

Myth & the 'Now'

Grant P. Hudson

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CONTENTS

Introduction 7

The Myth About Myth 9

The Right Frame of Mind 15

Ways of Thinking 21

The Mythic Bridge 27

Raw Creation 33

Universal Authenticities 45

The Tale of Arthur 51

The Fall of a King 55

Participation 61

Phantom Verisimilitude 67

Pride, Prejudice and Parable 71

Great Expectations 77

The Heart of Darkness 85

The Waste Land 93

The Turning World 97

Doomed? 107

Myth and the 'Now' 115

Simplicity 119

Introduction

You may have thought you knew how stories worked. You may have concluded that 'conflict' lay at the core of a successful tale. You possibly assumed that endings were either 'good' or 'bad'. But what was driving all of that?

Just as Copernicus' assertion that the earth circled the sun instead of vice-versa threw an older cosmology into disarray, those things you might have considered stable about the world of fiction are about to be turned on their heads.

The true glory of fiction lies at its heart, for the most part hidden from the full view of the reader. Operating largely in secret, this concealed engine at the centre of stories produces many modes and forms. Its boundless energies power all kinds of genres; its limitless potential generates the delight that keeps human beings fascinated by fiction no matter what it looks like on the surface.

This book takes the reader on a journey into that heart and attempts to bring it into view in new ways. It's a voyage which will visit unusual places, from Asgard and the world of the Norse Gods, to Navajo plains and Finnish lakes; along the way, be prepared to glimpse not only the evolution of human civilisation but the human soul and how it grows in individuals.

Get ready to look beyond beyond the edge of fiction's universe to an even wider world.

The Myth About Myth

I've written elsewhere about Canadian academic Northrop Frye and his work on understanding how fiction operates. I believe this to be some of the most startling and important research into our subject of writing fiction that has ever been done, and many of his ideas either underpin or parallel what I've outlined in my book *How Stories Really Work*.

Starting from the viewpoint that works of fiction may be classified according to the power of action possessed by their protagonist, Frye developed a theory of fictional 'modes'. Each mode is determined by the relationship of the hero or heroine both to other characters and to the natural environment. This produces five broad categories, as outlined in his groundbreaking book *Anatomy of Criticism*:

(1) Myth

The protagonist's superiority is different in kind from that of other men and the environment. What we usually call 'gods' are engaged in acts far beyond our normal, linear experiences as human beings, in a sphere of operation which is barely recognisable.

(2) Romance

Here, the protagonist's superiority is one of degree: superhuman deeds are done in an environment full of 'supernatural' elements.

(3) High Mimesis

The protagonist is a warrior or king or leader of some kind, capable of great action but in a world which we can recognise.

(4) Low Mimesis

These stories feature lead characters who are more or less equal to us as readers and not superior to their environments.

(5) Irony

The protagonist's power of action is inferior to that of an ordinary person.

Frye makes a further distinction between tragic and comic aspects of fiction. 'Tragedy' includes those stories featuring the death, fall, or isolation of the protagonist; 'Comedy' consists of tales in which the protagonist is somehow integrated into society.

These modes are rearranged and simplified in my book, in which I was able, I think, to connect them up dynamically. But Frye's analysis, which is incredibly scholarly and subtle, also enables us to see a historic evolution of a kind in terms of the modes of fiction which have risen to prominence through the ages: myth is usually seen as the first type of fiction, followed by the romances of the ancients and the Middle Ages, for example. With the coming of the Renaissance, high mimetic forms arose, including Shakespeare's great tragedies and comedies; then, with the rise of the novel, we see low mimetic stories taking centre stage, featuring the adventures of characters not unlike ourselves. The late Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries brought the deconstruction that comes with Irony, which we see flourishing in this 'post-modern' age.

But in a way this historical analysis is misleading: it encourages us to think of 'myth' as something belonging to the distant past, for a start. The whole notion of 'creation myths' adds fuel to the misconception that early story-tellers were more 'primitive' than ourselves, and that what they had to say was based purely on superstition or a lack of knowledge about how the world 'actually worked'. This is part of what C. S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery': the prevailing belief that 'modern people know better' than people in the past about basic truths. The idea that the ancients and the mediaevals told stories about knights and dragons because they were living in a fantasy world from which we have emerged is part of that snobbery which forms a powerful foundation of assumptions for our own culture. 'Progress' and 'evolution towards something superior' are concepts upon which modern thinking is built, but these concepts inherently devalue what has come before. Viewing things in this way leads us to evaluate past cultures inaccurately. Even the conviction that Renaissance playwrights told stories of kings and aristocrats purely because these people were their patrons risks missing central and highly significant truths.

What are those truths?

Well, one of them is that a story works because it resonates with fundamental psychological and spiritual realities that remain true, active and potent today, right now, for any reader.

In other words, a so-called 'primitive' creation myth has just as much psychological and spiritual value for a modern reader as it did thousands of years ago, as does a mediaeval romance or a Shakespearian drama: the fact that it was compiled in the 'past' is irrelevant and should not detract from the value of any work of fiction in any mode.

Thus a Norse creation myth, for example, can work for readers right now on a spiritual, mental and emotional level because it is dealing with archetypal figures and verities which

are just as meaningful today as they were back in the dim past when the story was first invented.

The tales of King Arthur, as another example, are significant to us not simply because of the colourful past which they evoke but because they are conveying to us things that we still need to know about life and meaning; likewise, the great plays of the first Elizabethan period are important not just because of what they tell us about Renaissance politics or even because of their emotional studies of 'great figures' but because they communicate things to audiences which are crucial to understanding life and the universe now, today, for every reader.

Instead of stringing out these modes along a historical timeline then, it might be more useful and important to picture them as concentric circles¹. In the heart of the circle are the most fundamental and simple authenticities about life and human nature as revealed to us through the world's most powerful myths. One circle outward from that, fiction uses a set of images and tropes to convey those same truths, elaborating upon or exploring them in different ways using superhuman protagonists and a supernatural environment for the most part.

In the next circle, we see those themes reworked, re-examined and reinvigorated in Renaissance drama, while the circle outside that focuses on the same universal truths using the imagery and expectations of 'ordinary people'. Finally, the outermost circle revisits those truths through the forms and patterns of Irony.

What does this mean? Why is this important?

What it means is that when we come to write a story, we are ourselves returning to the fundamental truths about the

¹ A free, full colour chart showing these circles is available from the website: <http://www.clarendonhousebooks.com/myth-the-now-chart>

human condition. The vast opus of literature that has gone before us can be ignored with effort - or it can be treated as a fountain of wisdom from which we can draw strength and learn. That's surely significant.

This book will look closely at both the meaning and the importance of all of this — and much more.

The Right Frame of Mind

A story works because it resonates with fundamental psychological and spiritual realities that remain true, active and potent today, right now, for any reader. That's what I asserted in the first chapter. And it applies to whatever type of story we are talking about, from ancient myths through to modern day Ironies. The exact elements that 'resonate' can be grasped, understood and communicated, if we approach them in the right frame of mind.

However, getting into that 'right frame of mind' isn't necessarily easy for a modern reader.

As I said earlier, a so-called 'primitive' creation myth has just as much psychological and spiritual value for a modern reader as it did thousands of years ago. To try to illustrate what I mean, I'm going to attempt something that some may consider foolish: I'm going to examine a Norse creation myth to see how it might work for readers right now spiritually, mentally and emotionally. Why might this be foolish? Well, because looking at a Norse myth in this way takes it totally out of its context, even out of its original language, and can only really look at the most superficial elements of it - that part of the iceberg, if you like, which shows above sea level. The rest of the iceberg remains out of our sight simply because we do not know the language or the culture which gave birth to the myth well enough to totally comprehend it. But we can discern enough for it to be worth the attempt, I hope, given that a story is as I've just defined it, an accessible work that potentially resonates for any reader.

Another reason why it might be foolish is because it requires a difficult shift in thinking for anyone born in the last hundred years.

When we come to read a story, and especially when we write one, we are potentially returning to the fundamental truths about the human condition. A story can play around the edges of this, using words and images that we understand, but can fall too obviously into clichés and tropes that we are used to, over-using conventions until it slips easily into a genre and just ‘goes through the motions’ of storytelling. Fiction of that kind - which comprises the vast bulk of fiction available today - can still be satisfying and is still resonating with ‘fundamental psychological and spiritual realities’ to a degree, it just isn’t particularly doing anything new or exciting with them. Other stories delve deeper, taking those same realities and re-envisioning them: in the hands of master authors, these tales become memorable and survive through time as ‘classics’ of one kind or another. In effect, the deeper an author can go into those truths, the further outside Time the work is pushed: there are a few works of fiction which are ‘timeless’ because of the depth of truth they contact or express.

What such works have tapped into is Myth. Their truth is so deep that it ejects them from history and makes them eternal. But to examine a myth with any hope of comprehending this, we have to immediately and thoroughly strip away any preconceived notions we have about the so-called ‘primitive culture’ from which such stories came.

Myths are the product of the human imagination, not necessarily its reason: the Norse storytellers who wove tales about the creation and structure of the world did so in order to build something that resonated with their listeners; today, we have our own ‘myths’ about the creation of the universe - the ‘Big Bang’, quantum physics, the endlessness of space - which have an imaginative function for us too. That ours is

supposedly 'scientifically measurable' or somehow more 'rational' shouldn't be permitted to detract from our experience of the fictive Norse cosmology.

In effect, our own mythology gets in the way of understanding other myths, sometimes.

So when we enter the world of Norse mythology, we must take care to see it for what it is without prejudice: the nine homeworlds realms, unified by the world tree Yggdrasil, vaguely alluded to in the Poetic Edda, are an imaginative cosmic landscape, brought into existence in the gap between fire and ice, just as our universe is possibly just one in a void full of potential parallel universes according to our own myths.

The cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasil, lies at the centre of the Norse cosmos, its roots drinking the waters of the homeworlds, including Asgard, home of the gods, and the homeworld of the humans, Midgard. Think of Yggdrasil as a powerful image communicating something to us poetically rather than falling into the trap of denigrating it as an irrational misconception of the nature of things: a tree, so vast that it draws strength from a number of separate realities. Beneath its root in the world of the frost giants is the spring of Mímir, whose waters contain wisdom and understanding, while the root in the Æsir homeworld taps the sacred wellspring of fate, the Well of Urðr. Explicitly, then, the Norse myth makers are conveying through the image of the tree something that draws symbolic power from wisdom, understanding and fate. It is the abstract made real.

Beings known as the Norns live near Yggdrasil, watering it and preserving it with clay: the water falls down to the earth as dew. Animals feed on the tree but it continually heals itself and nourishes life. At this point, focusing on Yggdrasil as a poetic metaphor, we come close to an abstract 'source' of

existence, something which sustains Life but is woven through everything deeply.

At the top of the tree sits an eagle whose wings cause the winds in the world of men, while at its root of the tree lies the great dragon, Niðhoggr, gnawing at it continuously, together with other serpents. Natural phenomena within our human frame of reference are thus linked to this poetic image, while its potency as a symbol is also continually challenged by the also-symbolic dragon and serpents. Speaking poetically, this is quite an achievement: Yggdrasil is a world-embracing, wisdom-fed, eternally renewing cosmic linking device - it straddles universes and gives rise to Life, water and wind, but it is not secure and insular: its heart is perpetually threatened by dark beasts. Not a bad summary of the indescribable essence of reality.

It's a cosmological image which underpins 'events' in the Norse creation story, which begin with the yawning emptiness of potential called Ginnungagap from whence two regions emerge: Muspelheim, full of fire, light and heat, and Niflheim, full of arctic waters, mists, and cold. Modern imaginations leap to compare these zones with our scientific understanding of space, but we should strive to put that aside and remain poetic in our apprehension of this if we are to get anywhere: think of Ginnungagap as an enormous vacuum, a void, spontaneously producing polar extremes. Combining elements from these extremes produces, again poetically, a living creature, Ymir, the ice giant. From his left armpit, the first man and woman were born.

Here a modern reader often pauses, and asks, 'Why the armpit? And why specifically the left armpit?' It's important to recollect the poetic track we're following, and to be highly aware of the modern prejudices which seek to make unhelpful comparisons all the time. Understanding myth isn't about making rational comparisons: it's about apprehending the

poetry of the thing. And in this case, poetically speaking, we have gone from the immense and inconceivable generalities of Muspelheim and Niflheim to a highly specific concreteness: an ice giant, with a humanoid anatomy, who gives birth to humanity not from any region of his body that we might expect, but from his left armpit. If nothing else, the incongruity and unexpectedness of that creates for us a startling mystery and compels us to pay attention.

