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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 whose work shows 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

Homo monstrosus:

Lloyd Alexander’s Gurgi 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. A work 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-farmer 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 gulp 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 Orgoch—repeat a mildly grisly running gag about Orgoch’s appetite. It is a failure of taste, I think, or perhaps a failure of nerve; in the end Alexander’s protagonist, 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.

SECTION INITIALS illuminated by Joe R. Christopher
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 from which the Black Cauldron is named, and in The High King he finds the coffers in which the treasure is stored.

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.1

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. It was hair so matted and covered leaves that it looked like an owl’s nest in need of housecleaning. It had long, skinny woolly arms, and a pair of feet so flexible and gristy 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 partly the moral neutrality of the intermediate world of nature and partly a world of mystery which is glimpsed but never seen, and which retreats when approached.2

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 “supernatural” beings is not as distressing in romance as in logic (pp.196-197)

As an example, Frye offers the tale of “St. George and Una in the hart, and Winston (New York: 1965), p. 10."


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 plots are defeated when Efinne squats at the head of the dinner table, "snatching boiling oil on the forty thieves in the jars" (p.36).

The hiding of the Indian by the Windigo's brother, the hiding of Jack by the Beanstalk giant's wife (he was going to grind Jack's bones to dust), the self-delusion with which he behaved ("the manner of Morgiana pouring boiling oil on the forty thieves in the jars") and remarks, "There is in these bags a flor of a sort" (p.36).

On this lower level with its unconscious are invariably archetypes that were present from the beginning. He states that "On this lower level with its uncontrollable or scarcely controlled emotions one behaves more or less like a primitive, who is not only the passive victim of his affects but also singularly incapable of moral judgment" (p.9). I would have to point 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 suppressing 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 relegate to our children and which will find its expression in the figure of the Windigo. Jung 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 homosexuality accepts the castrated male as a true equivalent of the devouring mother of whom he stands in excessive fear. The cunning unheroic companions of the hero also stand for the threat of oral castration. For "castrated," one may read "fearful," for "fearful," 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 piggy, 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 doves not only disfigure but also express an interest in the traditional search for his parents is concentrated upon his father; perhaps the role of his mother is taken by the three beings whose "chicken" he is.

Ehrenzweig, discussing the companion figure in his most extreme form—the devil—says:...they are terrifying, cunning, and in possession of magic knowledge, but at the same time they are clumsy, ridiculous and possibly mutilated. The reason for these contradictory aspects of the companion lies in their castrated nature. The terrifying devil is also the poor silly devil who gets himself trapped in castor bags, such as bags... (p.240). Gurgi is both "clumsy"—"Gurgi waved his arms so wildly he nearly tumbled from the saddle"—and agile—"Before Eiromwyn had finished talking man, Gurgi was over the wall, covered in leaves and twigs, popped up at the window, and with great agility clambered over the sill." The extension of the companion's ambivalence to the point of the devil figure is explained by J.R.R. Tolkien in his classic essay on Beowulf:

Monsters of more or less human shape were naturally liable to development on contact with Christian ideas of sin and spirits of evil. Their parody of human form...becomes symbolic, explicit, or sin, or rather this mythical element, already present but not resolved, is emphasized. Beowulf's adversary Grendel (of whom more below) is nevertheless not yet a devil or malignant spirit but "an ogre, a physical monster," according to Tolkien (p.38).

SHADOW FIGURES


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 Indian and the Negro. The ambivalence of the treatment accorded these figures (not to mention their real-life counterparts) is well known. Among many examples, two are especially discussed by Leslie Fiedler, whose ideas reflect the same source as do those of Ehrenzweig. Fiedler also expresses a debt to C. S. Lewis who "taught me at the age of eighteen the sense in which love is an invention and the poets its inventors," as well as Marx, Jung, and D. H. Lawrence.


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” enriches Grendel’s lurk 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 “herring” firelight eyes and “that portion of the conscious ego with its own shadow. Beowulf destroys Grendel by literally disarming him, but in the end of the poem, 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 caskets until Enkidu comes to his senses and they embrace and become friends. The hall-wrecking battle of Beowulf and Grendel comes to mind, and the reader may think back on 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 hair 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 Gorgi 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). Fflewddur refers to Gurgi as “your hairy friend” (p.125), and Doli calls him “a shaggy what-is-it!” (p.181), while in *The Castle of Llych*, “Shaggy-haired Gurgi, astride his pony, looked as mournful as an owl with a storm in its face and heart” (p.102). The many animal comparisons—“cattle,” “cat,” “dog,” “wolfhound,” “Devil’s dog” for Gurgi, “cattle” for Enkidu, and “stag” for Morfran—remind us of the possible origin of the devil image, or at least for his hairiness, in the ancient beast-gods of Paleolithic Europe (and, elsewhere).

