence of the treatment accorded these figures (not to mention their real-life counterparts) is well known.

Among the examples, two are especially discussed by Leslie Fiedler, whose ideas reflect the same source as do those of Ehrenzweig, Beowulf, trans. David Wright, Penguin Books (Baltimore: 1957), p. 29.


but in Grendel change and blending are, of course, already apparent" (p. 36). Grendel is driven mad by the sound of the harp recounting the story of the Creation, while he is "lurking joyless in the dark without" (p. 28) and he is ravenous for human flesh, "the grim and greedy demon" (Beowulf, p. 29)—his hunger is thus both psychic (his intolerable loneliness) and physical (his awful and illicit hunger).

Both aspects symbolize his essential dependence upon mankind which at once rejects him and serves him for food: Beowulf is necessary to Grendel and he is necessary to Beowulf. The image of the lighted hall of Heorot, which Grendel lurks in misery, and into which he strides in rage, depicts the human condition, in which the small lighted interior of the conscious mind flickers on the edge of "the moors and mist-ridden fells" (p. 43). When Grendel bursts into the hall, that light reflects in his "herrish firelight eyes," a pun on the conscious ego with its own shadow. Beowulf destroys Grendel by literally disarming him, but in the end of the poem, of course, an even more terrible being from the other world—a dragon, not man-like at all—destroys him.

ERHAPS THE OLDEST of stories about the companion as friend is The Epic of Gilgamesh. The hero Gilgamesh first does battle with Enkidu, breaking doorposts and shaking castles until Enkidu falls and they embrace and become friends. The hall-wrecking battle of Beowulf and Grendel comes to mind, and the reader may refer back to Taran's first encounter with Gurgi, given above. Enkidu's chief trait is his hairiness:

His body was rough, he had long hair like a woman's; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of corn. His body was covered with matted hair like Samugan's, the god of cattle. He was innocent of mankind; he knew nothing of the cultivated land. This hairiness, of course, is a trait of Gurgi as well: Taran was covered with Gurgi's shedding hair, in addition to the distressing odor of a wet wolfhound! (Book of Three, p. 37). Ffllewddwr refers to Gurgi as "your hairy friend" (p. 125), and Doli calls him "a shaggy what-is-1t" (p. 181), while in The Castle of Llyr, "Shaggy-haired Gurgi, astride his pony, looked as mournful as an owl with a stomach ache" (p. 106). The animal comparisons are still made, although Gurgi, "cattle" for Enkidu, and "stag" for Morfran—remind us of Dolic's him "a shaggy what-is-it" (p. 181), while in The Western Castle (p. 63). When Taran and Gurgi become friends, "the wet wolfhound odor did not seem as objectionable as before" (p. 126). Mary Young's source for the idea of monsters which she uses in discussing the Saquelacht is Annemarie de Waal Malefijt's article, "Homo Monstrous", which describes the development of the motif:

When Carl von Linne (Linnaeus) worked out his monumental classification of natural things in the 18th century, he included the species Homo monstruosus. By Homo monstruosus he meant a species related to Homo sapiens but markedly different in physical appearance. To do Linnaeus full justice, he was quite aware that there were men on all continents who belonged to the species Homo sapiens. He nonetheless believed, as many of his contemporaries and predecessors did, that in remote areas there were manlike creatures with weird characteristics. According to this account, the idea persisted for two thousand years or more. The writer who lists many monstrousities—strange combinations of forms—one-eyed beings and so on. These beings always lived on the outer edge of known lands. In The City of God St. Augustine dealt with the question of the reality of such beings. If, he wrote, the stories about monsters are not plain lies, such beings either are not men at all or, if they are men, they are, like other men, descendants of Adam. St. Augustine tended to favor the last possibility. (p. 113)

Other later writers suggested that such beings had degenerated by diabolic action: Nebuchadnezzar had become a "beast-like creature," they noted. Still others thought they had been created separately by the devil. "It was understood that monsters had monstrous habits: they were naked, lascivious, promiscuous and filthy; they had a bad smell and no religion" (p. 115).