Ymir, giving birth also to generations of frost giants, some named and others not, feeds on the milk of the cow Auðumbla. At what point, modern scientifically trained minds ask, and from where did Auðumbla appear? Modern readers tend to look for the Occam's razor simplicities that they have been brought up with; they desire straightforwardness and rational progression - but that is not what myths are all about. A myth is a behind-the-scenes glimpse of how poetry (and everything else) is made, a dream-like journey into the mechanics of the construction of worlds. We have to become sensitive to the unexpected. It's as though we are in a dream, where illogical and apparently unconnected things happen without us questioning them.

Auðumbla licks blocks of salty ice, releasing Búri, and Búri's son Borr has three sons, the gods Odin, Vili and Vé. These three then slay Ymir, and all of the jötnar (giants) except for Bergelmir and his wife, who drown in the blood of the others. From Ymir's body, Odin, Vili and Vé make the recognisable world: Ymir's blood forms the seas and lakes, his flesh the earth, his bones the mountains and his teeth the rocks. The dome of the sky is made from his skull, with a dwarf at each of the four corners to support it. Odin, Vili and Vé protect this world from the jötnar with a barrier made from Ymir's eyebrows. And while they are doing this, they create time, and place the sun and moon in chariots to circle around the sky.

If we can grasp this cascade of images, we will do the myth more justice than trying to look at it as a modern, rational, scientific conception of the way the world works. Beginning with the metaphor of the tree Yggdrasil, binding everything together but perpetually gnawed by darkness, we progress to a bipolar universe, the extreme generalities of which come together to produce mysterious specificity. Symbols and archetypes appear to act as bridges: Ymir, a humanoid figure who is too vast and alien to be human, a 'jötnar', nevertheless yields human-like forms - these forms are still transcendent, unimaginable, god-sized, but they begin to do recognisable things: killing, making, protecting, changing, setting things in motion. By the time we get to having a sun and moon in the sky we are almost in a recognisable place.

Poetically, the human-centric conception of things is winning (through killing and making) over the non-human metaphorical picture of things. Odin and his brothers are taking centre stage, but in a theatre of such vastness and mystery that we are still breathless.

The division between this kind of conception of the world and the way in which we as modern readers demand that the origins of the universe are explained is as wide as Ginnungagap. But there are reasons for that too, as we shall see. Why has it been such a struggle to examine something as raw as a Norse Creation Myth? The answer's in the next chapter.

Ways of Thinking

We just attempted to examine the Norse myth of creation as a story or piece of poetry, to see what emotional and spiritual value it had for us as modern readers without devaluing it as a myth, a 'core story', a collection of images and ideas which were and are an effort to capture basic truths about Life.

It wasn't easy. The World Tree Yggdrasil was just about comprehensible as an image of the mysterious, interlinked and untranslatable essence of reality, at a stretch; but once we began to look closely at the events surrounding the creation of the world - the appearance of Ymir the frost giant, the birth of the first human couple from his armpit, his destruction and the making of the physical world from his body by 'gods' who had murdered him - our modern credibility became strained.

It was like trying to make sense of a dream.

But looked at poetically, the myth retained some of its power: the movement from remote images of a vast, polar universe to the specific but strange appearances of god-like figures; the dream-like spaces and times involved; the grandeur and the glory of the natural world as an extension of poetry and mystery, these all possessed something of a coherent song about them, despite our removal from them culturally.

It's that 'cultural removal' which needs to be examined more closely. What has happened to the human imagination so that it is, in modern times, often intensely difficult to grasp the real power of myth? It is much easier for us to dismiss mythologies as 'primitive', as humanity's first attempts to make sense of the universe before they 'knew better'. Some readers probably react derisively to the sudden and

unexplained emergence of a creature like a giant, who engenders human beings through some mysterious process involving his armpit; some might seek for a background evolutionary heritage that 'must exist' to give rise to Auðumbla the cow, which, in licking blocks of ice, releases the grandfather of the Norse gods, Búri. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we have been very much educated to think in terms of material causes and effects: nothing appears without a logical prior cause going right back to first principles and the formation of matter during the Big Bang; and what's more, those things which appeared later in Time are, we are taught, intrinsically superior to the things that existed earlier, because they evolved to survive whereas their ancestors didn't. The notion of 'progress' and 'evolution', the idea that we are part of a timeline heading towards more and more 'improvement' is a subtle and powerful one: humanity is the senior life form on the planet because it has evolved to be so, says this philosophy. There can be no mysterious 'blanks' in this timeline; everything has to 'make sense', to be explained rationally. If there are strange gaps, these are temporary, so this way of thinking goes, to be filled in as soon as we can 'find out more about them'.

So when we come to look at myths, the first thing we attribute to them is age: we call them 'ancient' and immediately assign them to a remote past, about which we know very little, which serves to 'explain' some of their strangeness. And the second thing we tend to do with regard to mythology is we try to deconstruct it, to take it apart and analyse the cultural elements in an effort which results in a devaluation, whether we intended that or not. It's all part of the scientific quest for 'knowledge', which began focusing on the material universe around the time of the Reformation and hasn't stopped since.

Anyone who has struggled through Owen Barfield's ground-breaking but rather difficult book *Saving the Appearances* will know that there is another way entirely of looking at all this. Barfield was an exceptionally intelligent man, a friend of and major guide for C. S. Lewis, and a member of Lewis's informal but later culturally important Inklings group. In brief (for the ideas in his book are complex and require lengthy exposition to apprehend their full meaning) Barfield argued that human beings have lost a way of perceiving the world over the last few centuries. Mentally, he outlines, they started to divide things up at around the time of the Reformation into what might be called 'poetic' and 'rational' ways of seeing. The truth was, he felt, that humanity used to possess a more unified way of experiencing reality, one which didn't try to separate out the 'scientific' from the 'imaginative' and didn't even understand that there might be a difference, but involved both before the notion of separating them had even occurred to anyone. They 'participated' (to borrow Barfield's term) in the universe, implicitly recognising their part in it and of it, like a child in a womb or a person looking at the phenomenon of a rainbow, but have since come to 'view the universe from outside' as a piece of mechanical engineering, much as a driver looks at the motor of a car. Barfield analyses language to show how it reflects this development growing out of a unified view into a divided and divisive one.

Of course, the last few hundred years have yielded tremendous advances in our understanding of and ability to manipulate the material world around us - there is no argument with that. But these developments have been paralleled by a fairly obvious and devastating general disaffection with that world; often individuals have progressively become disassociated with their environments in one way or another, leading, amongst other things, to various

crises in mental health. Most of us no longer 'participate' in the world in the same way: we analyse it, deconstruct it, seek to explain it, viewing it as a complex object which we are within our rights to manipulate, but we don't engage with it in the same way anymore.

Any literature written prior to the twentieth century has traces of this earlier, unified way of thinking in it. It could be argued that literature and the broader field of fiction overall are the only ways left to us of apprehending reality in any way like a participation in it, other than some forms of mysticism and religion. In reading a piece of literature, we enter a world in which every part is an element in a unified whole (with varying degrees of success); from the words on the page, to the figures we know as 'characters' to the patterns of action they engage in which we know as the 'plot', to the emotional content and finally the overall effect of the work, everything is designed and depends for its power and life on the fact that we enter into it as readers. On completion of a novel, we place the book back on the shelf and emerge from it into a world where we have lost any sense of there being a unified whole, where the overall effect of living seems random rather than designed and where Life mostly seems to have little connection to the fact that we are present in it.

Barfield would probably argue - and this book argues - that there is a state, maybe attainable for us still, in which there is no real difference between the experience of reading a well-constructed novel and the experience of living itself. On completion of a novel, in other words, we would emerge into a world which was 'at one with itself', where our experience was clearly designed and where our presence was intrinsically important to that unified whole.

This is so far removed from our modern conception of reality that even contemplating it probably feels claustrophobic and even heretical to some: we are used to the

'wide open spaces' of an empty universe, and are accustomed to remaining detached from the things around us in order to preserve a sense of 'who we are'. And yet, in striving to preserve that integrity, ironically we find ourselves often feeling like uninvited strangers in a series of incidents which have nothing to do with us emotionally or spiritually.

No wonder we have trouble comprehending the meaning of a Norse myth, or any kind of myth. Myths were the stories created when the teller and the tale were almost indistinguishable, when the world of the fiction was most like the world in which it was being told.

And that has so much significance for us that it will take the rest of this book to explore it.

The Mythic Bridge

If myth is poetry, and the purpose of myth is to explain, as directly and as potently as the myth-maker can, the origins of the world as we experience it, then what we often see in myths at first are strange and faceless forces at work, inhuman, vast and almost incomprehensible. In the creation myth most familiar to us, for example, things begin from first principles:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

Things here are 'without form and void'; not only is there darkness, but it is 'upon the face of the deep', whatever 'the deep' might be, other than simply the concept of 'depth'. Even when 'the waters' appear, as something not quite so abstract, the Spirit of God moves upon the face of those waters with poetic and inscrutable majesty. This is not human territory; a listener centuries ago and a listener coming freshly to these passages today has no real anchoring point or image at this point through which to feel much affinity or understanding of what is being described. It's not until the next chapter that some familiarity enters the picture:

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

With 'the first day' we enter into something which has some kind of relationship to the world in which we sit listening to these words, albeit still a distant one. 'Day' is something of which we have intimate knowledge, whether we were born recently or millennia ago: Time has made an appearance. But we can't get too comfortable because the next lines bring more strangeness:

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

Even if we understand the word 'firmament' to be something to do with dry land, coming as it does from Latin *firmamentum*, from *firmare* 'fix, settle', it is not clear what is involved in dividing 'waters from waters', especially when some are under the firmament while some are above. But there is a progression through this first section of Genesis which can be viewed as a 'painting in' of elements familiar to the listener or reader: God gathers the waters together and calls them Seas, while the dry lands are called Earth, then brings forth grass and trees, stars and the sun and moon, moving creatures in the sea, in the air and on land, effectively setting the stage for the entry of the protagonist, with whom, naturally, comes the viewpoint taken by the listener and reader. Prior to the creation of Man and Woman, we are excluded from the picture; when the 'male and female' appear, so do we. But our approach is gradual - things with which we have some

association are gradually introduced, so that by the time we arrive, a bridge has been built for us poetically. In other words, we do not suddenly appear on Day One, when all is still 'without form and void' - the world has been assembled so that our appearance in it is like that of the final piece of a jigsaw.

In this way, it's possible to draw an inference about creating anything, and especially about creating a work of fiction. Broad, formless generalities, swimming darkly upon the face of the deep, are brought forward into some kind of timeline comparable to our own; then, piece by piece, a story reveals elements which bear some kind of relationship with the world of the reader. Finally, in this case at least, a viewpoint appears through which the reader can participate in the created world.

The modern tendency, examined earlier, to place 'mythology' as a subject at the beginning of a process of evolution which culminates in our 'superior' scientific understanding of things can, I hope, now be viewed as just that: a tendency. A myth - any myth, though the one from Genesis above is perhaps the most familiar one to us - isn't so much about the beginning of things according to 'primitive' imaginations, as it is about the fundamentals of things according to the power of the Imagination as a basic component of the human psyche. In other words, the more we keep assigning myths to some distant and ignorant past, the more we miss what they are trying to reveal to us now, today, as we read or hear them newly.

Genesis might or might not be about how the world was actually formed before Time began: what it is definitely about right now is how things are formed, imaginatively, full stop. From the darkness comes light, and with light comes everything else with which we are familiar, including, eventually, ourselves.

As another example, let's take a further journey into Norse mythology, looked at earlier. After the immense and unfathomable darkness of the Ginnungagap and the mysterious rise of the frost giants, accompanied by all kinds of strangeness, we progress slowly towards a world which responds more to our own senses and apprehensions. The realm of the Norse gods, the Æsir, is called Asgard (meaning the 'Court of the Ás' or 'Æsir') and is built in the likeness of a human dwelling place. Odin's hall, Válaskjálf, is roofed in silver. Though opulent, it is recognisable as a place in which we can sit, with walls and a roof - the fact that Odin can sit within it and view all the worlds at once means that we have not yet quite arrived in the mortal world in which we listen to this tale.

Righteous men go after death not to some deep, featureless void but to Gimli, a hall roofed with gold, which also lies somewhere in Asgard. Most famously, Valhalla, the hall of the slain, is the feast hall of Odin: here, those who died in battle are raised in the evening to indulge themselves there. Heimdallr, the gods' warden, dwells beside Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, over which the gods ride to their meeting place at the Urðarbrunnr. Halls, feasts, bridges, riding - these are features we can grasp, even though the halls are roofed with treasures and the bridges made of coloured light.

