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Abstract

Considers various definitions of myth and shows how literary myths deliberately created by an individual differ from myths that develop organically within a society. Concludes the truth within myth is what is important. Includes an extensive quotation from *The Last Battle*.

Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Mythopoesis; Myth—Definition

Narnia as Myth

by Peter Kreeft

The Chronicles of Narnia are a myth in a number of senses. This paper attempts to distinguish and characterize four of those senses. It is more about myth than about Narnia; but Narnia is a perfect example of what it means by myth. It may be regarded as a sort of philosophical preparation for the appreciation of the Narnia myth

In the first, most primitive sense - the sense used by the anthropologists and folklorists - a myth is a story of the doings of gods or human heroes in some kind of "other" place and "other" time than the present. It is regarded as sacred, archetypical, true, real, and normative.

Such sympathetic scholars as Mircea Eliade in works like *THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE*, *COSMOS AND HISTORY*, *MYTHS DREAMS AND MYSTERIES*, and *MYTH AND REALITY* have rescued myth from the patronizing positivism of the nineteenth century's attitude. Chesterton is surely right when he says in *THE EVERLASTING MAN* (I quote from memory, hence inaccurately):

We do not submit a sonnet to a mathematician...but we do indulge the equally fantastic notion that myth can be treated as a science. But unless these things are appreciated poetically they are not appreciated at all. It took a poet to make them; it takes a poet to appreciate them. There are more poets than non-poets in the world, as is proved by the popular origin of such legends...

When the Professor is told by the Polynesian that once there was nothing but a great feathered serpent, unless the learned man in spectacles feels a delight and an overwhelming wish that it were true, he is no judge of such matters at all.

Myths are "sacred" stories, and if one has no sense of the sacred, the numinous, one cannot appreciate myth. The time of myth is sacred time, the time of the gods' or heroes' actions, not historical time, familiar time. Its places are sacred places: the space in which mythic acts take place is not relative and homogeneous but special, set apart; the acts that take place in them make the places themselves mythical. Myth does not mean to be "historical" or "realistic". It is no fault that it cannot be.

Yet myth claims to be true. None of the myths that have naturally arisen among "primitive" ("old", not necessarily "stupid": the two meanings are usually confused in the word "primitive") cultures are felt or believed to be fictions; yet they are not true of the so-called "real world" (what we, not they call the "real world"). Of what then are they true?

Of the gods or heroes. Myths do not invent god-stories to explain vegetation or the seasons or the planets; they are not primitive science but primitive religion. Nature is seen as a symbol of the gods, not the gods as symbols of nature. Myths are like parables: truths about the gods translated into human terms. Thus they are true - but not about men and their merely human world, but about the gods and about man's sacred world, that aspect of human experience in which glimmers and glimpses of the divine shine through. The world is unsafe; there are all sorts of openings, unpredictable cracks, in it; and behind each crack the divine is lurking.

The basic drive behind myth is neither goodness nor power but being. Myths are not necessarily ethical; they may praise cannibalism, for instance. Nor are they, in their original form, magical (alchemy and astrology, e.g., are later deviations from something originally wholly non-pragmatic). Rather, mythic man thirsts for the real, what lies behind the relative, shifting veil of appearances.

Because his myths are believed to be true and real, they are normative to primitive man. "We must do what the gods did in the beginning." His world is a divine work of art, an imitation in the gods' mind (this is not a later, sophisticated theological notion; it is the main theme of the oldest manuscript known, the Egyptian Memphite Drama, antedating 4000 B.C.E.); and his life should be a similar imitation of the gods.

When a myth is deliberately invented by an individual, it loses much of the force a primitive, "natural" myth has. Its protagonists are usually men, not gods; its value is usually esthetic rather than religious; its truth is usually "fictional" rather than "factual" in any sense; and it is normative not for life but only the life of the imagination. Narnia resists this weakening almost as well as any "contrived" myth, perhaps because of its almost-allegorical connection with the "original", "natural", "strong" Christian myth.

A second sense of myth which applies more to a later, literary construct, is the one Tolkien delineates in his essay "On Fairy-Stories". In this sense of myth, too, a myth is meant to be "true". But the meaning of "true" is slightly different from the truth of the stories of the gods. Tolkien describes it as follows:

What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator". He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it; what he relates is "true"; it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged by kindness or circumstance to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed.

A real enthusiast for cricket is in the enchanted state: Secondary Belief.

Thus when we close the covers of THE LORD OF THE RINGS and turn once again to our kitchen window, we do not feel we have turned from the less to the more true, but vice versa. We have to exercise a deliberate "suspension of disbelief" in the so-

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called "real world", not in Tolkien's world! (Indeed, that may be one of its paradoxical effects: to make the ordinary, dull world more fantastic than Middle-Earth.)

