

Morphology of Myth: Reflections of Mythology in Literature

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Abstract

Myths are staple features of every country/culture. They represent the special bond that connects members of a society to their tradition and past. Therefore, all peoples have had to adopt a mythological framework to strengthen their theories about their origins, unite their communities, and in deed, to affirm their identities. A journey to the ancient myths of various civilisations enables us, in a manner of speaking, to visit them and to enter the private lives of the people who lived during ancient times.

Key Words: Tradition, Origins, Customs, Culture, Knowledge, Epics, Fairy tales, Ballads, Antiquity, Allusions, Legends, Sensibility, Archetypes, Interpretations.

"Mythos" in classical Greek denoted any story or plot, whether true or invented. It derived from "muthos", which stands for anything uttered by word of mouth. Homer used the word mythos to mean narrative and conversation, not including fictitious narratives or conversations. Plato defined muthos as something not wholly lacking in truth, but, for the most part, fictitious. In the modern sense, a myth is a story from mythology, "a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and the actions of the deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by people conduct their lives" (M.H. Abrams). Primarily, myths are basic stories or human dramas about our recurring, persistent struggles with life and death, good and evil, and coping with adversity, fame, misery, and happiness, both through miracles and normal states of affairs, precisely because of the abundance of human histrionics in myths, they find an inexplicable, yet profound place in the literatures of all countries and peoples.

Historians find it impossible to understand ancient people without understanding their mythology. The gods represented, expressed and gave form to that which, for these people, constituted the sacred, the essential and tangible. They per haps existed more in the hearts of men

than in reality, but they expressed the needs, desires, and aspirations of men and rep resented something beyond the insignificant, pedestrian nature of their lives, the limits of their lives, the limits of their actions and the dangers of their undertakings.

The classical mythology is full of fascinating and entertaining stories, which might be called "fairy tales" by some unless they are related to subject areas. Many cur rent readers view mythology as stories or tales. But to the ancient Greeks, these stories helped them make sense of natural phenomena they found unexplainable. An advance in the knowledge of technology has proved the scientific explanations found in the myths to be no longer useful, but the stories continue to live in their own right. The study of mythology provides deep insight into the past, as it reveals numerous scientific beliefs such as the reason for the change of seasons, for the rising and setting of the sun, for deserts, the origin of the grasshopper, and countless others. Like the English ballad, myths were passed on by word of mouth for countless ages. The existence in Greek myths of a hierarchy of the gods (the progression of power up to Jupiter, and the interactions of his family) indirectly divulges the background of the civilisation in which the ancient Greeks lived.

The Renaissance poets made ample of mythology after the discovery of classical antiquity and its inexplicable charm. The works of Ovid became so popular that they influenced Renaissance poets like Petrarch, Boccaccio and Dante. Right from the early epochs of modern English literature, we see Chaucer and Elizabethan poets flaunting their mythological knowledge in their literary works. Jean Racine in France and Goethe in Germany revived the Greek drama. Racine reworked the ancient myths-Phaedra, Andromache, Oedipus and Iphigenia-to new purposes.

Shakespeare's deep knowledge of Greek and Roman myths can be fathomed in almost all his plays. In one of his early plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we can see him refer to at least four mythical instances (Theseus and Ariadne; Phaeton's chariot; Leander and Hero; Orpheus). Modern criticism rates Shakespeare as one of the most avid, innovative and consummate interpreters of Greek myths. Evidence shows that even his Elizabethan spectators were well acquainted with the Ro man and Greek myths, which seemed to have been in popular at that time. Shakespearean critics have come to a consensus that his main source of mythical trajectories was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Though Ovid is the undisputed and single largest influence on Shakespeare's use of mythology, the bard seems to have departed from his sources for creative in novation in most of his works. The Ovidian myth of Pygmalion, the reflection of the Echo and Narcissus myth (Twelfth Night-motifs of narcissism and unrequited love), the philosophical theme of the myth of Ixion (*King Lear*), etc., were almost certainly reworkings of mythologies. we see an abundance of allusions and references to Greek mythology, which abundantly reveal both Shakespeare's in-depth knowledge of Greek myths, as well as the Elizabethan spectator's acquaintance with them