There is another modern tendency, born of our fascination with the material world (and our scientific progression from what we can observe under a microscope incrementally mounting up to what we can infer about our own psychology) to think of myth, and the world of mediaeval romance and legend - the hinterlands of which we are now approaching - as a projection of what we are familiar with onto a larger screen. The Norse people, so the argument goes, took those things of which they had a daily appreciation - halls, fighting, feasting, riding, voyaging and so on - and

imaginatively made them bigger, extending them outwards and backwards in Time to 'explain' where humanity came from and how the world was created. But it's possible to turn this on its head and see myth as a progression from the unknown, from the void, into more and more specific and concrete forms, until what cannot be comprehended emerges finally into the lighted world we know. And this progression mirrors and encapsulates the making of anything, especially stories.

As we will see, myth bridges over (on a bridge made of coloured light) into a world of legends; legends unfold into tales of greatness; and those tales metamorphose into stories of ordinary, recognisable people. As a single story evolves, so do Stories evolve. The process by which familiarity develops from unfamiliarity is universal - and omnipotent.

Raw Creation

It's very easy to fall for the modern temptation to try to explain something from where we stand now, projecting backwards in time those concepts with which we are familiar in an effort to understand those things which came earlier or lie beneath the comfortable things that we think we know. But while that seems perfectly natural, and is certainly commonplace, it runs counter to the raw creative process itself, which appears to begin with nothing and draws forth from that void recognisable archetypes and images by degrees, eventually crafting something familiar.

In the case of myth, for example, it would be a relatively simple matter to begin with character archetypes with which we are familiar from the world of contemporary stories, and which are given in great detail in my book *How Stories Really Work*, and to trace their origins by visiting them first in today's blockbuster movies, then in the twentieth century's ironic novels, then again in the rise of the novel in the preceding hundred years, and so on, going back through Shakespearian plays to the earliest known literature. That kind of study is common for understandable reasons, and it yields valuable insights.

What we end up with, though, more often than not, is an understanding of certain kinds of stories on our terms, the terms set by the rational, intellectual thinking of the last few centuries and the most recent few decades in particular. This framework says, in a general way, that 'things evolve from early, more primitive forms to later, more complex forms'. It asserts, knowingly or not, that the later and more complex forms have a superiority of some kind - even a moral

superiority - over the earlier. Implicit within this approach - and, as I say, not without value - is the notion that rationality is senior to poetic emotivity, and that human beings 'know better now than they used to'.

This approach makes everything an allegory of things that we know. There are no genuine external Truths, according to this view, only projected extrapolations from familiar items, ideas and objects. In C. S. Lewis's children's book *The Silver Chair*, the Green Witch convinces her captives that the world of Narnia, the Sun and the Lion Aslan himself are all merely copies of the dark caves, the hanging lamps and the pet cat in the underworld in which she has entrapped them. And so we can begin to imagine that the world revealed to us most powerfully through myths is only a coloured-in facsimile of the mundane reality around us.

Endeavouring to explain anything any other way would seem counter-intuitive: of course one should start from things that we grasp, and work backwards. An earlier attempt to examine Norse mythology, for example, showed how much the modern mind struggles with the images it presents, constantly wanting to categorise them as 'primitive' and even brutal or incomprehensible. But I want to try to take this counter-intuitive route, as an experiment. Let's see how far we can get by looking rawly into the darkness and seeing what emerges from it, rather than building a well-lighted bridge into it; let's put aside allegory, and look into the void.

If we stare into Gunningagap, for example, that primal abyss from Norse mythology about which we know little other than brief references in Icelandic literature, or into the Beginning of Things as alluded to in Genesis in the Bible, the first thing that we meet is indeed a cardinal blackness or emptiness, an immense vacuum which contains the ultimate in nothings, the chaotic void before there was anything else. From that empty chasm comes a duality: two poles appear. In

Norse myth, they are represented by the regions of Muspelheim and Niflheim; in Genesis we see 'waters above and waters below' even before we see the light and dark of Day and Night. It is between these poles that everything else grows - and I want to suggest that that is where we should begin: two poles, two separated regions, and an area of potential between them.

Without getting too scientific or electronic, it is these two poles, common in myth, that create the immense and absolute difference that in turn engenders the world between them. From the gap between Muspelheim and Niflheim comes the ice giant, Ymir; from the world of Day and Night, with the agency of God, comes all the rest of Nature. From Ymir's armpit, from dust and Adam's rib, in some unfathomable way, come human beings, scarcely recognisable but familiar enough to anchor us in the created universe. Then, Story proper begins and the tale of everything that is becomes the story of a progression either away from or towards those original poles.

Let's lay it out like this:

In the Great Void (or whatever you want to call it) are two poles:

Pole # 1

Pole # 2

Between them manifests everything that is. But that created zone is in flux: what lies in it moves either toward Pole # 1 or Pole # 2 - there is a progression closer to or further away from either Pole.

So we have:

Pole # 1

Close to Pole # 1

Equidistant from either Pole

Close to Pole # 2

Pole # 2

Already this looks too scientific, but you probably get the concept. In mythic terms, we have the cold darkness of Niflheim, occupied by Frost Giants and the like, then the rest of the Nine Worlds, edging up towards Pole # 1 and the fiery regions of Muspelheim. Christianity has its Hell and Heaven; and every other religion has a similar layout, of one kind or another. This isn't a study of religions, though, but of stories, and of myths in particular. And the interesting thing that emerges from this, I think, is that we have the beginning of the precise universal archetypes that underlie all fiction.

Starting from Northrop Frye's division of literature into the modes of myth, romance (by which he meant mediaeval-style epic stories), high mimetic (grand stories about kings and leaders), low mimetic (more 'ordinary' stories about more 'ordinary' people) and ironic (stories about the less-than-human), we have looked at how seeing these modes as a progression of storytelling through time, while interesting, channelled us away from another powerful point - and that is that there might be another kind of progression, from the deep and mysterious truths of myth, moving outward by concentric circles to the more recognisable truths of everyday existence. This fundamental progression echoes the creative process itself, making a story (or any kind of artefact) from nothing.

We also examined the difficulty that modern readers often face when they try to look at all of this freshly: the mental and spiritual frame of reference has changed so much in the last

hundred years that it becomes a struggle to appreciate the way in which earlier stories reflected the world of their creators. Prior to the Reformation and the so-called scientific revolution, we have argued, the relationship between people and their environments was different: there was a primal engagement with and participation in the universe back then which we have more or less succeeded in splitting up into 'external' and 'psychological' halves. Our education leads us to look for 'reasonable' and 'verifiable' evidence for things, while categorising emotional and spiritual experiences as 'merely' mental phenomena.

This leads us to make everything allegorical.

For the earlier storytellers, no such division existed or could have been imagined: the world was perceived as a cohesive whole. Our destinies were truly written in the stars. Allegory wasn't the connecting together of two things: it was perceiving the unity that was already in both.

(About the only vestige we have of this world view today, by the way, is the daily horoscope in the newspaper - a set of 'star signs' which have been trivialised and used to manipulate the superstitious. We sneer scornfully at them, treating them as a joke or a 'bit of fun' - but they are all that is left of a grand and honourable philosophy in which human beings were part of a linked cosmos, guided by universal principles: the same laws applied to the stars as applied to moral behaviour on earth; the whole of existence was connected, participating in an infinite dance around a central and loving Truth.)

Central universal principles are glimpsed in myth, that mode of storytelling in which truth is most raw and unrecognisable: dark abysses, immense, inhuman giants, strange, deep and unfathomable shapes move 'over the waters' in these stories, as we saw in our brief inspection of Norse and Christian mythologies. If we are right, though, and

if another layer of truth emerges from these formless beginnings as we move outward from them, we should be able to glimpse the first seeds of universal story archetypes - if we look carefully.

These archetypes appear throughout fiction, from myth all the way to modern detective thrillers, from ancient plays through to contemporary movies, from mediaeval ballads through to today's mass-produced novels. They've been discussed many times elsewhere, particularly in my book *How Stories Really Work*, but here's a summary:

The Protagonist

In most stories with which we are familiar, protagonists are almost identical:

- Frodo the halfling protagonist in *The Lord of the Rings*, is an orphan who is stabbed, stung and loses a finger in the course of his journey
- Paul Atreides in the science-fiction classic *Dune*, by Frank Herbert, loses his father and is later struck blind in his adventures
- Will, the child protagonist, loses his mother and then some of his fingers in the second of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman
- Jem, one of the child protagonists of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, having already lost his mother, has his arm broken as part of his journey.

Jane, the eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, Heathcliff, the wayward protagonist of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, Pip, the child hero of *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, Anne in *Anne Of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery, and Harry in *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling are all orphans and are all

wounded either physically or emotionally on their journeys. Harry receives his scar while still a baby.

In the film world, examples are again too numerous to mention: George Bailey in Frank Capra's classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, loses his father and is afflicted with deafness in one ear; Luke Skywalker thinks that he is an orphan and even loses the relatives who were raising him in *Star Wars: A New Hope*.

Fiction is quite a brutal world.

That heroes of tales are often orphans is nothing new, strange though it may seem to look at it rawly like this. But the question that few seem to ask is 'Why are so many of these protagonists orphans? Why are so many of them savagely wounded in some way in their stories?'

One obvious answer is 'to gain sympathy from the reader.' Orphans are immediately sympathetic figures for most readers. Wounds and scars increase that sense of sympathy and wanting to help, increasing the identification with the star of the story.

But as we have seen in my book *How Stories Really Work*, it is actually even simpler than that.

For our present purposes, let's simply recognise that there is an archetype called the Protagonist. He or she is the channel through which we, the reader or listener or viewer, participate in the fiction as a whole.

What about the other six archetypes?

The Shadow Protagonist

This figure also appears across the whole range of fiction: he or she is like the protagonist, but with different choices made.

Think Bentley Drummle and Orlick in *Great Expectations*; Darth Vader in *Star Wars*; Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*;

Mordred in the tales of Arthur. These are often the assistants of antagonists, lurking in the darkness like brutal versions of the hero or heroine.

The Antagonist

These go almost without saying as one of the major archetypes in fiction. You will have thought of several before I can finish this sentence: Sauron, Voldemort, Morgana Le Fay, Emperor Palpatine, Steerpike, and a thousand more.

The Comic Companion

There's also a comic companion, virtually the same figure from tale to tale, or fulfilling the same function.

Sam Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, has remarkable similarities to Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or Piglet in *Winnie the Pooh*, or Herbert in *Great Expectations*, or Ron in *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone*, or R2-D2 and C-3PO in *Star Wars*, or the porter in *Macbeth*. Why are these figures there? Why are they so alike?

One standard answer is 'to provide comic relief'. But the real answer, the universal answer, is that there is an archetypal function to fulfil here.

The Submerged Companion

There is a further archetype, a controversial one because of the connection to gender. This is best seen through examples:

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen is a prototype of the romantic novel. Here, Lizzy, potentially a tragic figure, ends up overcoming her inner need and is fulfilled, marrying Darcy at the end.

Jane in *Jane Eyre*, on the other hand, walks around the novel much like a living vacuum for most of the story, but there's a deeper female 'gap' or vacuum lurking upstairs in the mad wife.

Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, ends up unwell, dead and then a ghost - haunting the moors as a phantom.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth ends up walking, empty of soul, in her sleep and then committing suicide; in *Hamlet*, Ophelia loses her mind and also throws her own life away; in *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham is a hollow ghost and Estella an emotionless shell.

Are you beginning to see a pattern here? It's elaborated upon in *How Stories Really Work*.

To grasp what is going on here, we have to put aside the idea that a character in a work of fiction is a creature designed to reflect reality in terms of appearing lifelike and 'real' to readers, and instead think of characters as constructions made of vacuums.

The Emerging Companion

Obvious as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*, or Hans Solo in *Star Wars*, less obvious as Fielding in *A Passage to India* or Sirius Black in *Harry Potter*, this warrior figure has some common traits too across the world of fiction. Warrior figures tend to start off as duplicitous - they are presented to the reader as potentially villainous, not quite to be trusted, shadowy. This ambiguity is their characteristic quality.

That uncertainty about them is of course a vacuum, a gap, an unknown.

In Comedies and Epics they often emerge as the love interests for the female figures - examples abound, including Darcy and Captain Wentworth in Austen's novels, who begin

somewhat overshadowed but who are redeemed by their heroines later.

In Tragedies and Ironies, these warrior types are often the 'heroic' counterparts to the anti-heroic protagonists: Laertes to *Hamlet*, Malcolm to *Macbeth*, Boo Radley to Bob Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Samuel L. Jackson's Jules Winnfield to John Travolta's Vincent Vega in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*.

They eventually shake off the suggestions of duality, though. Their vacuums are filled and they become kings, generals or leaders, doers, men of action and command.

They *emerge*.

