



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 1  
Issue 4

Article 3

---

January 1974

## Myth in the Modern World

Poul Anderson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Poul (1974) "Myth in the Modern World," *Mythcon Proceedings*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro/vol1/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythcon Proceedings by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



---

## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

Fantasy author Anderson discusses definitions of myth and how literature becomes mythopoeic, particularly by catching or reflecting cultural needs. Includes an example of a modern historical novel incorporating myth, Jensen's *The Fall of the King* and its use of symbolism from the Norse "Song of Grotte."

### Keywords

Hrolf Kraki Saga; Jensen, Johannes V. *The Fall of the King*; Myth—Definition; Myth in literature; "Song of Grotte";

# MYTH IN THE MODERN WORLD

by Poul Anderson

First I want to thank you most sincerely for the very great honor you have done us and for all the hospitality and kindness which are making that honor an equally great pleasure. There is no way to give you a proper return.

Certainly a speech will not serve. In fact, I can't help wondering what the dickens I am doing here, addressing you. You are the scholars and philosophers of myth, not I. I doubt if I can say anything that will not strike you as being the merest truism--at best. At worst, you will catch me in gross error. The safest course is to try to keep this thing short. It is also the most merciful.

Still, you may at least like to know what a few of the thoughts are of one who, if not a deep student of myth, does use it in his work. Please note that I say "use," not "make." In the sense of the word "myth" that I shall be employing, everybody uses it and no individual ever makes it. This is true even of the most seminal writers, like Tolkien or Lovecraft.

You see, I give "myth" a meaning more broad than the usual dictionary definition. This wider meaning is not original with me, of course, yet it seems fruitful. Ordinarily we say that a myth is a traditional narrative, ostensibly historical but one whose origins are in fact lost. It has no known author, and probably had none in the first place. Instead, it has come down by word of mouth, in song and story, among the people through the ages. In the course of this, more often than not, fantastic elements get into it. Remember the old joke about the schoolboy who described a fairy tale as a story where the characters are goblins, dragons, ghosts, virgins, and other supernatural beings?

Well, the standard definition is all right as far as it goes. The trouble is, it doesn't go far enough. It doesn't say anything about the grip of a myth on the hearts and minds of men, the way a myth can shape a whole literature and even a whole civilization. Nor does it relate these ancient stories to modern ones, or to actual persons, events, and concepts, which have the same effect.

Let us therefore call a myth a creation in language which somehow expresses the spirit of the people, who use it and pass it on until it pervades their society. So it becomes integral to the lives of many persons, through generations, at last through centuries and millennia.

That is why no individual can create a myth. He can, at most, create a story or a figure, which because of its power over the imagination will in time become a myth.

A case in point would be *MOBY DICK*. By now, mad Ahab and the White Whale, the entire epic of that quest, can pretty safely be called mythic. Whether or not you have read the book, some part of your thinking, your personality has been influenced by it, if only because it has been basic cultural property for more than a hundred years.

Now why is this? Why did it happen to *MOBY DICK* and not to the rest of Herman Melville's works, good though they are acknowledged to be? I suggest to you that in this one he touched something elemental. He found new symbols of mystery, terror, overweening pride and overwhelming disaster, motifs as ancient and widespread as humanity itself. These are American symbols. The tale is, in its way, cast in our idiom and expresses something of our spirit.

To be sure, the quest and the obsession with revenge are universal stories. So is the theme of pride and wrath turning to madness and thus bringing ruin. That's one element of a true myth: universality. But another element, I think, is specificity--a native idiom, native symbols. The classical Greeks knew about quest, revenge, and catastrophe. They would never have used them to create a *MOBY DICK*, any more than the New Englanders would ever have brought forth an *ILIAD* or *ODYSSEY*.

Naturally, we are capable of studying the myths of different cultures and getting a great deal out of them. However, I believe much of their value comes just from their specificity. This gives them a concreteness which is every bit as essential as the more abstract and

archetypal element.

The writer who uses myth does well to employ the same principles, to be ethnic as well as cosmic. I don't mean that he should slavishly imitate. I mean only that he should treat his sources with respect. For instance, in Tolkien the old Gaelic and Nordic material is genuine. He has modified the details as necessary, but he has kept the spirit, the feel of it. At the same time, his hobbits are uniquely English--rural English from the period of his youth. And as for Mordor, is not part of the horror that in it we can recognize what we ourselves are doing to this earth?

(I hope Angelenos will forgive me for remarking that on bad days, Karen and I refer to their home region as the Desolation of Smog. The Bay Area has problems too.)