But a good literary myth can be true in an even stronger sense: true in some way of the primary world as well. A fairy tale can be more realistic than a statistic. To quote Tolkien again:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: "inner consistency of reality", it is difficult to conceive how this can be if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, "Is it true?" The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): "If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world." That is enough for the artist, or the artist part of the artist. But in the "eucatastrophe" we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater - it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium [Gospel, "good news"] in the real world...The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them...All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.

A third level of meaning to the concept "myth" is added by C.S. Lewis, especially when he speaks, in the first chapter of MIRACLES, of the possibility of other worlds, other natures - not just other planets or galaxies in our space-time continuum but "preternatural" worlds discontinuous with ours. It is only a "climate of opinion", not scientific evidence, that makes most of us skeptical of such "other worlds" (in fact, there is much quite respectably-scientific evidence for them on file in the Society for Psychical Research in London). In such worlds, he suggests in PERELANDRA, what is myth on earth may be fact there. (Unfortunately, the identification with the planet Venus tends to obscure the truly mythic character of the "other world" of PERELANDRA; there is no such "confusion with a 'real' world" in Narnia.) The whole distinction between myth and fact is, he suggests, a result of the fall of man, and even in his present state there are hints that the distinction is not final: in the "magical" effect a great poet's imagery exercises on us, in the best instances of sexual love, in great music, and in sacraments. The "other world" Lewis has primarily in mind is man's own next world, heaven, the "new earth". The things Lewis says about this I find so pre-eminently moving, so nearly the "things which no man dare to utter" which St. John refused his readers in his apocalypse, that I can only send the interested reader/listener to the last chapters of MIRACLES and THE PROBLEM OF PAIN.

A fourth aspect of myth and fourth sense in which it is "true" is the Platonic. Lewis can introduce us to this aspect too. In THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE, for instance, he contrasts Spenser's "life-likeness" with Shakespeare's, and says that while the details of Shakespeare's world are like the details of ours, the experience of reading Spenser is like the experience of living itself. He reveals things too large for normal notice, like the large-print names of continents on maps, or like the air we breathe: Shakespeare imitates life; life imitates Spenser. Spen-

ser's art is the communication of archetypes.

In such art, says Lewis in the essay "on Stories" (in OF OTHER WORLDS):

the plot, as we call it, is only a net whereby to catch something else. The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality. Giantship, otherness, the desolation of space, are examples that have crossed our path. The titles of some stories illustrate the point very well. THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END - can a man write a story to that title?

(Lewis, incidentally, experimented interestingly with this idea in applying it to the HAMLET-problem in "Hamlet: the Prince of the Poem?", interpreting HAMLET not as primarily a character-drama but as a ghost-story; it seemed to work even there.)

Shall I be thought whimsical if, in conclusion [he goes on to say], I suggest that this internal tension in the heart of every story between the theme and the plot constitutes, after all, its chief resemblance to life?...In real life, as in a story, something must happen. That is just the trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never quite embodied. The grand idea of finding Atlantis which stirs us in the first chapter of the adventure story is apt to be frittered away in mere excitement when the journey has once been begun. But so in real life the idea of adventure fades when the day-to-day details begin to happen...Other grand ideas - homecoming, reunion with a beloved - similarly elude our grasp here. But now, something must happen, and after that something else. All that happens may be delightful; but can any such series quite embody the sheer state of being which was what we wanted?

Our true world, our true home, our true selves - we feel separated from them, divinely discontent. And just as our present alienated situation is drawn toward the more real world that is our true one, the story in a myth is drawn toward the thing it fitfully suggests. "Time is a moving image of eternity", said Plato, who introduced the idea of the Ideal or the Archetype into Western thought. I conclude by suggesting that myth is an image of our own ultimate destiny, and as such is at the opposite pole from irrelevancy, irresponsible dreaming (dreams were thought to be messengers of the gods by almost all ancient peoples), wishful thinking (is the truth less or more than our wishes?), or mere fiction ("life is a dream of the gods", and divinity is (if it exists at all) the ultimate Fact). Our literary myths, such as Narnia, fit Charles Williams' "Way of Affirmation of Images"; but they must also be negated, transcended. They reveal but also conceal. "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou." That is why even Narnia dies in the last and greatest Chronicle of Narnia. But when it dies the true Narnia is born. If our visible world is an image of our myth, our myth is an image of the really-real:

"When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia, which has always been here and always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different: as

different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream." His voice stirred everyone like a trumpet as he spoke these words: but when he added under his breath "It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what do they teach them at these schools!" the older ones laughed...

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed and cried: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this."

...said Aslan: "...the term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended; this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and so beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