It is Aragorn who wins the military side of the War of the Ring, Hans Solo who rescues Luke, Fielding who stands up against British injustice in the trial of Adela, Sirius Black who commands power in *Harry Potter*.

Darcy loses his pride and becomes a mover of events; Boo Radley comes out of hiding to save the children; Jules Winnfield rejects his criminal background and decides to 'walk the earth'.

So these characters we have become accustomed to call warrior figures are figures in transition and move out of their vacuums in the course of a wide variety of fiction.

As is further described in *How Stories Really Work*, the whole world of 'character-driven fiction' is here: reader attention pulled along by vacuums within archetypal figures.

The Wise Old Figure with the Stick

The old man (or woman) with a stick is a major archetype. This figure ranges from Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, the Doctor in *Doctor Who*, and so on, right the way through to their Tragic, Ironic or Comedic reflections, like Jagers in *Great*

Expectations, Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, or Doc Smith in *Back to the Future*.

All of them play the role of outlining the story of which they are a part, and guiding the protagonist onward:

- Gandalf reveals the history of the One Ring which sets the story in motion

- Dumbledore outlines the tasks that Harry must accomplish

- Obi Wan sets out the nature of the quest for Luke and his companions

- the Doctor in *Doctor Who* always sees the main issue and a way through to the conclusion of each episode's plot

- Jagers in *Great Expectations* lays out the law, literally, which moves Pip forward

- Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, outlines the challenge faced by Scrooge

- Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* creates the 'vacuum' of George's vanishment which is the central core of the plot

- Doc Smith in *Back to the Future* similarly points out goals and drives the story into action plot-wise.

They are the main expositors; we turn to them for an idea of what the plot is going to be about.

All right, so we've met these figures in one way or another in almost every major story that we have ever read or heard of. But there is so much more to them. I've presented them here in a rather random way. If I rearrange that order slightly, you might begin to see the beginnings of a pattern:

Wise Old Man

Comic Companion

Emerging Companion

Protagonist

Submerged Companion

Shadow Protagonist

Antagonist

This is their 'correct' sequence. What do I mean? Well, let's reduce them to our earlier little chart:

Pole # 1

Close to Pole # 1

Equidistant from either Pole

Close to Pole # 2

Pole # 2

Now we are starting to get somewhere...though perhaps you may not think so, just yet.

Universal Authenticities

The act of making something, let's assume, is the act of drawing something out of an ultimate Non Existence into some kind of Existence.

Before you begin writing a story, this idea goes, there is no story. Whether quickly or slowly, consciously or unconsciously, something emerges into the light, beginning with some kind of vague polarity or dichotomy, resolving somehow into shapes and figures, moving in one direction or another.

At least, that's what myths tell us is happening. Creation myths come in all shapes and sizes, but they have a startling amount in common. They are 'creation myths' not just because they supposedly tell us how the world began, but because they tell us how anything begins - and where it goes.

In the Korean creation story, for example, there is only an empty void to begin with, until one day a gap forms in it. Correct - a gap in emptiness. All that is lighter than the gap heads upwards to form the sky, while all that is heavier than the gap drifts down to become the earth. A drop of dew from the earth and one from the sky mix to form all that exists, including humans and even the gods.

In Finnish mythology, we see strange characters performing a play for us: at first there are only primal waters and Sky. Sky has a daughter named Ilmatar who, seeking a resting place, descends to the waters, where she swims for 700 years until she notices a beautiful bird also searching for a resting place. Raising her knee for the bird so it can land leads the bird to then lay six eggs made of gold and one made of iron. Eventually Ilmatar is burned by the incubating eggs and

moves her leg, dislodging the eggs, which fall and shatter in the waters: the lower part of one of the eggshells forming the land, while sky forms from the top, with the whites becoming the moon and stars, and the yolk ending up as the sun.

The Navajo creation myth begins with the Niłch'i Diyin (Holy Wind) being created, the mists of lights rising through the darkness to bring to life the four Diyin Dine'é (Holy People), all created in the time before the Earth and the physical aspect of humans came to be.

The most widely accepted account of Greek creation myth is reported by Hesiod, beginning with Chaos, a yawning nothingness from which emerge Gaia (the Earth) and some other divine beings: Eros (Love), the Abyss (the Tartarus), and the Erebus. Action and narrative begin to take shape when Gaia gives birth to Uranus (the Sky) who then fertilizes her: from that union is born first the Titans, followed by the one-eyed Cyclopes and the Hecatonchires or Hundred-Handed Ones, who are both thrown into Tartarus by Uranus. Gaia, driven into fury by this, convinces Cronus to castrate his father. Cronus does so and becomes the ruler of the Titans.

Note that we begin with emptiness and this coalesces into narrative, in various colourful and creative ways: the void comes first, usually, followed by a progression towards the light and sometimes some kind of conflict with the darkness. Details, shapes, actions seem to differ superficially, but the narrative trend is one of motion either towards or away from the light: the 'story' that follows the primal creation is to do with whether things move 'upward' or 'downward', or, to put it another way, everything goes into orbit around one pole or the other.

And that matches up, as we found earlier, with the archetypal characters whom we find in all kinds of fiction:

The Wise Old Figure, representing Wisdom or one end of the spectrum, the pole of Light or the 'Skyfather' or whatever each mythology calls it or him.

The Comic Companion, symbolising Freedom, closest to the Skyfather pole, sometimes represented as a messenger of the gods or an entertainer.

The Emerging Companion or Emerging King, that key figure who often begins in the shadows or makes a journey through the shadows but more often than not comes out at the other side triumphant and closer to the light end of the spectrum.

The Protagonist or 'centre of awareness' who, because he or she hovers in that zone equidistant between both poles, grabs most of our attention.

The Submerged Companion, a character archetype who often drifts towards being a phantom or hollow creature, heading towards orbit around the dark pole, but who is sometimes 'rescued' and pulled upward toward the light, usually by the Emerging Companion.

The Shadow Protagonist, symbolising a subservience to darkness, a figure who is already often trapped in orbit around Non-Existence or darkness and whose choices often parallel those of the Protagonist.

And finally, the Antagonist, often a personification of the Void, a figure whose entire purpose is the subjugation of the light, and its destruction.

Dozens of examples of each these may have already occurred to you. They abound throughout all literature in almost every culture on Earth. Perhaps you are wondering why you've not spotted them before, or, if you have, why have you not placed them in this sequence before.

In effect, what this means - if we carry our argument through to its logical conclusion - is that every story is a myth, or follows a mythic pattern: every tale, whether it's a novel, an

epic poem, a film, a play or whatever, is about this 'pull between poles'. We can even define the basic genres themselves as those forms of story which pull one way or another: Epic and Comedy pull toward the light; Tragedy and Irony pull toward the dark.

Keeping our little archetypal scale in mind, we can postulate that a Comedy tells the tale of a Submerged Companion or even a Shadow Protagonist moving upward towards Freedom and Wisdom, ending in reunification or marriage; and an Epic relays the progression of a Protagonist through shadows towards the Light; whereas a Tragedy is the story of an Emerging Companion doomed to fall into the position of a Shadow Protagonist or even an Antagonist, failing to respond to the light, while an Irony describes the arc of the Protagonist downward into the Void.

Modern minds struggle with this. We can look over the creation myths above and volubly argue that it is precisely that they vary so much in detail and colour which indicates that they cannot be 'true': we desire a cold, scientific, separated-out and 'objective' truth, and all these tales are just fanciful whimsy for us. But we have lost the art of 'participating' in the universe: we have taken on board the mental habits of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution and can no longer see the world in a unified way, but can only seek to divide it into 'objective' and 'subjective' halves.

Each creation myth is like a song, sung by its people: the underlying tones are the same, the lyrics differ. If we were to put them all together in one room, we would have a concert, not a competition for 'truth'.

It's the same today, now, with a collection of short stories or a bookshelf full of fiction: each successful tale that is written emerges from Non-Existence to Existence following the pattern of myth, each asserts its own 'truth' - but we do not

claim that one story holds more 'objective truth' than another, rather that each contains universal verities.

This ability to reflect universal authenticities is one of the main reasons we value fiction. As we will see, fictions of all kinds perform this function for us, showing us the mythic nature of the world in different ways.

The Tale of Arthur

Some assertions thus far, then:

Myth brings something out of nothing via a set of two poles, between which is a spectrum of points:

Pole # 1

Close to Pole # 1

Equidistant from either Pole

Close to Pole # 2

Pole # 2

This abstract scale is then personified as the great archetypes:

The Wise Old Figure

The Comic Companion

The Emerging Companion

The Protagonist

The Submerged Companion

The Shadow Protagonist

The Antagonist

At first, in myths such as the creation stories told in cultures all over the world, these figures are strange, inhuman, often giant or animal-like - great eagles, or roosters, or dragons and so on. Events take place which seem unnatural or full of a kind of dark symbolism that we can scarcely grasp: sons destroy

fathers, creatures consume themselves, things shatter or melt or burn, and from these remnants further things are made.

Then we begin to see figures that resemble us in some distant way: humankind's first ancestors, or god-like but humanoid forms - mighty, remote, opulent. Odin sits in his silver-roofed hall; Adam and Eve dwell in Paradise; the world's first people partake of Dreamtime.

There's a bridge that is built, then, to lands with which we have more familiarity: Bifrost the Rainbow Bridge reaches Midgard or Earth; Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden into a harder, more recognisable world; part-humans like Hercules appear.

As we move outward from this core of mythic tales, we encounter what Northrop Frye called Romances - not love stories, but grand epics about heroic larger-than-life figures moving through landscapes that we might identify but which are still populated by and saturated with the 'supernatural'. And here we observe another interesting thing: the rough-hewn or primal archetypes we glimpsed in myth are at this level more distinct.

As an example of this, let's take a look at one of the most familiar Romances, the story of King Arthur and his Knights at the Round Table. If we are correct in our analysis, we should see quite quickly that certain of the seven great figures above now take on a defined and particular form.

We're all familiar with the basic story of Arthur, the son of King Uther Pendragon who is raised by another family, taking his rightful place as king when, as a boy, he is able to pull a sword from an anvil set in stone. He is counselled by Merlin the magician, marries Guinevere, is nearly betrayed by his sister Morgana le Fay, takes into his order of knights the warrior Lancelot (who establishes himself as the greatest knight in all the world by his virtue, loyalty, and bravery) and

is eventually undone by his own son, Mordred, who mortally wounds him, all as Merlin prophesied.

All of that is perfectly well-known from stories we have either been told in childhood or seen on movie screens in one form or another for generations.

Did you spot the archetypes?

Arthur, the obvious Protagonist, moves from being the orphan boy, through various challenges, to become king, counselled by Merlin the Wise Old Man.

Lancelot is the Emerging Companion, proceeding from darkness to become a Knight of the Round Table - but his relationship with Guinevere, the Submerged Companion, dooms the whole Epic structure of the story into a tragic form: instead of rescuing the hollow Submerged Companion from her submergence, as occurs in many other tales (and which gives us the basic form of the love story in literature) he succumbs to temptation and is demoted.

Arthur's sister, the Antagonist Morgana le Fay, tricks Arthur into becoming the father of the Shadow Protagonist Mordred, who eventually slays him, in echoes of the father-murdering son motif from myth.

Almost all the Seven Character Archetypes are there. The pattern of action they engage in together shapes the story as a whole into a Tragedy with powerful Epic ramifications. The tale of Arthur is no longer a 'myth': the figures in it are much more recognisably human, their motivations and actions much more commonplace, the outcomes more predictable. But this is nevertheless an outer circle around the primal truths of myth and not that far removed from it: Arthur is the personification of the point equidistant between two extremes, pulled hither and thither by them, first upward through trials towards kingship, then downward towards death by deception and betrayal; Lancelot as a personification of the height of nobility

falls in the end from that height due to the pull of the partly-void Submerged Companion.

The only archetype not clearly present is the Comic Companion. This figure never emerges in the initial Arthurian tales, but always makes it into the later Disney versions in some way. Comedy is, as this sequence of archetypes has it, close to Wisdom - Comic Companions are often close to the Wise Old Figures in fiction, chosen or at least smiled upon by them: to reach a point so close to the pole of Light means that triumph is close. This is one reason why Comic Companions almost always have something to do with the final victory of the Protagonist; it's also perhaps why there is no clear personification in these stories, because Arthur doesn't ultimately succeed - his Quest for the Holy Grail falls short, and his tale turns dark, with only the brightest of hopes, that he will return in the time of the kingdom's greatest need, as an echo of it.

In the supernatural Logres of Arthurian Britain, we have in fact been entertained by a movement of figures across a stage haunted by the mythic imagery and motifs behind and under it: a high-born boy has been taken and hidden by a wise old man, to be revealed as a figure of power and destiny at the right moment; a grand and noble man has fallen; a hollow queen has pulled him away from perfection; a corrupt and unnatural birth has resulted in the collapse of a divine dream, leading to the beginnings of a more prosaic world.