Some commentators have announced the end of myth as a vital force. How can it flourish in a world of science, computers, bureaucracies, mechanization? Well, we have unquestionably gotten very short on color, pageantry, and individual distinction. I'm sure this is the main reason why the Society for Creative Anachronism is growing like the green bay tree; it fulfills a need. I also feel this is at least part of the reason for the popularity of fantasy fiction. It isn't simply escape, it's essential nourishment.

However, myth is not dead. In the present sense of the word, it will live as long as man does.

Let's think back. I said "a myth is a creation in language which somehow expresses the spirit of the people, who use it and pass it on until it pervades their society." Because it says something that is important to them, it shapes their thinking, their attitudes, and thus their entire personalities.

Religion is an obvious case in point. A devout Christian can with perfect propriety discuss the Christian myth, a Jew the Jewish myth, and so on. You see, the objective truth or falsity of an idea does not affect the way it functions in a human head. Out of the Christian myth have grown at least three distinct civilizations, Byzantine, Eastern Orthodox, and Western.

Many historical events and persons have become mythic. Take Lincoln. He is probably the central figure in American mythology. I suspect this is not only because he led the nation through a terrible era. I suspect his assassination in the very moment of triumph has a lot to do with it. He may not be exactly our dying god, but he is our king who dies for the people.

Science is not killing off myth either. Instead, it's giving us a whole rich new body of lore and images. Today we live in a mental universe unthinkably enormous, made up of atoms unthinkably tiny, and of energies and subtle forces. We are slowly, perhaps too slowly for survival, adding to that myth the concept that all life is one and that man cannot endure unless he shows more reverence for the species which share this planet with him.

There is an example of the distinction between a myth on the one hand and a mere story or presumed fact on the other. We won't get far with this business of treating the ecology right, as long as the need to do so is just an intellectual concept. That's too weak. What will drive us, if anything does, is a mystique going far beyond the practicalities of staying alive. It will have to be something, a body of ideas and images and heroes and deeds, that we feel down in our guts and bones. In short, a myth.

That is a beneficent one, or will be someday, we hope. There are evil myths, too. Politics is full of them. There are dangerous ones. For instance, the human brain does have analogies to a computer; but when we start feeling that we are nothing but computers made of meat, we may cripple ourselves as badly as did those ancient worshippers of Cybele who believed castration was pleasing to her.

Inevitably, we live by myths--though they can be for good or ill, helpful or deadly.

What has all this to do with literature?



I submit that it has everything to do with literature. The works which appeal to us most strongly, those most likely to endure, probably those which most affect man's destiny, are those which make full and creative use of myth. Only they give us any hint of the world as a whole: because we think of that world, we even experience it, in mythic terms.

Writers like Tolkien and Eddison have drawn mostly on ancient myth. That's fine; it still speaks to us in a way that nothing else can. Various other writers employ religious myth, like C. S. Lewis, or historical, like Stephen Vincent Benét. Still others, mostly though not exclusively in science fiction, use scientific myth.

I think it's a very bad thing, a cause for great concern, that so few writers and poets nowadays do likewise--hardly any of the fashionable ones. Just how much universality is there in a novel about, say, the frustrations of a Manhattan intellectual? For that matter, just how much does it have to do with the specific society, its humble, its dead, and its unborn as well as its conspicuous living members? I don't deny that some of these authors have talent, but I do think you'll learn more about both the American scene and the human condition from somebody like John D. MacDonald.

Currently science is the most potent myth-starting force in existence. But how many major English-language poets have significantly drawn ideas and imagery from it? I can really only call to mind Kipling, Robinson Jeffers, and W. H. Auden. It's worth noting that these three men also made full use of legendary, religious, and historical myth. In so doing, they have not only enriched our conceptual universe, they have helped us get a better understanding of it and feeling for it. They have made us more sane. We need a lot of others who'll follow their lead.

By encouraging certain forms of myth, you in this society are doing something more valuable than you perhaps realize. I suggest to you that the other forms are equally worth developing. In fact, a literary work does not have to embody exclusively one kind of myth. It can use several, and thereby speak to us of the real world, today's and tomorrow's world.

Let me close with an example. But first a little introductory digression. You may be interested to know that I have just completed a redaction for the modern reader of the Hroif Kraki saga, an ancient Northern story which has close affinities to BEOWULF. In it I incorporate a translation of a poem from that general era, the Song of Grotte. For the benefit of those who don't know the Eddas, if there are any here, I'll explain that Grotte was a quern, a stone mill turned by an upright handle. But this quern would grind forth whatever the worker said. Two giantesses named Fenja and Menja were set to labor at it. At first they ground out the riches and peace that the owner wanted, then they grew angry and ground out enemies who slew him.

