

Summer 7-15-1984

Mythopoesis

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Recommended Citation

Beach, Sarah (1984) "Mythopoesis," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 24.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol11/iss1/24>

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Mythopoesis

Abstract

Discusses how fantasy authors create characters, drawing on Jungian psychology and essays by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Techniques; Jungian archetypes in fantasy

Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

Characters

The sky is a jewel-like blue. The broad moor hides its colors in a dark blanket. On the eastern horizon, dawn is pouring a cream and pink light into the air. And there, silhouetted against the growing day, pace a line of figures.

Who are these local inhabitants and where do they come from?

When a Sub-Creator shapes a world, it is usually for the purpose of telling a story, and the story is usually about a person (or persons) of some sort or another. The writer found the character somewhere, with his story wrapped around him. The writer is trying to unwrap the story.

Is it a Hero, a Wizard, a lost Princess, a Wise Woman, a Ruler, or a Villain?

Jungian psychology, with its presentation of Archetypes, has greatly assisted the study of literature. It has opened many doors of understanding in the study of fantasy literature in particular. But the Archetypes are not necessarily there in the story because they were chosen as representatives of their type. Few Sub-Creators start out saying "Today I will tell a story about a Wizard--any wizard." More often it is a case of "There once was a wizard who hated to ride horses. He traveled in a pony-drawn cart. Whenever he wanted to go up into the tall Fatefell Mountains he had to walk, because the trails were not made for pony-carts."

This is character. For from this starting point, the Author asks "Why does he hate horses?" and "Why does he go to the Fatefell Mountains?" The character, the person, starts telling the Author about himself. But where does "character" spring from? What hidden fountain feeds the flowing stream of the story?

Characters spring from the Sub-Creator. Usually they are fairly complete when the Author sets them in motion, in the sense that their characteristics are more or less set. Ursula K. Le Guin in The Language of the Night (Berkley Books, 1982) offers an observation of this completeness.

I don't write out descriptions beforehand, and would indeed feel ridiculous, even ashamed, to do so. If the character isn't so clear to me that I know all that about him, what am I doing writing about him?

What right have I to describe what William did when Helen bit his knee, if I don't even know what he looks like, and his past, and his psyche, inside and out, as well as I know myself? Because after all he is myself. Part of myself. (p. 39)

This is certainly true of the main characters in an Author's story. They are intimate friends of the Sub-Creator. The minor characters may be only nodding

acquaintances, and so worthy of a note or two -- to prevent one from mistaking them for someone else. But the inner unity of a character springs from the Author's knowledge of that character.

If William is a character worthy of being written about, then he exists. He exists, inside my head to be sure, but in his own right, with his own vitality. All I have to do is look at him. I don't plan him, compose him of bits and pieces, inventory him. I find him. (LN, p. 39)

Once a Sub-Creator has found a character and starts unwrapping that character's story, unexpected things may be happening. When an Author has become well-acquainted with his creature, he may find that the character has very definite ideas (so to call it) about what he will and will not do. Le Guin has commented on such an experience springing from the writing of The Farthest Shore.

Ged, who was always very strong-minded, always saying things that surprised me, and doing things he wasn't supposed to do, took over completely in this book. He was determined to show me how his life must end, and why. I tried to keep up with him, but he was always ahead. I rewrote the book more times than I want to remember, trying to keep him under some kind of control. (LN, p. 46)

An Author has two choices in dealing with characters like this, ones that come leaping to life. He can accept them as they exist and discipline them to stay in line with the rest of the story. Or he can flatten them out, squeeze them into pre-cut molds, stuff them with sawdust. The second choice might make for less interesting characters, but they are also likely to be less threatening to the Author.

For Characters can in one sense be threatening to their creator. As noted, they spring from the Author's mind, and there are few who are not aware of the implications generated by psychological criticism of art and literature. If all is a reflection of the maker's mind, how is one to regard those "questionable" characters that are necessary to some stories? Is one required to admit that they are part of oneself? Perhaps many Sub-Creators draw back at this point, either consciously or unconsciously. They deny their darkest shadows and create villains who are less than evil, sometimes turning them into fools hobbled by blindness. Le Guin, in commenting on Hans Christian Andersen points the way out of this dilemma.

Part of Andersen's cruelty is the cruelty of reason--of psychological realism, radical honesty, the willingness to see and accept the consequences of an act or a failure to act. There is a sadistic, depressive streak in Andersen also, which is his own shadow; it's there, it's part of him, but not all of him, nor is he ruled by it. His strength,

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early literature, and lists only six "comparatively recent" authors who "made their mark on him." (p. 157) Bronte is not among them.
4. "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader*, p. 89
5. He suggests that "Tree and Leaf" may interest readers of LOTR because they were written in the same period; yet it seems clear that such interest comes not merely from the connection in time, but also from a concern with the same subject.
6. It is perhaps appropriate to say something at this point about Tennyson. If we agree to stretch the concept of the Byronic hero wide enough to include King Arthur, it may seem that that character accomplishes the union under discussion here; but, while Arthur, like any king, shares many messianic qualities with Christ, the deep structure of his myth (as Charles Williams saw) is that Arthur chooses not to be Christ-like, letting Galahad seek the Grail instead of going for it himself. At the allegorical level, of course, Tennyson's ideal knight is identified with the human soul at war with sense, not Christ at war with evil.

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* I omit references to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Holy Bible*.

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his subtlety, his creative genius, come precisely from his acceptance of and cooperation with the dark side of his own soul. That's why Andersen the fabulist is one of the great realists of literature.
(LN, p. 51)

Radical, basic, unqualified honesty and the willingness to see and accept the consequences of acts, of characters: these are the keys for unlocking the problems of evil characters, creatures born of shadow. These creatures may be part of the Sub-Creator, but they are not all of him, nor is he ruled by them.

It is the Sub-Creator's mind which gives life to the characters with which he peoples his world. The depth and range of personality which they exhibit is limited only by the will and honesty of their maker.