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The Future of Mythology

Abstract

Attempts to define mythology in a broad context. Contends that truly mythic literature is rare, and science fiction is a mythology for modern times. Offers some “guesses” about the future of science fiction and fantasy.

Additional Keywords

Myth—Definition; Mythology and religion; Science fiction; Bernia Zuber

THE FUTURE OF MYTHOLOGY

POUL ANDERSON



According to the Webster that lives on my desk, the primary meaning of "myth" is: "A story, the origin of which is forgotten, ostensibly historical but usually such as to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon. Myths are especially associated with religious rites and beliefs.... In general, a myth deals with the actions of gods or godlike beings; a legend, though it may include supernatural incidents, concerns human beings."

It's a rather old Webster, though. More recent usage would expand the definition. For instance, there is more to myth than narrative; there may also be such things as description and prediction. Thus the Eddas describe the abodes of the gods and, indeed, their entire universe; they foretell its end; in so doing, they express and embody a whole, fatalistic concept of the world and of man's place therein.

But all religions, including living ones, do something of the same kind. So do many systems described as philosophies and ideologies. Hence we find, as always, that reality breaks the bounds of any neat little definitions in which we try to confine it. Today most persons who use the word "myth" to mean more than just "falsehood" or "superstition" are, perforce, imprecise in their employment. They make a myth -- or, perhaps better, a mythology -- out to be some kind of *Weltbild* which, in some sense and however incompletely, organizes our thoughts and feelings. As such, it has emotional as well as intellectual content -- not that those two elements are ever really separable. It can be a system in which people now believe, or one in which they formerly believed, or one in which they might conceivably believe.

In this admittedly vague sense, the most obvious mythology we have today is that set of ideas we call "science". To many among us it is the only mythology, the supreme and final explanation. Of course, they usually agree that we still have a great deal to learn; but this is essentially a matter of filling in the details of a basically understandable cosmos. The mutability of our understanding -- e.g., the relativistic and quantum mechanical upset of classical physics -- is no more an invalidation of science than theo-

logical disagreements have been of Christianity, in the minds of believers.

The analogy can be pursued further. Like Judaism, the core of Christian thought has held that God is not capricious. His ways may often be mysterious to us, but they always make sense (a claim which Einstein made the basis of a famous metaphor when he denied that the universe can be ultimately acausal, as the uncertainty principle suggests it is). Reason can bring us a certain amount of knowledge about the divine. Experience can too. St. Paul pointed out in First Corinthians that his faith was in vain unless the Resurrection of Christ was a historical fact -- not a tale or an allegory or a symbol, but an event which had actually happened -- and he went to the trouble of collecting eyewitness testimony.

Therefore no disrespect is intended when I call Judeo-Christianity one of the great mythologies. Science is another, and Whitehead was doubtless right in tracing its origins back to the religion. Societies living by different myths, wherein theory was comparatively unimportant -- China, for example -- never came near developing a scientific system. At most, they made various useful discoveries and inventions; their principal gifts to mankind were of other sorts.

Where reason and factual information are basic, the lack of them can have disastrous consequences. This is why Judeo-Christianity has traditionally emphasized theology; and even so, the same heresies have recurred century after century under various names. Similarly, today public ignorance of science has brought us such joys as a massive revival of that hoary old fraud astrology and a widespread hysteria about nuclear powerplants.

A mythology is, however, much more than a set of attempted explanations of phenomena we observe. On the contrary, most mythologies have made only perfunctory attempts at rationalizing the world, and some, such as Taoism, have explicitly disavowed it. Man does not live by logic alone. Science itself would not have the hold on many human minds and hearts that it does, did its findings not have the immense emotional impact which they do.

Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" is a perfect illustration of failure to perceive this impact. He describes how, after listening to a lecture full of figures, he fled from the hall into the night and "Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars." Now no doubt the astronomer was a boring speaker -- many priests give dull sermons too! -- but the matter he dealt with was awesome. To mention a single case, the law of gravitation is not just an equation enabling us to calculate positions and trajectories, it is an epic about worlds and stars moving in an eternal embrace.