In commenting on the idea of a hairy monster, in particular the Sasquatch, who is a Pacific Northwest relative of the Himalayan Abominable Snowman, the yetí, Mary Young writes:

Social scientists have long been aware of the linkage which can exist in the minds of people between the strange habits and physical appearance of those removed from them in space, time and by social structure. The characteristics which have been attributed to “monsters” are also often applied to such groups; lasciviouness, promiscuity, lack of religion and a bad smell. The first of these three traits are expressive of that “moral neutrality” (as Frye calls it) which in some figures grows into the devil-image, but the “bad smell” is precisely Gurgi: “Taran came to his senses on a pile of dirty straw, which smelled as foul as an owl with a storm in its face and heart” (Book of Three, 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 Sasquatch is Annemarie de Waal Malefijt’s article, “Homo Monstrous,” which describes the development of the motif:

When Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) worked out his monumental classification of natural things in the 18th century, he included the species *Homo monstrosus*. By *Homo monstrosus* 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 as the “superstitious belief that certain men 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 uttermost East. Although Columbus reported that the Indians were “well-made men who were...generous with their possessions” and “handsome and of fine face and figure” (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 also a “hairy” monster: “he raceth a monster,” “smells like a fish, and is mistaken for a devil. His name is explained by Annemarie de Waal Malefijt as an acronym of “can[n]ibal,” which derives from “caribal,”—that is, a Caribbean—the New World area thought to have “dog-headed beings in it.” Gurgi’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 as “hirsute,” but in fact they have 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 to say, 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 Sasquatch, 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 “who represent the rejection and ‘repudiation’ of the Sasquatchery” 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 real” (Alön, 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, what-have-you) are different from their own. Jung continues, “Closer examination of the dark characteristics—the inferiorities constituting the shadow—reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessively 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 to one’s own 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
asked of Taran. In his final encounter with Arawn Death-Lord in *The High King*, Taran merely cleaves a serpent in twain. His shadow has been suited to his size.

Gurgi embodies, then, Taran’s self-emasculating fear, his hunger (for self-knowledge and identity)—of which his being a pig-keeper is perhaps an echo, for the prozidial son, far from his birthplace, and starving, became a swineherd and ate husks with his pigs—and his doglike dependency: “had Gurgi owned a tail, Taran was sure he would have wagged it frantically” (*Book of Three*, p.38). When Taran reaches maturity, Gurgi (and the other magical—that is to say, unconscious—companions) withdraws: “Yes! yes!” shouted Gurgi. “All go to the land of no sighings and no dyings!” He bounded joyously and waved his arms in the air, shedding a good portion of what hair remained to him. “Yes, oh yes! All together forever! And Gurgi, too, will find what he seeks. Wisdom for his poor tender head!” (*The High King*, p. 282.)

Jolande Jacobi discusses making conscious the unconscious contents (of which the shadow figure is actually the most shallow and immediate)—the symbol may be brought to a certain level of consciousness “but without being wholly fathomed, so that it continues to be ‘alive’ and effective;” it may be “completely fathomed and explored.””


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**An Enlargement of Being**

(continued from page 9)

the Society’s fuller maturity as a literary organization — balanced, united in intellectual honesty, and worthy 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 all 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 aggrandize 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 realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. We realise it best when we talk with a solitary 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 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 am never more myself than when I do.

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**Notes on This Issue**

The last issue took a great deal of time to become fact. This was in part due to my personal saddened resulting from the death of J.R.R. Tolkien, a man I, along with many others, respected and admired deeply. Nevertheless the issue needed to be finished, and gradually my own personal feelings were forced to come to a head as I wrote the editorial “Death and the Desire for Deathlessness.” Its writing was a cathartic experience, and no longer held back by the inertia of bereavement, I could look again look forward.

I realized Mythlore needed a larger staff, in order to publish it, hopefully with greater frequency. I asked Laurence Krieg, Gracia Fay Ellwood, and George Colvin to join the staff, and they agreed. Laurence Krieg would undertake the role of Managing Editor in a similar fashion as he had done previously with *Mythprint*. As a result, credit goes to him for the organization, arranging of art, and layout of most of the interior of the issue (pp. 3-7, and 10-31). I am directly responsible for the content of the two covers, pages 2, 9, and the lower half of this page. I regret I was not able to follow the Managing Editor's policy of not continuing ends of articles later in the issue. Gracia Fay Ellwood made the arrangements for page 8. I express my thanks to all the staff for their vital assistance, especially Laurence Krieg, in getting this issue into facthood.

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Plans are nearly finished on the working out of a new way of producing Mythlore on a regular basis. I have learned not to make premature promises in print, but do both hope and expect that you will be seeing the next issue sooner than you may expect.

— Glen H. GoodKnight