Milton's *Paradise Lost* showcases the un easy liaison between the pre-Christian and Christian myths. Written in the epic convention, Milton's sources were the Bible, primarily, and also Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the other stories in Greco-Roman mythology, Milton used Greco-Roman myths in his devout, religious epic as a source of information and also as writing models. Also, Milton's early poems, especially those in Latin, were verbally, stylistically and structurally designed to imitate Ovid. They contain a mythological emphasis that is heavily classical and primarily decorative, although it occasionally acts as a mask for the young poet's yearnings and resolution, with the leitmotif of "justifying God's ways to men". However, though the myths persist in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, Milton, over the years, sobered down in his use of Greek and Latin mythology. Milton uses myths as metaphorical vehicles for thematic development as well as the description. Critics point out that each myth in the *Paradise Lost* is often in paradoxical dramatic conflict: "inherent in the beauty of most of the myths is fragility and often ruin." Every myth used in the epic is proleptic, that is "each image contributing to the anticipation of the major events of the poem and every moment containing some knowledge of all moments."

W.B. Yeats was deeply involved in the revival of Celtic myths, folklore, and legends. He used Celtic myths extensively as a subversive strategy against the literary hegemony of Greco-Roman classicism. Yeats sought to bring in a national and nationalist character into his writing by incorporating as well as popularising the Irish myths. Besides building a national character, he was also exploring his personal interest in mythology and the oral traditions of the Celts. Yeats was acquainted with the ongoing literary revival of interest in Irish myths and folklore, which was already taking place during his youth; and he contributed significantly to a wider circulation and popularisation of the Celtic myths.

Many works of Yeats share the theme of Celtic folklore and myth, which reflect a distinctly Irish sensibility and nationalism. The folklore, myths and legends of ancient Celtic traditions provided Yeats with a rich well of inspiration to draw from and a whole nation to take pride in the forgotten lore and bask in its redeemed glory.

If Elizabethan, Jacobean and Augustan writers used the Greco-Roman myths extensively, early twentieth century writers relied on Christian and national myths embedded in their works to bring about the different layers of strife, unrest, spirituality and latent doom hovering over Europe. T.S. Eliot famously used the myths of the Fisher King and the Grail Quest from the Gaelic tradition, which were assimilated into Christianity. Although the myth of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail do not find any mention in the Bible, both were important to Europeans and the stories became integral parts of the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. These myths were described as they are in the two works of anthropology-Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*-that form the bedrock of the allusive world of *The Waste Land*. Eliot used these myths to explore the heroic quest motif for spiritual solace in an increasingly arduous and unspiritual modern world.

In the same year that *The Waste Land* (1922) was published, James Joyce explored the relationship between the myth of the heroic quest and modern fiction in his much acclaimed work *Ulysses*. The action of Joyce's novel takes place in Dublin in 1904 and Joyce based the framework of his sarcastic novel on the structure of one of the greatest and most influential works in world literature, Homer's *Odyssey*. In a parody of the way Homer's protagonist Odysseus encounters many perils-giants, angry gods, and monsters-on his adventurous journey back home after the Trojan War, Joyce's twentieth century hero, a Jew of Hungarian origin, Leopold Bloom, undertakes his mundane day-to-day life's journey in a very uneventful and drab manner. His adventure consists of getting breakfast, feeding his cat, going to a funeral, doing legwork for his job, visiting pubs or restaurants, and thinking about his unfaithful wife. His activities parallel in some way the adventures of Homer's *Ulysses*.

During the first half of the twentieth century, William Faulkner and Eugene O'Neill brought mythical allusions into their writings. Faulkner also dabbled in the primitive nature myth in his writings; however, it was O'Neill who brought in the elements of myth to his modern day plays *Mourning becomes Electra* and *The Hairy Ape*. One of O'Neill's major plays *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a reworking of the Greek tragic myth *Orestia* in nineteenth-century New England. Through the reworking of the Greek myth, O'Neill weighs in on the darkest and bleakest facets of human life.

Black and Native American writers like Alice Walker, Les lie Marmon Silko, and Toni Morrison have rewritten the Judeo-Christian myths in radical ways. They have explored the full potential of Native American and African creation myths to re-narrate Genesis.