On the other side of the coin is the village atheist who may have a sense of that but has no sense of the might and mystery and beauty in the Bible.

Somebody has said that man is incurably religious, with the implication that science is the atheist's or agnostic's surrogate faith. (In this connection, I was interested to learn, in conversation with a Soviet citizen, that, throughout his country, countless Christian heresies have appeared. It seems that you can muzzle the theologians, but you can't stop people thinking about God.) Let me propose that it would be more accurate to call man incurably mythopoeic.

Remember, most pagans looked on their gods merely as

humans writ large, whom it was advisable to conciliate; there was neither the mysticism of all the more highly developed religions nor the rationalism of some. Today's assorted neo-paganisms are thin and rather pathetic stuff. Yet some paganisms in history developed quite subtle and complex systems of belief, e.g., in Pharaonic Egypt -- whereas at least one major "church," the Buddhist, is frankly agnostic. If we are to lump all these and more, such as Judeo-Christianity and Islam, together as "religions," and then throw in science as well, we will stretch the word out of any useful shape. On the other hand, we can quite reasonably call them mythologies.

This has the value that we can include mythologies in which nobody believes any longer, such as the Greek, and invented mythologies in which nobody was ever intended to believe, such as Tolkien's. What function other than entertainment do these have?

I think they do certain very basic things for us, and we can scarcely live without them; surely we cannot live well.

In the first place, they are time-binding; they embody much of the human heritage. How can we hope to understand, say, the Hawaiians whom Cook met unless we know something of Maui, or the Eskimos whom Freuchen met unless we know something of Sedna? How can we even hope to understand our own ancestors unless we ourselves have encountered Zeus, Jupiter, Isis, Odin, Manannan, and, for that matter, Yahweh? There being no point here in drawing Webster's fine distinction between myths and legends, let me also ask where you could find a stronger, yet more fully human symbol of indomitability than Odysseus, or of unselfish leadership than Beowulf.

In the second place, myths give us imagery. By this I do not mean simply a set of metaphors, important though those have always been to literature. (Not long ago I started to write a sentence about the Gadarene progress of present-day education in America, then realized wryly that by now the educationists have brought us so far downhill that hardly anyone would understand me.) I mean the information, nonverbal and not really capable of being put into words, which is in them.

Take, for example, the Oedipus story. You, my readers, are exceptional these days; you know that the hero had no Oedipus complex. He killed his father and married his mother in complete ignorance of the relationships. Yet inexorable justice brought a plague upon the city he came to rule, until he performed a ghastly penance and departed, eventually to be reconciled with the gods. Now people who regard this as a case of divine inefficiency -- observing that not only had Oedipus' motives been entirely innocent, but his subjects had done nothing to deserve punishment -- are being the shallowest kind of modern humanists. I cannot spell out for them what the meaning of the story is, any more than I can spell out the rather similar meaning of the Book of Job. In either case, what we have is, simply and starkly, an insight into the nature of things.

It seems that much of the power of Tolkien comes from his use of such archetypes. Likewise for Lewis and Williams, of course, as well as Chesterton and a few more, though these stayed closer to traditional Christian motifs. I would say, too, that Poe and Lovecraft, whether consciously or not, adapted ancient imagery to their work; at least I think I notice family resemblances between the former's Antarctic wastes and the icy hell of numerous mythologies, or between the latter's Cthulhu and the Midgard Serpent ... or Satan. Similar remarks could be made about other creations of these men, or of other writers such as Hoffmann, Andersen, and Joyce.

Not all writing, not even all great writing, has a mythic quality. For example, I do not find it in Shakespeare. He does assume certain things to be true, as each of us must, whatever they may be in our particular beliefs; but his main concern is with highly specific individuals. Indeed, fully mythic material is probably comparatively rare in literature, though indispensable to its continued vitality.

Do we have any new mythologies to use?

Yes, we do, in abundance. Mankind keeps generating them. At present I cannot count Tolkien's. That it derives from older ones is no obstacle; presumably those had sources of their own. However, quite aside from legal and ethical questions of plagiarism, it hasn't been around long enough to acquire the numberless associations which make a mythology an integral part of a culture. Come back in two or three hundred years and we'll see.

