

A Study on Myth, Religion and Philosophy in Literature

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Abstract

Myth Unlike hard sciences where precise and exact definitions are demanded and arrived at as well, in humanities, especially in subjects like religion and mythology, precise definitions are hard to come by for these subjects, at least in part, deal with the transcendent and other superhuman beings who cannot be pigeon-holed by human categories which are finite and contingent. Myth is one such term illogical philosophy, paranormal causality that one event causes another without any natural process linking the two events, such as astrology and certain aspects linked to religion, like omens, witchcraft and prophecies, that challenge natural science. Myths are not unchanging and unchanged antiques which are simply delivered out of the past in some naked original state. Their specific identity depends on the way in which each generation and reader receives or interprets them according to their needs, conventions and ideological motivations.

Myths are quizzical phenomena. They are at once regional and yet universal; static and yet dynamic; stable and yet protean; archaic and yet modern; extravagant and yet hallowed; fantastic and yet highly-structured; divine and yet human in that they are as much about gods and goddesses as about human beings. Though they belong to a pre-literate and pre-historical era, they keep chronic in all ages and are a part of our contemporary society.

Though they belong to the realm of primitive religion, and come under the of anthropologists, folklorists and phenol Imnologist of religion, they are an integral part of literature and other arts. In short, myths are endowed with flexibility, adaptability and resilience which help creative artists to transpose and transplant them in diverse cultures and media. Even a cursory glance at twentieth-century literature, especially the writings of T.S. Eliot, Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, would highlight the happy fusion between myth and literature, and the creative transposition and transplanting of archaic myths in modern era.

Commenting on the anthropological character of the works of T S Eliot, D H Lawrence and Joyce, Haskell M. Block notes in "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Criticism" that in many instances the structure of their works, the development of primary themes, the significance of even the most recondite allusions, all can be classified to some extent by anthropological reference. Block hastens to add that "such analysis. . . often goes far beyond source hunting or philological exegesis; it drives at the central meaning of the work" (132). Methodological procedures

demand that the relationship between myth and literature be spelt out before a contrastive study of the ethnologist and the literary artist is undertaken to highlight their modes of operation in their respective fields. Enough and more has been written to delineate the relationship between myth and literature.

In Literary Criticism and Myth, Lillian Feder brings out the connection between myth and literature: Myths are used in literature in three major ways: mythical narratives and figures are the overt basis on which plot and character are created; or they are submerged beneath the surface of realistic characters and action; or new mythical structures are invented that have a remarkable resemblance to traditional ones.

"Myth Criticism: Limitations and Possibilities," E.W. Herd throws considerable light on the different ways in which myths are put to use in literature. Herd differentiates between five kinds of mythological works. Firstly, "there is the work which avowedly sets out to retell an acknowledged myth" (70), and he cites Mann's the Joseph tetralogy to exemplify the first type. Secondly, there are novels in which "the author uses myth as a means of literary allusion, intended to attract the attention of the reader and add significance to a theme or situation by means of illustration or parallel" (7). He refers to White's Riders in the Chariot as an example of this type. Thirdly, pointing to Joyce's Ulysses, Herd notes that myth is sometimes used consciously as a "structural element" (70). Fourthly, he writes that "it is also possible [as in the case of

Kafka's *The Castle*] that a mythical pattern can emerge within the structure of a novel without conscious development by the author" and adds that it is "the critic's job ... to show that this pattern forms a coherent and meaningful whole within the overall structure of the work" (71). Completing his classification, Herd remarks that "the fifth situation is the most controversial. This is the situation of an author who claims himself, or who is claimed by critics, to be creating a new myth" (72).

He puts forth the claim of Peter B. Murray who contended that Hawthorne's "*The Blithedale Romance*" expounded a new myth. The last category will be kept out of the reckoning as far as this thesis is concerned for, "myth" in this thesis, is confined to the province of classical myths. Creative artists and ethnologists differ sharply in their respective approaches to myth. Ethnologists deal with oral myths and focus on the painstaking recording and preservation of this oral tradition, and this exercise is marked by fidelity to the original, i.e. their job is to record the myths as faithfully and meticulously as possible. Secondly, ethnologists are interested in the role-communal, psychological, religious and ethical-these myths play in the lives of the "primitives." Malinowski's research among the Trobrian islanders and Levi-Strauss's field work among the South American Indians testify in part to this fact. Creative artists, on the contrary, are concerned not with oral myths but with written versions of these myths. What sets off literary artists from ethnologists is their freedom, which is an offshoot of their mythopoesis, to creatively tamper with myths to suit their literary-aesthetic purposes. In other words, there is no external pressure and demand on writers to reproduce classical myths in their

works in their pristine form, and clone the mythical personages. This highlights the elasticity and resilience of myths on the one hand, and the mythopoeic imagination of writers on the other hand. Commenting on the differing standpoints of these two groups,

Ian G. Barbour writes in *Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language* that "in contrast to literary critics who have usually concentrated on the internal content of myths . . . anthropologists have been concerned about their place in the lives of individuals and groups" (19)

Ricoeur's comment in his dialogue with Kearney as presented in *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* provides the summation:

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Works Cited

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