Legend, that band of stories around the core of Myth, has in effect retold the same tales but using figures more clearly 'human', less god-like or monstrous.

This 're-telling' business continues when we look at the next layer of fiction.

The Fall of a King

We have seen that the powerful images and motifs of Myth can be found in different forms in what Northrop Frye called Romance, the genre of legends and tales of heroes and demigods. Examining the Matter of Britain, we detected quite easily the presence of most of the great archetypes - the Wise Old Figure, the Comic Companion, the Emerging Companion, the Aware Protagonist, the Submerged Companion, the Shadow Protagonist and the Antagonist - partaking of adventures under different names: Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, Guinevere, Mordred and Morgana Le Fay, with only the Comic Companion missing, at least until T. H. White and Disney came along and retold the stories.

In our diagram of Frye's modes² - a diagram that we have changed from one of linear historical progression to a series of concentric circles, with Myth at the heart - the next circle moving out from Romance is what Frye called High Mimesis, a grand name betokening those stories of kings and other leaders which come to us most memorably in the form of Shakespeare's Tragedies and Histories.

Here, as Frye outlined, instead of a tale telling us about demigods and super-heroes, as in the Arthur stories, we hear about the rise and fall of 'real' political figures: Shakespeare's kings are for the most part based on real kings who actually reigned. Of course, they are not portrayed in what we could consider 'realistic' ways: Shakespeare took earlier historical chronicles, which were themselves embellished and anecdotal,

² See the free, full colour chart available from the website: <http://www.clarendonhousebooks.com/myth-the-now-chart>

and added, developed or tweaked fictitious elements to create interesting dramas. He did not intend to create documentaries; he was a playwright and a master author.

And that is the point: High Mimesis, as we glimpse it through Shakespeare's plays, was another form of fiction, and as such drew its power from the same source as Romance: Myth.

To see what this means, let's take a close look at *Macbeth*.

For most of us, the plot is familiar. Amidst thunder and lightning, three witches decide that their next meeting shall be with Macbeth, a Scottish warrior-general who has just defeated the allied invasion forces of Norway and Ireland, led by the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. As they wander onto a heath, Macbeth and his lieutenant Banquo encounter the three witches who prophecy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, and 'King hereafter', before they vanish - just as another thane, Ross, arrives and informs Macbeth of something that the audience already knows at that point - that King Duncan has bestowed upon Macbeth the title Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his efforts in defending Scotland. Macbeth begins to ponder how he might become king after all.

Duncan welcomes and praises Macbeth and Banquo, declaring that he will spend the night at Macbeth's castle at Inverness; Macbeth sends a message ahead to his wife, Lady Macbeth, telling her about the witches' prophecies. She suffers none of her husband's vacillation, overriding all of his objections and successfully persuading him to kill the king that night in their own home.

While Duncan is asleep, Macbeth overcomes his doubts and hallucinations - he sees a dagger floating in front of him, guiding the way to the king - and stabs his guest. He is so shaken that Lady Macbeth has to follow through and frame Duncan's sleeping servants for the murder by placing bloody daggers on them.

Early the next morning, the darkly comic porter opens the gate to Macduff, the loyal Thane of Fife, and Macbeth leads him to the king's chamber, where Macduff discovers Duncan's body. Soon afterwards Macbeth murders the guards to prevent them from professing their innocence, claiming he did so in a fit of anger. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain then flee to England and Ireland, and Macbeth assumes the throne as the new King of Scotland.

Deeply uneasy despite his success, Macbeth becomes suspicious of everyone, including his best friend Banquo whom the witches prophesied would be the father of kings. Macbeth arranges to have him and his son Fleance murdered - assassins succeed in killing Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At a banquet that evening, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost enter and sit in Macbeth's place. Macbeth causes panic by raging at what to the guests is an empty chair, and a desperate Lady Macbeth is unable to prevent widespread concern over Macbeth's apparent insanity from breaking up what was supposed to be a joyous occasion.

Growing more and more mentally restless, Macbeth visits the three witches again, who, in answer to his questions, summon horrible apparitions, each of which offers predictions and further prophecies: an armoured head tells him to beware of Macduff; a bloody child tells him that no one born of a woman shall be able to harm him; and a crowned child holding a tree, states that Macbeth will be safe until Great Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. As all men are apparently born of women and forests cannot move, this puts Macbeth at ease. But when he is told that Macduff has fled to England, Macbeth orders Macduff's castle to be seized, and sends murderers to slaughter Macduff's wife and children.

Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth, tormented by guilt from the crimes she and her husband have committed, is witnessed sleepwalking and bemoaning the murders of Duncan, Lady

Macduff, and Banquo, as she attempts to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands.

In England, Macduff, learning of the death of his wife and family, vows revenge and joins with the rightful heir to Scotland's throne, Malcolm, and an army raised with the support of the Scottish nobles. Malcolm leads the army, along with Macduff and Englishmen against Macbeth in Dunsinane Castle. As they pass through Birnam Wood, the soldiers are ordered to cut down and carry tree limbs to camouflage their numbers. Lady Macbeth kills herself, causing Macbeth to sink into despair, reflecting on the brevity and meaninglessness of life. Still certain that the witches' prophecies guarantee his invincibility, he is struck with fear when he learns that the English army is advancing on Dunsinane shielded with boughs cut from Birnam Wood, in apparent fulfilment of one of the prophecies.

The play ends with a battle between Macbeth and Macduff, whose declaration that he was 'from his mother's womb/ Untimely ripp'd' (V.8.15–16), (i.e. born by Caesarean section) and is therefore technically not 'of woman born', finally brings Macbeth to realise that he has misinterpreted the witches' words. Though doomed, he continues to fight; Macduff kills and beheads him, thus fulfilling the remaining prophecy.

Although Malcolm, and not Fleance, is then placed on the throne, the witches' prophecy concerning Banquo ('Thou shalt get kings') was known to the audience of Shakespeare's time to be true: James VI of Scotland (later also James I of England) was supposedly Banquo's descendant.

Astute readers will note the echoes of Myth and Romance here, including the three witches resemblance to the three Norse Norns, controllers of Fate; the killing of a king; the suggestion of a moving forest and supernatural invincibility. But the play bridges the chasm between Romance and the Low Mimetic modes: none of what is suggested as supernatural

turns out to be so, except for the mystery of the witches' foreknowledge of it. Characters are not superhuman, but mortal; the world is revealed to be grim and harshly real rather than full of magic, even though magic is strongly suggested throughout.

As for the Seven Archetypes, they are all present and performing their roles as they have done in Myth and Romance, given that we are in a Tragedy: a wise (but powerless) old man tells of doom; a grimly comic porter jokes about Hell; the emerging warrior Malcolm comes to his throne from the shadows; the protagonist Macbeth, instead of rising to greatness as in an Epic tale, is pulled down the wrong path by his submerged and hollow wife, and becomes a Shadow Protagonist, making consistently flawed decisions before ending up bereft of all hope and dead. If Myth gives us the two poles of darkness and light, and then moves into a narrative form as these archetypes arrange themselves around one pole or the other (as we have seen), then *Macbeth* is about going into orbit around darkness.

Macbeth rekindles something of the strangeness of Myth too with its motifs and images: bearded witches, bloodied children, moving woods, men 'not born of woman'. Shapes emerge from the darkness but never quite make it into the light. But we can clearly see that, in this High Mimetic mode, there has been a motion away from the eerie and inexplicable motions of the mythic and the colourful but supernatural tapestry of the romantic epic towards something else. Great warriors who speak in iambic pentameter and let us see inside their minds through soliloquys are different creatures to the strange gods of myth or the super-heroic knights of legend - they are that much closer to the 'person in the street', in a sense, though still aloof.

In examining the Low Mimetic, we will see whether our thesis holds true: do stories of 'ordinary folk' as outlined in

19th century novels, also resonate with the same motifs and archetypes as the myth we think lies at their core?

Participation

Earlier, we looked at Northrop Frye's development of what he called fictional 'modes', each determined by the relationship of the hero or heroine both to other characters and to the natural environment. The five modes, as outlined in his ground-breaking book *Anatomy of Criticism*, were:

(1) Myth, featuring a world in which entities that we usually call 'gods' do barely recognisable things. As we have since seen, going beyond Frye, myths about creation involve something emerging from a void or total darkness, something that is usually bipolar in nature at first, something that takes shape as a set of personified archetypes.

(2) Romance, where superhuman deeds are done in a supernatural environment, like the world of Arthurian legend. We have noted since then that these tales feature the same set of archetypes from myth.

(3) High Mimesis, about warriors or kings or leaders, capable of great and usually tragic action in a recognisably 'realistic' setting. Mythic archetypes are still at work, but more recognisable and 'ordinary'.

(4) Low Mimesis, in which lead characters who seem similar to us as readers are involved in more prosaic adventures.

(5) Irony, featuring characters clearly inferior to us in some way.

Frye argued that these modes had a historical evolution, with Myth at the beginning, then Romance during ancient and mediaeval times, followed by High Mimesis during the Renaissance and Low Mimesis during the rise of the novel. Irony was, he proposed, the main form of literature in modern times. However, we have instead considered these modes outside a historical context and in terms of a series of concentric circles³.

If we accept for a moment the premise of this set of circles, it would mean that every story, no matter what 'mode' it was written in, contained elements of the modes within it. Thus a Romance would be quite 'myth-like' at its heart, a High Mimetic tale would contain some of the features of both Myth and Romance, and so on. Ultimately an Irony would encompass them all in some way, retaining mythic power at its core.

This would also mean many other things, including that there was really no such thing as an original, individual story, only the operations of the imagination finding new 'disguises' as worn in different ways by different authors. A modern thriller would contain the seeds of myth in much the same way as a 19th century novel; a mediaeval tale would be recognisably similar to a piece of pulp fiction; a Renaissance play would have at its core the same 'message' as a creation myth.

And that is largely what we do find.

We have also considered that the modern reader is divorced from a particular way of viewing both fiction and the 'real' world because of a fundamental change of approach which also has a historical context.

³ See the free, full colour chart available from the website: <http://www.clarendonhousebooks.com/myth-the-now-chart>

We postulated that, for many reasons elaborated elsewhere, human beings 'participated' in their environments - social, religious, natural, intellectual - in a unified way for most of recorded history, but that around the middle of the last millennium, a 'splitting off' occurred. This took the shape of the Reformation in terms of religion, the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution in terms of philosophy, and, in fiction, saw a shift away from the epic poetry of the Romance towards stories centred first on 'great figures', quasi-historical kings and other leaders, and then on 'ordinary people' as can be seen in the rise of the novel. We can see this 'splitting' in language, as Owen Barfield argues: some words divide from an original unity of meaning into what we now call figurative use, with metaphors and similes coming into use to represent a re-unification of an old unity.

Modern readers might tend to associate these changes with the growth of literacy in the population, so that, for example, as new schools opened up in the Renaissance, spreading the ability to read and write beyond the confines of the Church for the first time, so did a desire for stories written about recognisable people. Furthermore, as yet more schools and the entire modern education system were created to cope with the societal transformation that accompanied the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, so novels came into being to satisfy a new reading public. It's an interesting line of argument, but it doesn't really go deep enough - we can always ask 'Why were schools opening up more than at any other time in human history?' However we view that evolution, the result was that new modes of literature were spawned, including, in the 20th century, the inwardly turning and deconstructive mode of Irony.

However, this view of the transformation of 'participation' into rational and emotional halves, like the historical

perspective taken initially to do with Frye's modes, can also fall into a trap.

Whenever we discuss something historically, we immediately push part of it into a zone called 'the past' and to some extent, intentionally or not, distance ourselves from it. In modic terms, for example, making Myth the historical starting point of a progression of forms of fiction through time inevitably means that we see it as remote, lost in the mists of different epochs, separated from us. Romance and legend seem closer; the great works of the Renaissance a little closer. By the time we get to the novel and its ironic forms of the last century, we mentally feel that we have 'arrived' at a form for which everything that was prior to it was aiming somehow, and with which we are more familiar. A converse argument, as taken in this book, is that this is unhelpful and that we should look at the modes in terms of co-existing concentric circles⁴. This also applies to what happens with 'participation'.