A mythology old in a foreign society, e.g., West Africa, may be new to us, and inspire fresh works. Perhaps, though, this kind of borrowing has been a bit overdone lately.

The mythology we call science underlies that entire field of literature we call science fiction. With astonishing discoveries being made at an ever increasing rate, there should be no lack of subject matter.

At the core of any viable political system is a mythology, in the sense in which this essay uses that term -- a set of emotionally charged ideas about things that matter to people in a fundamental way, with much of the content of those ideas not expressible in words. Tremendous works have sprung from such concepts as monarchy ("The Song of Roland"), aristocracy ("The Forty-Seven Ronin"), democracy (Huckleberry Finn), even Communism (Independent People). Then opposition to political systems has inspired some fine writing, e.g., 1984 and On the Marble Cliffs. Today all political systems have brought themselves into disrepute in the eyes of most people, but no doubt renamed versions of them will arise in due course and find enthusiasts.

The same can be said of religion in still greater degree, both past and future. We seem to be entering a new, as yet undefined Age of Faith -- though it also seems we, like the Romans before us, must first pass through an Age of Credulity -- and this will surely fire the imaginations of many writers.

Then there is the ever-present possibility of an individual, without having any such intention, creating a new myth, if not mythology. Mary Shelley did, in Frankenstein, H. G. Wells in The Time Machine, Karel Capek in "R.U.R." -- stories, images which have become a part of everybody's minds. With, technically, no fantasy at all, Melville gave us another myth in Moby Dick. You can doubtless think of a few more examples yourself, though they will in truth be few.

Meanwhile, these considerations may well strike you as rather remote. You may be asking what you, as a reader who appreciates mythic material, can hope for in times to come.

Well, I have no pipeline to tomorrow, nor any interest in trying to spot a trend. As A. J. Budrys put it, trends are for second-raters. I can only offer you some guesses, and please remember that they are mere guesses.

Science fiction will increasingly use traditional myths both as imagery and as direct inspiration. In part this will be because the "new wave" has long since completed whatever rapprochement was possible with the "mainstream" (detestable, snobbish word) and good writers are never content with stale repetitions. More importantly, it will be because the cosmos itself is turning out to be so mysterious, ultimately so incomprehensible, that if we are to write of it we must do so in terms of awe and wonder such as our ancestors felt.

Outright fantasy will continue to grow in popularity and hence in volume. Less and less will it need to label itself "science fiction." In the nature of the case, most of it will be routine and derivative, albeit often entertaining enough. However, with any luck, we won't get many more Tolkien ripoffs. Rather, on the bright side, I expect that such people as Richard Adams will continue to break altogether new ground, and inspire their colleagues to do likewise. Most fantasy is not particularly mythic, but some always is, and we can hope not only for fresh use of old motifs, but creation of new ones.

"When the morning stars sang together -- " The stars, we now believe, are fiery nuclear furnaces, and any songs they may sing are borne on the winds driving forth out of them: unless the phrase means the planets Mercury and Venus, that use the solar wind itself as their throats, or else sing by their light low in our eastern skies....

"-- and all the sons of God shouted for joy -- " Who were they? What do they mean? In this single line, if you think about it, lies an entire universe of concepts, questions, emotions, and therefore stories. There are many more such phrases, more facts and myths and possibilities, than any one of us can ever know.

THE COUNSEL OF ELROND

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH TOLKIEN

GLEN GOODKNIGHT

Each one of us has memories of what it was like to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings for the first time, especially if that experience was a number of years ago. Part of that remembering involves a contrasting of our own lives then and now and also the state of Tolkien appreciation.