Well, you'll find that in my book. Today I'd like to show you how another twentieth-century writer creatively used not only this old, old theme, but certain myths of science as well. This was a Dane, Johannes V. Jensen. Some of you may have read his archeological novel THE LONG JOURNEY. He also did a historical novel called THE FALL OF THE KING, set in northern Europe during the chaos of the Reformation period. At the end, the hero, Mikkel, greatly aged, lies dying in a room of a castle. The previous chapter has told of the bitterly cold winter and the loud grinding of pack ice in a nearby strait. This is my translation, which I can only hope is not too unworthy of the original.

Each night came a ringing, sundering sound nearer to Mikkel's left ear.

It was like the sound of a millstone not far from his head. He often lay and thought that now he had died. There went centuries, where he was stretched out lame in the steel-sharp singing of the dark.

And yet he still woke now and then and could move a hand or glimpse somewhat of the room around him. But every time the monstrous sound began again in his ear, it had come nearer and shrilled through him more dreadfully than before.

It was the same sound he had marked in his youth, but then it was faint and remote, thousands of miles away. Later it had waxed each time it remembered him. And now the clamor was so immense that there was nothing else; Mikkel was lost

therein. It was the sound of a stone quern.

It was the near sound of Grotte, which Fenja and Menja swing in the north polar night.

Their mill-song shall take you, it shall come from inside your head as a noise of stone grinding asunder. Your head shall become the center for Grotte's whirlings of world-dust, for Fenja's and Menja's splintering quern-song.

We grind, sings Fenja, we swing the stone which is heavy as the earth, we grind you sunrise and cattle and fertile acres. We grind you shining clouds and rain for growth, clover, yellow and white blossoms.

And we grind you sickness and drought, sings Menja at the same time, burnt-off fields, waterlessness, we grind you hail like knuckles, we whirl you up a thundercloud from the west, darkness, lightning and smoldering homesteads.

We grind you springtime and blue billows, groans Fenja, we make the summer ready in time, we grind you greenwoods full of songbirds, we grind you love, forgetfulness and light nights.

And we grind you Fimbul's darkness, sounds Menja's rasping song, rain of ashes, withering, we grind you the winter into the heart of summer. We sing you a harvest storm, we swing rime and frost over everything growing, we grind the warmth out of the souls of men.

And yet we grind you new springtime and new growth, sings Fenja raging, we grind you solstice and dead calm on the sea, we grind you foals and shivering puppies and southerly winds, we grind you leafing and faith.

Yes, and we swing the quern so it creaks, cackles Menja, we grind at birth and we grind in the coffin, we grind snow and despair. I sing the last.

And now they arch their backs, the angry giant maids, and plant their legs deep in the mould and swing the smoking quernstone. They sing together, Fenja and Menja:

We grind you sun, moon and stars runaway around the world. Day and night shall change in a blink, white and black, and heaven shall go like a wheel. We grind you summer and winter like fever; heat shall fly upon you and flee again from cold.

But at last we grind you wintertime. We toil throughout thousands of years, but we grind you finally ice time.

Auroras over our heads! We grind you miles-wide ice and the year full of northerly storms and drifting snow. We grind the hope thin in you, we sing sums where the tale of the cold goes mounting. We grind you eternal nights, we swing the sun out upon distant roads. We grind coughing icebergs with crushed mountainsides down from the north and out over all rich plains, we crush the cities under the glacier, and we crumble all fruitfulness.

And we turn your head to stone, we whirl forth desolation, we sing with frost-cold heart till the quern shatters.

(Continued from page 7)

Jane is now prepared. Her thoughts as she walks in the garden directly afterward demonstrate that her pride has been humbled and her ignorance enlightened. She then has her first Christian vision, in which God bestows on her Grace and self-knowledge, and she responds. What she experiences is a death of her old self and a rebirth as a new creature; she is born again in a second baptism. Being a mystic, she also achieves a direct communion with God: "She had come...into a Person, or into the presence of a Person...with no veil or protection between" (p. 318). She has, in fact, achieved the Holy Grail. In the rest of the book, Lewis tidies up the loose ends by providing Jane with a reconstructed Mark with whom a Christian marriage is possible.

Despite his use of material from the Arthurian romances, Lewis's interpretation of the Grail quest is quite modern in tone. The quest is almost entirely internal, a psychological or spiritual journey rather than a physical one. Like Tolkien's Frodo, and Ransom himself, Jane is one of those modern questers who have greatness - and their quests - thrust upon them. She is no Galahad, not even a Percival. A certain nobility and grandeur of the first, a certain supernatural mystery of the second: both are missing in That Hideous Strength. But realism has been added to provide a well-designed counterpoint to the wild elements of myth and fantasy. And, as Lewis notes in his preface, this was his intent.