To the fifteenth century, of course, the most far-away place was the New World, which some of its early discoverers thought was the utmostest East. Although Columbus reported that the Indians were "well-made men who were...generous with their possessions and "handsome and fierce in face" (p. 116), he also solemnly reported monstrous dog-headed races. The latter motif continued to appear in reports of the New World and is reflected in the sixteenth century in the character of Caliban, in Shakespeare's The Tempest (Malefijt, p. 117). He is described as a "half man"—"a race of monsters," he smells like a fish, and is mistaken for a devil. His name is explained by Annemarie de Waal Malefijt as an anagram of "can[n]ibal," which derives from "caribal"—that is, a Caribbean—the New World area thought to have "dog-headed beings in it. Gilgammel's dogish characteristics have already been noted, and will be referred to again below: he is "faithful" and smells like a wet wolfhound. A pupil of Linnaeus subdivided the monsters and depicted them in different ways, but in fact the idea survived the development of evolutionary theory and the science of genetics in the popular notion of a "missing link," and many laymen do not yet know that "the ancestors of men are not represented among contemporary ape species" (Malefijt, p. 118).

That is, man is not descended from any of the apes. The idea of the monster persists in the Abominable Snowman and his New World relative the Saquelacht, and has, of course, been successfully transplanted to the new periphery of mankind's world, the planets, where the little green men and the bug-eyed monsters have "certain nonconformist and "quackery" contain a concern for the racist overtones or implications of this kind of thinking, just as Fiedler's book does. That particular element is not part of my argument, except in a general way.

N JUNG'S THOUGHT, The Shadow "involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and not repressed..." (Alcon, p. 8). People who cannot bear to face their own lesser selves are condemned to do exactly that, for they project the traits they have rejected into other people, especially into people whose appearance (colour, race, nationality, or what-have-you) are different from their own. Jung continues, "Closer examination of the dark characteristics—that is, the inferiorities constituting the shadow—reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality" (p. 8). Gurgi expresses the emotions which Taran wishes to suppress in himself. Jung states that the shadow "is always of the same sex as the subject" (which accounts for the "homosexual" element in the companion figure), and "represents first and foremost the personal unconscious" (p. 10). Thus, "with a little self-criticism one can see through the shadow as far as its nature is personal" (p. 10). Jung continues, "But when it appears as an archetype, one encounters... difficulties... In other words, it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering experience to gaze into the face of absolute evil." (p. 10). This shattering experience is that of Beowulf confronting Grendel; it is not
An Enlargement of Being

(continued from page 9)

the Society's fuller maturity as a literary organization — balanced, united in intellectual honesty, and worthily fulfilling its stated commitment. What I say is not in any way directed toward specific individuals, because I recognize that no single person that I know of personally is an embodiment of either error. Rather, real people are constantly and subtly altering their own positions on these and many other questions. I believe there is a reason for literary experience — whether or not the individual acknowledges a link with spiritual experience — in which I hope we may and can find agreement. In giving a justification for reading great literature — C. S. Lewis says in the Epilogue of An Experiment in Criticism: What then is the good of — what is even the defence for — occupying our hearts with stories of what never happened and entering vicariously into feelings which we should try to avoid having in our own person?... The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. And even when we build disinterested fantasies, they are saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology.... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as our own.... The primary impulse of each is to maintain and agrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness.... Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. We realize it best when we talk with an unliterary friend. He may be full of goodness and good sense but he inhabits a tiny world. In it, we should be suffocated. The man who is content to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison.... Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound: but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and I am never more myself than when I do.

a conceptually unambiguous content of consciousness" (Complain/ Archetype/Symbol, p. 121); ("shedding," as it were, "what hair remained") or it may "not be understood at all," resulting in "an autonomous splinter psycho... that is, in all kinds of neurotic and psychotic symptoms" (p. 121)—such a being as Grendel. Whatever the result, the shadow must be reckoned with. Taran must agree with his hairy adversary, and take him along as a companion. As Alexander says in introducing his second book, "readers who have already journeyed with Taran are assured... that Gurgi, despite shakings and quakings and fears for his poor tender head, insisted on joining this new adventure" (The Black Cauldron, Intro., n.p.).

There is one last place to look for light on Gurgi, the shadow, and ourselves: this is a superb Little Golden Book, The Monster at the End of This Book, which stars "lovable, furry old Grover," one of a race of monsters familiar to the audience of Sesame Street. In this story Grover reads the title, and exclaims "Did that say there will be a Monster at the end of this book??? IT DID? Oh, I am so scared of Monsters!!!"

After a series of desperate attempts to prevent the reader from turning the pages and reaching the last page, Grover makes his discovery: "Well look at that! This is the end of the book and the only one here is... ME. I, lovable, furry old GROVER, am the Monster at the end of this book." This sums up my thesis admirably: we are ourselves the monsters, whether we know it or not. The shadow we cast is our own.

NANCY-LOU PATTERSON

Feast of St. Philip and St. James

AD 1975, Waterloo, Ontario