I encountered Tolkien as a high school student in the very late 50's. My only real experience into private reading for pleasure had been Science Fiction, besides a good assortment of children's books in childhood. I owe much to Science Fiction; on it I cut my intellectual and imaginative eye teeth, but only to a certain point. When the other students in my high school Science Fiction club discovered Tolkien with fiery enthusiasm, I was reluctant. First, I was told I should read a book called The Hobbit, a "children's book." This was mildly offensive and demeaning. At that age, one took their reputation in hand to be seen entering the children's section of the public library, opening themselves to open division and silent opprobrium. Yet this was only the preparatory initiation for the next and, it was reported, a greater experience. Second, I was told I could then read something called The Lord of the Rings, a story so long it took three volumes to tell. This appeared as a heavy charge-- I usually limited myself to short stories, anthologies, and novellas - but the unabated enthusiasm and ongoing conversation of my fellows impelled me to take the plunge.

To recall my initial reactions to LoTR is akin to retelling a long, detailed dream heavy with unconscious implications after one has been awake for several hours. Not since the uplifting to a new consciousness and appreciation of life, nature, aesthetics and the life of ideas at around the age of 14, had anything so gripped me. I was fired by both the desire to exercise the imagination and a feeling that life might hold more than I had scarce dared hope before. Here was nourishment to the character, romance, the deep abyss of time, and a feeling that life held real meaning - though hidden for the time being - beyond the turmoil and chaos that so many experience in adolescence.

Now, the three volumes, even with the detailed appendices, did not seem nearly enough. I was hungry for more. I tried several other fantasies: The Well of the Unicorn and The Worm Ouroboros, but they were hardly the same. They certainly had imagination, but little warmth or satisfaction; I found no hint of joy "beyond the walls of the world." After the feast Tolkien provided, Science Fiction generally was like saltine crackers. About a year later, I did discover C. S. Lewis. Perhaps there was more Tolkien hidden away in the Public Library. After exhausting the card catalog, I turned to the Reader's Guide and other similar reference guides.

"Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" was discovered, which was mostly over my head, although I certainly wouldn't admit it. Further delving brought me at last to something called "Leaf by Niggle" in the Dublin Review, January, 1945. By great good fortune, the Los Angeles Central Public Library had this arcane volume. It was on "reserve," but I was able

to take it out to the patio next to the children's room. There in the gathering twilight, with sparrows contesting and singing in the shrubbery and trees, and traffic noises muffled by the surrounding walls, I read of Niggle's adventure for the first time. Its eucatastrophic joy intrigued and puzzled me, but its appeal and implications has never escaped me.

Thus my early experience with Tolkien was before the pop-culture explosion of the mid-sixties, the availability of paperback editions, ongoing organizations, publications, and the myriad of critical and reference books. Then, far more than now, one felt he knew a secret that could be shared with very few others. It was a wistful, lonely feeling, that in my case eventually led to the formation of The Mythopoeic Society in 1967.

Whether one has encountered Tolkien with these adjunct and multifaceted resources or not, I believe the primary and most fundamental interaction is with the imagination of the individual and the profound vision Tolkien has given. Without that, the other things serve as an elaborate frame around an empty center.

After the first encounter many do return repeatedly, even though we have not forgotten the original impact, for refreshment and to discover new things. This is the case for myself with The Silmarillion. In 1978, after twenty long years of false rumors and waiting, I eagerly read it in a short time. For many, this work has proved nearly undigestible read at a fast pace. It needs slow, careful reading several times to savor this very bitter-sweet book. Now that Unfinished Tales has been printed, I find myself going back to The Silmarillion for more relaxed reflections and clarifications. What an amazingly rich book it is. I missed much of its import in that first hurried, impelled reading.

I think it is fairly certain that The Lord of the Rings will always be the most popular of Tolkien's works. It is far more like a novel than the others. Its drama and dialog draw the reader into a more personal interaction; one feels one is participating with the action and unfolding plot. The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales generally read more like ancient historical accounts, surely as Tolkien intended.

Years ago I made the analogy that whereas The Hobbit was like looking through a keyhole onto Middle-earth, with The Lord of the Rings it was like opening the door for a much more comprehensive view. To extend the analogy, now with The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales, we are provided a startling mountain-top panorama.

I am fairly sure we may see more Tolkien fragments published in the future. What new riches and insights will be found? The waiting will surely be vexing, but what new encounters will meet and interact with our enlarged vision then?