By pushing the 'original participation' (to use Barfield's term) back in time to before the Reformation, we can easily lose sight of the fact that this progression from a unity of viewpoint to a splitting off into halves is what tends to occur with us as human individuals in life: in childhood, the whole universe appears to us as inter-connected: everything has both a 'logical' and an 'emotional' component, the lines between which are blurred to the point of complete indistinctness. Only later, as we 'grow up', do we learn (partly as a result of the educational input of a society which has already assimilated the 'split') to look at the world around us in a divided way: some things are to do with rationality, technicality, logic and the material world, while others, so this development asserts, are to do with irrationality, poetics, emotion and the suddenly

⁴ See the free, full colour chart available from the website: <http://www.clarendonhousebooks.com/myth-the-now-chart>

'inner' or subjective world. It is not only our career choices which are separated out into the reasoned and commercially viable or the emotional and artistic - our minds, even our souls, are compartmented in a similar way. As we grow into adulthood, many of us spend our time trying to 'bridge the gaps' which have been largely artificially created by this progression: we seek meaning in the material, soulfulness in the scientific, passion in the purely commercial. A pre-Reformation intellect would probably not have had this problem, and may even not recognised it - just as the viewpoint of a child is impervious to it. Children don't see the world like that, and neither did we when we were children - 'inanimate objects' did not exist: everything was animated, everything participated in a gloriously universal dance, the meaning of which we could no more separate out as a distinct component than one could split away light from the star that emanated it.

So a parallel argument to that of the role of Myth is to see the growth of 'non-participation' in the world not as a purely historical development which we can assign to the past but as an intimate and personal progression which happens to us all as we 'grow up'. That something so peculiar to us as individuals is then made large and thrown across time as a historical pattern of growth is interesting in itself. But for the purposes of this book, what is fascinating is that just as Myth is the seedbed of all other modes of literature, so is 'participation' the core of our reading of them.

Phantom Verisimilitude

From the darkness come two poles, light and dark; between those poles archetypes form, moving into orbit around one pole or the other. In the gaps between, strange images (birds whose eggshells form the world, dew droplets combining to make reality, and so on) and non-sequiturs (from an ice-giant's armpit comes the first man and woman, for example) roam unbridled. This is the zone of Myth.

As the light grows stronger, so the images become clarified: in the zone of Romance or Legend, superhuman figures come into conflict, quests and tasks are set, there are clear beginnings and endings. But the archetypes are the same. And, as Romance turns into the High Mimetic, the zone where human figures become more vulnerable and the world grows more solid, and grisly deeds and death contrast with wisdom and sanity in ways which we can almost share, we can see the same archetypes. The narrative is further defined, paralleling history itself, as in Shakespeare's great Tragedies and Histories - but the bones of Myth show through.

Similarly, as children we participate in a world without an awareness of law or sequences or even cause and effect - it is we who emerge from the darkness into a reality in which everything is non-sequitur at first. Gradually, things begin to make sense: time and order, colour and motion take the place of primal polarities. The towering, partly-archetypal figures of our parents and guardians slowly dwindle into vulnerable human figures. We learn to split apart our souls into thinking compartments, some for rationalities, others for imaginings; whereas at first the universe is awash with emotion, we are taught by the culture around us that as time goes on those

feelings belong largely inside ourselves. We cease to participate in the world in the same way. But the bones of participation show through.

Myths mutate into Legends, which transform into embellished stories of real kings and leaders; our awareness mutates into early childhood and then into the garnished but harder world of later childhood.

Then comes the zone of what Frye called the Low Mimetic, in which life is presented as more prosaic. The lumbering god-like beings of Myth have diminished through the superhuman heroes of Legend and the grand leaders of Tragedy and History and become characters whom we might just meet in the street - except that they aren't, quite. The fiction of the Low Mimetic contains stories which do not stretch the bounds of credibility quite as far as Shakespeare's plays or the legends of yesteryear, but they are not yet documentary accounts: events are still designed; incidents and outcomes purposeful and controlled. An author is still present; characters are not 'real', they are crafted; a plotline exists, even when it is deftly disguised as a series of random occurrences.

Comparably, as childhood wanes into adolescence, we are still part of a world haunted by order, by a sense that some kind of unity must be around the corner, or a feeling of betrayal and injustice when we find it missing. Adulthood beckons to us with the same sense of 'conclusion' as the final part of a novel. The sense of Myth lingers.

It's tempting to colour the Low Mimetic, that mode of fiction that is supposed to be about 'ordinary people' and which developed with the novel, with a sense of verisimilitude. 'Verisimilitude' means 'like truth' and so we think that the 19th century novel and many of its successors are representations of 'the world as we know it'. In these kinds of stories, people meet occurrences which, we imagine, might happen to us as we sit reading the book: accidents, marriages,

love affairs, deaths, divorces, and an almost infinite amount of what we might be tempted to term 'real life events'. But verisimilitude is 'like truth' - it isn't actual truth. It disguises itself in different clothes from its predecessors in the High Mimetic or the Romance or the Myth behind them, but they are clothes nevertheless. What we find in the Low Mimetic is the same polarities, the same archetypes, the same motion towards light or dark, but this time dressed in 'ordinariness'.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for example, would be classed as a Low Mimetic piece of fiction. In our next chapter, we will see just how much its weight is carried by the skeleton of Myth beneath its surface.

Pride, Prejudice and Parable

Usually it is only in stories or dreams that we feel as though we have been journeying for a long time but realise that we are still in the same place. But the argument in this book can have the same effect: we began by looking at Myth and the strange images and tales that spring from the hearts of cultures across the planet; then we examined Romance or Legend, the quests and superhuman accomplishments of larger-than-life figures, striding through magical landscapes. Shortly afterwards we inspected the grand Tragedies of what Northrop Frye called High Mimesis, the chronicles of the fall of great half-historical figures in almost-historical settings. But all the way through we glimpsed beneath the surface of all these stories the same skeleton that we first found in Myth: the polarities, the archetypes, the motion between them, the rising and falling that occurs between darkness and light. Macbeth's fall from power was not unlike the fall of Lucifer, or that of Adam; the companions of the Round Table were not unlike those of Olympus; the brutal violence and storms of *King Lear* echo the dark and cold mythological forms upon which it is based.

Furthermore, as if that wasn't enough, this whole progression paralleled our own development from a childlike participation in the world around us, to a maturing detachment, to an eventual mental and spiritual compartmentation and division. But even here, we found that we are haunted by the core or unable to escape the bones of things, even when we feel at our most separated from the world: we go into orbit around the Light or the Dark, or are pulled towards both poles in the same way that the character-archetypes of fiction are.

In arriving at Frye's Low Mimetic mode - supposedly the 'realistic' stories of 'ordinary' folk which accompanied the rise of the novel in the 19th century, a mode which parallels what we might call 'early adolescence' - we find that the same game is afoot: twin poles, archetypes in motion, pulling characters one way or the other, and with them, our attention as readers moves up and down.

When we say a good story is one which 'moves' readers, the term is not simply figurative.

If it is indeed true that there are two magnetic poles at the core of all stories, then we can presume that the archetypal 'points' that lie between them - the Wise Old Figure, the Comic Companion, the Emerging Warrior King, the Aware Protagonist, the Submerged and usually female Companion, the Shadow Protagonist and the Antagonist - exert their own lesser or derivative 'gravitational pull' on other characters resulting in the sequences we call plots. In the Myth mode, for example, the Submerged Companion Eve pulls Adam down towards darkness in Genesis; we see this reflected in Romance, when Guinevere hauls the Round Table down into disarray with her illicit love for the Emerging Warrior Lancelot; and we see it again when Lady Macbeth persuades her husband into evil.

Any downward pull leads to the two basic genres of Tragedy (ending usually in death but leaving the world in relatively good order) and Irony (where the world itself is unravelled and an ultimate darkness is approached). The opposite upward pull creates the genres of Comedy (ending usually in marriage or reunion) and Epic (concluding with victory or transcendence). In these latter genres, it is usually the Emerging Warrior King who pulls the Submerged Companion up and out of her orbit around darkness - that is precisely the plotline for modern romances (which fit neatly into the Comedy genre). These are not the epic Romances

defined by Frye, but the love stories that have grown into a sub-genre all their own.

This Emerging-Warrior-King-rescues-Submerged-Female-Companion plotline is exactly that of Jane Austen's Low Mimetic masterpiece, *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the stories which initiated that whole 'r'" sub-genre.

It's 'Low Mimetic' because, as the label suggests, it is set out as an imitation of the lives of 'lower' people. Unlike the mighty stories of legend in the Romance mode or the lofty tales of kings and generals in the High Mimetic mode, *Pride and Prejudice*, like most novels, strives to convey a fiction about 'ordinary' folk, people who possess no superhuman powers and aren't particularly engaged in grand politics. These characters occupy a world created to resemble the 'compartmented reality' which we as adult readers most readily recognise as similar to our own: this is a world of social relationships (like family or neighbourly interactions), particular low-key events (like local dances or fairs) and emotions revealed through dialogue and author omniscience.

In Myth, we never glimpsed inside a god's head but saw what he or she was like implicitly, by image or pure archetype; in Romance we were occasionally told what a character felt but mainly understood it from action, like jousting or questing; in the High Mimetic mode we were told explicitly what a character was thinking through soliloquys, but these were delivered in iambic pentameter. Now in the Low Mimetic mode the language is tamer and more immediately comprehensible - prose rather than poetry - and the suggestions as to what is going on in the characters' minds come from a source we haven't yet seen as clearly as we do in the novel: the author.

It's interesting to note that the emergence of the figure of the 'author' happens at around the time of the rise of the

novel, during the so-called 'Romantic period'. Viewed less historically but more as a psychic progression, the author emerges at the point when our adolescence as individuals begins to coalesce. Prior to that point, individuality - including the notion of copyright, attributing distinct 'sources' to anything, and all the legal rigmarole that comes with an author asserting his or her presence - was simply less important. Shakespeare, for example, took elements for his stories from earlier manuscripts by others without any qualms; Chaucer and the other mediaevals considered it to be a plus that their own tales were drawn from earlier sources. And, with regard to our growth into adults, when we are children we don't have so many issues with 'individuality' - these develop as we become teenagers.

Irrespective of that, though, we can see in Austen's novel the bones of Myth, now dressed in the flesh of 'ordinariness'. The archetypes are all there in some form:

The Wise Old Figure is Mr. Bennet, trapped in what is possibly a hopeless and loveless marriage, but sane and wise enough still to direct Lizzie away from danger and towards wisdom and happiness when he can.

The Comic Companion - Lizzie's mother most closely fits this bill, but there are elements in Mr. Collins and others.

The Emerging Companion is obviously Darcy, who is at first shadowed with prejudice but manifests as a much more worthy gentleman as the tale progresses.

The Protagonist and Submerged Companion are blended, as they are in most stories of this type, into a single figure: in this case, Elizabeth Bennet, a figure at risk of sinking either into the social ruin of spinsterhood by remaining unmarried, or being drawn along an even more ruinous path by the Shadow Protagonist, Wickham.

The Antagonist is revealed as the 'wicked witch' herself, Lady Catherine du Bergh, whose machinations are foiled at the last by the robust and brave defiance of the heroine.

What are the two poles of the story? Wealth, happiness, true love and possibly wisdom at one end, with poverty, misery and the depredations of lust at the other. Wickham's elopement with Lizzie's wild sister Lydia, which threatens the destruction of the Bennet family's reputation, is as close as the story gets to the dark pole; Lizzie's acceptance of Darcy's proposal takes the tale into orbit around the bright pole.

Arguably, the only thing separating this story from Myth is the clothes it wears: the dialogue, the fashion, the setting, the authorially provided detail. Strip them away and we have again witnessed a drama between Light and Dark.

But there is a further level: after adolescence comes adulthood; after ordinariness comes the sub-ordinary; after the modern novel comes the work of the 20th century and the post-moderns.

After the Low Mimetic comes the Ironic mode.

Great Expectations

Northrop Frye's division of fiction into several modes has in his work *Anatomy of Criticism* and elsewhere been most usually associated with time periods. I have taken the additional step of correlating them with stages of human growth, then these in turn broadly relate (I'm asserting) to the progression outlined by Owen Barfield in his book *Saving the Appearances* from a state of 'original participation' in which the relationship of human beings to the world around them was more intimate and unified, to a condition in which everything has been divided up and the struggle is to restore it to coherence and unity.

One of the points I'm making is that pushing Myth into the past (along with other modes) or placing Barfield's 'original participation' in the past can prevent us from perceiving a greater truth: the state of Myth and that of original participation can be much closer to the 'Now' of our lives, if we connect them to our growth as individual human beings.

In the last chapter we looked at the Low Mimetic mode through the example of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and found that, as we expected, it is carried by the skeleton of Myth in the same way that all the other modes are: there is the same polarity, there are the same archetypes, there is the pattern of motion towards light or dark and so on. But the last of Frye's modes, Irony, is a little harder to deal with. That's because we are living it - it is the mode of our current culture, for one thing, having developed historically in the 19th century and come into its own in all fields of culture in the 20th and 21st centuries, but looking at it less historically and more psychically, it is the mode of the 'adult', that version of

us which has progressed furthest from the 'original participation' of childhood. Most of us are at that stage of our lives in which things are normally highly compartmented and structured, where we have supposedly 'matured'. That means that we have entered a certain order into things, but in doing so may have lost our innocent appreciation of, and ability to contribute to, the world around us.