In the Indian English context, myths combine spirituality with the post-colonial instinct to subvert the western canonical perspective. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) recounts the Bhasmasura myth presented within the context of the modern times, where the author tells us the story of the peaceful printer Nataraj who overcomes the demon-like Vasu. The novel is important in a post-colonial context as Nataraj and Vasu are symbolically positioned as the eidos of two conflicting cultures, the Eastern and the Western, and Vasu's aggression represents the invasion of one culture of another. Nataraj is the owner of a small printing press. He rents a room in his home to Vasu, only to have it overtaken by Vasu's life style, values, and taxidermist profession. The structure of the story is almost like a myth, with the protagonist facing an invincible enemy who eventually meets his end by his own hand. The novel is complemented by comparisons and references to various Hindu myths, which act as signposts to the significance of the implicit layers. These underlying meanings bring out the subtle depths of the narrative. The myth also gives us greater insight into the action and characters, by showing us the delicate aspects of the story which are juxtaposed against the mythical storytelling captured from yesteryears.

Much before Narayan, Raja Rao had already employed myth to bring in the overtures of a political struggle and triumph in his *Kanthapura*, written in 1938. *Kanthapura* is narrated in the harikatha mode and engages in a sthalapurana (the legend of a place). In the novel, Raja Rao ingeniously blends local myths (goddess Kenchamma) with that of the struggle between Rama and the Asuras in the Ramayana. Raja Rao successfully combines the oral tradition of a locale with that of the pan-Indian myth Ramayana within the stylistic strictures of the harikatha narrative. Thus, as one of the first generation writers in Indian English fiction, Raja Rao wove mythology into the story of the social and political struggle in a small south Indian village called *Kanthapura*, and also enriched our understanding of imperialism and the national freedom struggle.

Among the new Indian writers, Shashi Tharoor has used Indian myths effectively to narrate contemporary life and politics. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* begins with a reference to *The Mahabharata* as the author juxtaposes prominent Indian freedom fighters and legendary characters of *The Mahabharata*. The novel is loosely based on the Indian politics of the pre-and post-Independence eras. Though the author describes almost all the events that transpired during the freedom struggle in a chronological manner, taking poetic liberty, he presents the facts in a cheeky style, with innovative/bizarre explanations provided for the decisions made by the characters, be it the Mango Tax Yatra or the Manimur annexation. Thus investing the bland tale of well-known events with a new charm and meaning. Towards the end of the novel, it traverses a zigzag path, very much like the political scenario of India, metamorphosing from a colony to anarchy to democracy to anarchy again. At the end of the novel, the narrator feels the need to retell the story from a new point of view.

Throughout the Victorian period, the study of mythology evoked much interest and a considerable breadth of opinion. The theories of that time framed myth as a failed or obsolete mode of thought, often by interpreting myth as the precursor of modern science. Mythologies were seen as "faded metaphors" and many critics considered myths as retrogressive in nature.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* broke new ground in myth studies, as Frye drew upon his knowledge of myth criticism from social anthropology and psychoanalysis and applied it to literary studies. According to M.H. Abrams, the term archetype refers to "recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works in literature, as well as in myths, dreams and even social rituals". Such elemental patterns are supposedly universal patterns in the primordial human psyche. Frye combined the typological interpretation of the Bible and the archetypes of literary imagination in Blake, to conclude that the literary universe consists of four radical mythoi (or literary structures)

which correspond to the four generic divisions of comedy (spring), romance (summer), tragedy (autumn) and satire (winter). If we view the literature archetypally, literature transforms a comprehensive and detached material universe into a viable and intelligible verbal construct that suits every individual's needs, values and concerns.

Mircea Eliade attributed modern man's anxieties to his rejection of myths and the sense of the sacred, in his appendix to *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, and in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. In the 1950s, Roland Barthes published a series of essays examining modern myths and the process of their creation in his book *Mythologies*. In his book of essays, he defined myth as the nodal point where different texts join together. Texts, according to Barthes, have an expanded meaning that includes any aspect of daily life with the potential to signify meaning. The texts that he "reads" in mythologies include soap powders, children's toys, iconoclastic celebrities, tropes such as the idea of the "writer on holiday", women's magazines, and professional wrestling, among others.

In myth criticism, interestingly, phenomenal changes have elevated the position of myths from retrogressive symbols of primitive cognition to that of cultural apparatuses that narrate stories of a community, race and society. Another important feature in postmodern myth criticism, as well as mythical literature, has been the replacement and subversion of classical Greek and Roman myths by national and local myths.

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