Furthermore, for the adult there has usually not only been this compartmentation but a deconstruction: closely held values and beliefs, once cherished, have been broken up and broken down, undermined, challenged and often suppressed. These are the characteristics of Irony as a genre and also go some way to describing Irony as a mode.

Irony deals with the sub-human. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye defines Irony as 'a mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action inferior to the one assumed to be normal in the reader or audience, or in which the poet's attitude is one of detached objectivity' and 'the mythos of the literature concerned primarily with a "realistic" level of experience, usually taking the form of a parody or contrasting analogue to romance. Such irony may be tragic or comic in its main emphasis'. In my book *How Stories Really Work*, I elaborate on this, looking at Irony as one fourth of a circle of four basic genres: Epic, Comedy, Tragedy and Irony.

Irony is the quarter of the horror story, the dark detective thriller, the unsolved mystery, the twisted and unending nightmare. It is the quarter where things which would be neatly resolved in the Epic or even Tragic quarters are left unresolved, usually explicitly. Whereas the Epic apex is one of enlightenment and release, here at the nadir of the circle waits only despair and eternal captivity.

One of the key features of Ironies is that things get a little 'mixed up': time is often out of sequence (as in *Pulp Fiction*), characters have split personalities (as in *Fight Club*) and reality

can take on the colour of nightmares (as in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*).

But does Irony betray the presence of Myth, as all the other modes do? Its emergence as a distinct genre or mode can probably be traced to the latter part of the 19th century, and one of its early examples is Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

In examining *Great Expectations*, what exactly should our thesis lead us to look for?

The same kind of things that we have been finding all along: two poles, a set of archetypes, and a motion toward one of the poles. In Myth, the image presented is usually either of an eternal battle or balance between Light and Dark; in Romance, the forces of each are arrayed in terms of supernatural virtues and vices; in the High Mimetic, the same forces struggle with each other, often resulting in an overturning and death of the protagonist; in Low Mimetic fiction, the poles are normally cleverly disguised but can still be detected, as we have seen. Following the logic of all this, in an Irony, the motion would be towards the darker pole and away from the light, probably in the form of some kind of subversion of the bright pole. In other words, whereas in another kind of story the protagonist might die but no one questions the value system or background order of the story world, in an Irony the story world itself is undermined as well.

Instead of a pull upwards, as we saw in *Pride and Prejudice* and as is common to 90% of the tales with which we are familiar, which show a general trend for things to go into orbit around a bright outcome ('and they lived happily ever after'), as we enter the Ironic world the pull is downwards: the archetype of the Emerging Warrior King, whose destiny in another mode might have been to take up his crown, is in an Irony doomed to lose; the Submerged Companion, who otherwise might have been 'rescued' and end her days happily married, is here doomed to live a phantom life and eventually

die horribly; Shadow Protagonists abound and get their way; and the Protagonist drifts towards orbiting the dark.

Protagonists in Ironies never have a happy time of it, even from the start, and Pip is no exception:

My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

The tale of Pip is the story of an orphan (no surprises there for a Protagonist) and his apparent rise from the borderline of poverty and abuse into the realms of London life as a gentleman. But the emphasis is on 'apparent'. His infatuation with Estella, and his consequent misunderstanding about the sources of his sudden fortune, underpin the whole book. They lead Pip to construct a world in which present wealth and future love are going to haul him slowly to the top of the scale, towards the Light. But this turns out to be illusory, a fabrication which comes crashing down and winds up with him having nothing except the ghost of a hope in the final line of the novel (a line Dickens revised to make it less grim than in

his original draft). In other words, *Great Expectations* follows the arc of an Irony perfectly - it is the fall towards the lower pole, disguised as a progression to the upper.

As for the archetypes, you may have spotted them already, keeping in mind that they are ironically disguised and subverted. Jaggers the lawyer, who outlines the plot to the protagonist and who turns out to have had a remarkable influence behind the scenes of most of the events of the novel, is a darker version of the Wise Old Figure:

'Now you are to understand, secondly, Mr. Pip, that the name of the person who is your liberal benefactor remains a profound secret, until the person chooses to reveal it. I am empowered to mention that it is the intention of the person to reveal it at first hand by word of mouth to yourself. When or where that intention may be carried out, I cannot say; no one can say. It may be years hence. Now, you are distinctly to understand that you are most positively prohibited from making any inquiry on this head, or any allusion or reference, however distant, to any individual whomsoever as the individual, in all the communications you may have with me. If you have a suspicion in your own breast, keep that suspicion in your own breast.'

Herbert Pocket performs his role as the Comic Companion perfectly, assisting the Protagonist to the last. The Emerging Companion is a degraded convict, returning from transportation to Australia; the Submerged Companion is the phantom-like Miss Havisham, stuck in the past in a decaying wedding dress, who ends up burning to death. Her protégé is the cold and aloof Estella:

Estella was always about, and always let me in and out, but never told me I might kiss her again. Sometimes, she would coldly tolerate me; sometimes, she would condescend to me; sometimes, she would be quite familiar with me; sometimes, she would tell me energetically that she hated me. Miss Havisham would often ask me in a whisper, or when we were alone, 'Does she grow prettier and prettier, Pip?' And when I said yes (for indeed she did), would seem to enjoy it greedily. Also, when we played at cards Miss Havisham would look on, with a miserly relish of Estella's moods, whatever they were. And sometimes, when her moods were so many and so contradictory of one another that I was puzzled what to say or do, Miss Havisham would embrace her with lavish fondness, murmuring something in her ear that sounded like 'Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!'

As we might expect, there is more than one Shadow Protagonist: first, as a kind of Hyde to Pip's Jekyll, comes Orlick, the smith's apprentice who violently maims Pip's older sister and places Pip's life in danger; then, as a counterpart to Pip's gentlemanly life, there's Bentley Drummle, who arrogantly takes Estella as his wife then beats her.

The mysterious Compeyson, whose machinations have resulted in almost every drama in the plot, fulfils the role of Antagonist.

Everything goes wrong for Pip: his mentor, not whom he expected it to be, perishes; his fortune is seized by the courts; even his Comic Companion goes overseas, though he does provide Pip with paying work. As the Irony plummets towards the darkness and emptiness which is its wont, we

have only that brief glimmer of hope at the end, and even that is subjective, from Pip's point of view:

'We are friends,' said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

'And will continue friends apart,' said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.

In *Great Expectations*, the emphasis is on emptinesses, losses, gaps, mysteries, unknowns. They are left for the most part unfulfilled. But in leaving them empty, Dickens allows the bones of Myth to show through. We have again witnessed the play of archetypes across the bi-polar field of primal Story.

This became even clearer in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Heart of Darkness

I have asserted earlier that we are living in an Ironic Age. By that, I mean that there are various indications in the art, literature, film, theatre and other cultural expressions of our time that there has been a shift towards a focus on the 'darker pole'. Myth tells us that from an initial Void there emerges a set of binary positions, commonly referred to as Light and Dark. What forms between these poles - i.e. everything that we know of as 'the world' - then tends to go into orbit around one pole or the other, or to strive to. That motion, that striving, arguably a part of Life itself, certainly forms the basis for the movement in forms of narrative ever since.

Epics and Comedies, as we have seen, move towards the Light; Tragedies and Ironies move towards the Dark. And throughout history these attempts to go into orbit have taken the forms defined by Northrop Frye in his book *Anatomy of Criticism*: Myth, Romance, High Mimetic (as in the plays of Shakespeare), Low Mimetic (as in novels) and Irony, as we see in modern and post-modern literature.

My initial encounter with this Ironic culture was when I first attended university in 1977. I had been a devotee of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis for many years, and it was in an effort to pursue my studies of their works that I went to university, only to discover that the structure of the curriculum in the English Department meant that I would need to wait several years before I could focus on them. The curriculum began with a study of Twentieth Century Literature, then proceeded in the second year to the Nineteenth Century and Shakespeare, before eventually breaking up into eclectic units such as Children's Literature or Science Fiction. One had to

'wade through' all of this to get to a point at which one could select one's topics of study - I ended up spending a total of seven years at university in order to achieve my initial ambition.

But the first year came as a real shock. I was not at all familiar with Twentieth Century Literature except for niches like fantasy and science fiction. The initial reading of some of the works of last century probably unhinged me to some extent: T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' and Sylvia Plath's poetry featured highly. First among the novels was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Heart of Darkness is a good place to start in explaining what I mean by Irony in literature. Written in 1899, this novella by Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad, about a voyage up the Congo River into the Congo Free State in the heart of Africa, was originally issued as a three-part serial story in Blackwood's Magazine but has since been widely re-published and translated into many languages. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked *Heart of Darkness* 67th on their list of the 100 best novels in English of the twentieth century.

In the novel, the story's narrator Charles Marlow tells the story to friends aboard a boat anchored on the River Thames of his obsession with an ivory trader, Kurtz. But to my naive adolescent mind, the novel twisted perceptions born in the world of Epic and effectively threatened to extinguish their light. This was a different fictional universe to the ones I was most used to: here, I learned of Marlow's fascination with 'the blank spaces' on maps, particularly the blank space at the centre of Africa, which had turned into 'a place of darkness'. The river that wound its way into the heart of this darkness resembled 'an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land' and that image of the river on the map hypnotised Marlow 'as a snake would a bird', making

him feel as though 'instead of going to the centre of a continent I were about to set off for the centre of the earth'.

Thus we are orientated to the darker pole immediately (if we were not already by the book's title) and the imagery is already that of Myth: blank spaces, giant serpents, the sea, the earth. Conrad is using this imagery purposefully though: we are not being guided here towards release, victory or transcendence.

Marlow takes passage on a French steamer bound for the African coast and then goes on into the interior, eventually finding himself in a narrow ravine, 'the gloomy circle of some Inferno'. Here, diseased Africans who worked on the railroad await their deaths. Marlow is 'horror-struck' - and horror is indeed the central emotion conveyed by the book. At the Company's Outer Station, which strikes Marlow as a scene of devastation, he hears of Mr. Kurtz, a 'very remarkable person' who 'sends in as much ivory as all the others put together'. As Marlow journeys deeper into the continent, he is met with a series of accidents, fires, scenes of torture and more devastation. Kurtz is referred to as 'a prodigy' and 'an emissary of pity, and science, and progress'. Though clearly at the heart of much that seems morally wrong, Kurtz seems to represent for some the 'higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose' needed to forward European purposes within Africa. As our moral bearings are subverted with a growing sense of horror, Marlow is told 'The same people who sent him specially also recommended you', subtly implicating our narrator and protagonist in the progression towards darkness.

Conrad uses the setting to convey a psychic journey deeper into a world which is unthinkingly hostile:

There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the

gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once -somewhere- far away in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.

At one point, the crew of the river boat awakens to find that the boat is enveloped by a thick white fog and they hear a loud cry, followed by other mysterious noises. Then the steamboat is attacked by small arrows from the forest. The helmsman is impaled by a spear and Marlow watches him die. Marlow as narrator points out that the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had commissioned Kurtz to write a report. In the margins, apparently added later by Kurtz, a note reads 'Exterminate all the brutes!'

As they draw nearer to Kurtz's location, Marlow learns more about what is happening in the 'darkness': the natives worship Kurtz. He is admired by others for his apparent 'insights' into love, life, and justice, and primarily for his willingness to use power. All of this conveys to Marlow that Kurtz has gone mad.

It becomes apparent that others feel that Kurtz has harmed the Company's business in the region, using 'unsound' methods, and that there is an intention to remove him from the station and hang him. Finding Kurtz weak with illness, Marlow and the others begin a return trip, but Kurtz's health worsens and Marlow himself becomes increasingly ill. As Kurtz approaches death, Marlow hears him weakly whisper: 'The horror! The horror!' The next day Marlow pays hardly any attention as they bury 'something' in a muddy hole. Marlow's illness worsens almost to the point of death.

When he recovers, Marlow is contemptuous of the 'civilised' world. He visits Kurtz's fiancée a year later to find her still dressed in black and deep in mourning, asking him to repeat Kurtz's final words. Marlow lies and tells her that Kurtz's final word was her name.

This was my first real experience of a piece of fiction which journeyed into the 'heart of darkness' which had Conrad's intended effect to draw the story into orbit around a darker pole - though Conrad denied any underlying 'unity of artistic purpose' in an author's note to a 1917 edition.

Those of us who have been following the argument of this book will be able to clearly see the skeleton of Myth: the polar opposites, the archetypes, the motion towards a pole. But here, all is blurred and undermined: there is no 'wise old figure' pointing the way to wisdom and victory, unless it is Marlow himself - but his philosophy is bleak:

Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream--making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams...No, it is

impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence - that which makes its truth, its meaning - its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream - alone. While the dream disappears, the life continues painfully.

Here, positive attributes are seen in a negative context: 'Your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others'. Instead of the protagonist progressing upward towards some kind enlightenment or freedom, the conclusion is empty:

Droll thing life is - that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself - that comes too late - a crop of inextinguishable regrets.

When Marlow looks upon Kurtz, the antagonist, he sees the dark pole itself, embodied:

He struggled with himself, too. I saw it - I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.

There is no quest for meaning to be found here. Quite the opposite, the transformation is towards the emptying of meaning:

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear

of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary.

The message of the novel, insofar as it has any, is a desolate one: 'Like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker.'

I hardly knew what hit me in 1977. Which was the whole point - Irony strikes down conventional 'bright' morality and its themes of redemption, release and providential order. Conrad succeeded in setting the boat adrift, as it were: unmoored, I made my way deeper into the darkness myself.

Irony, by presenting a decaying, rotten underbelly of reality to the reader, also attempts to convey that it is the only truth - that that underbelly represents the bedrock of reality. Actually, all it is is the last stage of going into orbit around the darker pole, a pole where the Emerging Warrior King has fallen into the mire, where the Submerged Companion remains submerged in grief and delusion, where there is no sign of comedy, and where the Protagonist becomes the Shadow Protagonist.

There are plenty of examples of this in the literature of the Twentieth Century and beyond - but each betrays its essence when examined in the light of Myth.

The Waste Land

Another good example of what I mean by the 'Ironic culture' of the 20th and 21st Centuries is T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, which some regard as the most important poem of the 20th century. *The Waste Land* has been the subject of a great deal of critical analysis and scholarly interpretation, with many still arguing over 'what it means'. But this is actually our first indication that we are dealing with an Ironic work: works of previous modes and other genres do not normally give rise to such contention about their meaning. Ambiguity and lack of accord about something so important as a poet's or author's central intentions, or the purpose and meaning of a work irrespective of its poet or author, are signs of an Irony.

In the second decade of the twentieth century a group of poets who named themselves 'Georgians' after King George V, dominated poetry in England. They were part of a well-worn tradition stemming from Victorian times in which poetry was mostly about nature and had rural settings. The early 20th Century with its motorcars, buses, commuters on the London Underground, canned food and gramophone records was not their focus: indeed, the 'modern world', especially the state of the world after the First World War, had not yet properly been assimilated by any poetic movement in English. Sassoon's war poems had given readers a poetic glimpse of the war itself, but its consequences for the peace had yet to be poetically assessed.

Eliot, who had grown up in America, the crucible of secular industrial modernism, was convinced that Georgian poetry was significantly failing to capture the post-war world poetically. Overused images and metaphors lose force and

become clichés, and a small number of poets in England including T. E. Hulme had started to reject much of what the Georgians stood for and to call instead for a 'dry, hard, classical verse' based around innovative images and new metaphors.

As an undergraduate, Eliot came across several nineteenth-century French poets, including Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue. Rather than writing about the rural world, Baudelaire (1821-1867) had often tackled the modern city using new images, and had developed a new language for poetry. French poets also showed Eliot that poetry didn't have to conform to a strict rhyme scheme or metre: the French called it *vers libre* or 'free verse'.

The Waste Land took these techniques of modernism to new levels. But again, if we understand what Irony is all about, we can predict what we will find: Irony, moving closer to the 'dark pole' than any other mode or genre, subverts the ordered structures and rules of Epic or of earlier modes; indeed, it depends for its own meaning on the subversion or dispersal of conventional meanings. For the purposes of this book, what we are looking for is whether or not, in doing so, the skeleton of Myth, which we have found so far to have underpinned the other modes, likewise forms the foundation of Irony.

And this is exactly what we do find in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's poem draws on a vast number of literary and religious texts and traditions, but particularly focuses on what is called the 'mythic method', Eliot's use of a mythic narrative or structure. James Joyce had used this method in his novel *Ulysses*, which had been appearing in instalments in the Little Review for several years prior to its publication in 1922, when *The Waste Land* appeared. Eliot had praised Joyce's use of ancient myth in an essay, and in his own poem drew on Arthurian legend and other religious and literary traditions, including the Fisher King myth from the Arthurian body of

work, summed up as the story of an infertile king with an infertile kingdom. The desolation has been caused by a crime, the rape of maidens. The land cannot be made pure except through the actions of a pure man.

Readers will spot immediately how this is a simple inversion of the traditional Romance, in which the Emerging Warrior King ascends to his throne bringing prosperity to the kingdom, or in other words the progress of a story towards the enlightenment and freedom of the 'light pole'.

In his poem, Eliot was postulating that post-First World War civilisation had become a 'waste land' - the world had lost its fertility and even the survivors of the war seemed to be suffering spiritually. Eliot's primary task was to try to capture this poetically, using the techniques he had picked up from Baudelaire and others. One of the foremost of these was the idea of 'impersonality'. Eliot considered that a 'good poem' was not all about the poet's own feelings and experiences, arguing in his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' for a kind of anti-Romanticism. The Romantics - Wordsworth, Coleridge and many others - focused on the idea of original creation and inspiration, but for Eliot the tradition that preceded any era of poetry was even more vital. Joyce had used Odysseus as a framework for his novel set in modern Dublin; Ezra Pound looked back to the poets of the Middle Ages; H. D.'s Imagist poetry used Greek references and ideas. Eliot felt that a modern poet should write with an intimate knowledge of the literature of all previous ages:

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

In other words, knowledge of past writers in the hands of contemporary writers incorporates tradition into the contemporary scene. The traditions of Homer and Dante come together in Eliot's poetry making it both modern and traditional. This has been called a paradox, but we can recognise it as an explicit statement from an Ironic poet that he was using Myth as his foundation.

For Eliot, the poet's personality did not matter: the poetry produced is what is important:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

Irony, according to Northrop Frye, is to do with the sub-human. Here we have Eliot wanting to escape from what it was to be cohesively human, to remove himself from personality. But he used the power of Myth to do so - with interesting results, as we shall see.

The Turning World

Our thesis so far is that Northrop Frye's categorisation of literature into the five evolving modes of Myth, Romance, High Mimetic, Low Mimetic and Irony parallels the development of the thing called 'fiction' through the ages, but also mirrors the development of the individual, from early childhood to adulthood - and this whole movement is also related to the progression described in Owen Barfield's work *Saving the Appearances*, from a state in which human beings are intimately participating in the world around them to a condition in which they find themselves disaffected and isolated.

Irony as a mode, as we have seen defined by Frye earlier, is 'literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action inferior to the one assumed to be normal in the reader or audience, or in which the poet's attitude is one of detached objectivity' and 'the mythos of the literature concerned primarily with a "realistic" level of experience, usually taking the form of a parody or contrasting analogue to romance. Such irony may be tragic or comic in its main emphasis'. If our thesis is broadly correct, we should also find that this state reflects a normal experience of 'being an adult' and that that condition is associated with isolation and fragmentation.

And so, matching it all up, we find that Irony comes to dominate the literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries, appearing to us, as the audience which has grown up in those times, to be literature's 'most mature' form. Thus we fall prey to what C. S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery', which he defined as

the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited

which we must not fail to recognise as the attitude commonly taken by adults to anything to do with childhood - i.e. the sense that 'childish things have been outgrown and are now superseded and outmoded in every way'.

The latter is a kind of localised chronological snobbery: we believe that because we are older, we must 'know better'. This is such an axiom of our times and throughout human history that it is no wonder that the same idea leaks out more broadly into our attitudes to the past as whole.

But it is also our thesis that, even at the remotest end of these scales, when we are 'grown up', when we are at our most remote and analytical, and when we live in the most 'advanced' period of human history, the bones of Myth show through: the primal, raw, simple and powerful images and motifs of early humanity, early childhood and our most participative phase are still there, just under the surface, forming the skeleton upon which the flesh of later modes, later centuries and later life hangs.

Eliot said that he explicitly used 'mythic method' in writing his poetry - he recognised and strived to apply the principles of Myth despite that fact that his message or theme was highly Ironic in nature. It should only be necessary to examine the first part of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* in detail to establish that it is in fact Ironic in nature but is using the power of Myth to make its point.

As I said earlier, the fact that it is difficult to attach simple meanings to *The Waste Land* is a sign that it is Ironic. Eliot intended it as a eulogy to the culture around him that he considered to be dead. In attempting to sum up the nature of

that supposedly dying culture, Eliot intentionally wrote in a disjointed style. (Fragmented writing was what Eliot was famous for, as we can see from other examples of his poetry like 'The Love Story of J. Alfred Prufrock'.) *The Waste Land* is split up into five sections, each of which has a different theme.

However, mythic allusions start before the poem itself: it was originally preceded by a Latin epigraph from *The Satyricon*, written by Gaius Petronius, which features a narrator, Encolpius, and his unfaithful lover. The epigraph reads, 'I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys said to her, "Sibyl, what do you want?" she replied, "I want to die".' The oracle Sibyl is made immortal by Apollo, but not given eternal youth or health - she grows older and weaker, but never dies. No better testimony to the 'perpetual adulthood' of Irony could be found - the epigraph suggests the prolonged meaningless and degradation of a life without joy, isolated from the innocent participation in the world which was the province of youth.

One of the chief characteristics of Irony, as described in my own book *How Stories Really Work*, is that it plays with what is considered an ordinary time sequence. Stories in which events happen out of sequence usually fall into the Irony genre. And at the beginning of the poem itself is the section called 'The Burial of the Dead': we are starting at the end, so to speak.

I. The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

Summer surprised us, coming over the
Starnbergersee

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt
deutsch.

And when we were children, staying at the arch-
duke's,

My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

In the mountains, there you feel free.

I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

April, normally considered the month in which Winter finds its end and Spring emerges with new growth and hope, is turned on its head: April is the 'cruellest month', and life's 'dull roots' are bred from death, fed with 'dried tubers'. Oxymorons, another feature of Irony, abound: 'Winter kept us warm'; 'Summer surprised us...With a shower of rain'.

'Starnbergersee' was the countess Marie Louise Larisch's native home of Munich; the 'Hofgarten' is a garden in the centre of Munich, a symbol of European decadence. After the First World War, Marie Louise Larisch was herself a symbol of Old-World decadent Europe. Thus Eliot harks back to the pre-war years as we as adults might yearn for a lost childhood: 'in the mountains, there you feel free'.

'Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch' means 'I am not Russian at all, I come from Lithuania, I am a real German' emphasising dislocation not least by the fact that very few English readers would know enough German to translate it, leaving them feeling disaffected.

But we can already see mythic images emerging, albeit upturned:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no
relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

These clutching roots are a long way from the World Tree, Yggdrasil, in Norse myth, which winds its branches and roots into the whole universe - and the 'Son of man' here is not the living Christ but an entity that knows only a 'heap of broken images'. Water, mythically the source of life and even eternal life, is here absent. The universe has become a frightening, hostile place, full of shadows under which we are invited:

Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Then Eliot quotes from Wagner's 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde* about the ill-fated affair between the knight Tristan and the lady Isolde, itself based on a medieval romance that became part of the Arthurian tradition. The quoted scene occurs near the beginning of the opera, with the captured Isolde being escorted by ship to Cornwall by Tristan:

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?

Fresh blows the wind
For home;
My Irish child,
Where do you tarry?

The opera's central idea is that while death conquers all and unites grieving lovers, love itself is the source of problems - therefore it is death that should be celebrated, not love: another Ironic inversion.

The poet then expresses a draining away of life, senses and knowledge even in the face of sensuous beauty:

Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth
garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

Another German phrase. 'Oed' und leer das Meer', translates as 'empty and desolate the sea'.

Even the mention of Hyacinths suggests tragedy: Hyacinth was a young Spartan prince whom Apollo found attractive, but in a tragic accident, Apollo killed him with his discus. Mourning his lover, Apollo turned the drops of Hyacinth's blood into flowers. Beauty, in an Irony, can only arise from deathly circumstances.

The next few lines capture the patter of a fake clairvoyant:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the
Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

Surface irony becomes a deeper irony: the 'man with three staves,' the 'one-eyed merchant,' the 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring,' are loaded with Ironic meanings which become apparent throughout the rest of the poem - the 'man with three staves' is a representation of the Fisher King, for example, wounded by his own spear, regenerated through water from the Holy Grail.

Crowds, normally seen as an image of bustling life, are here a reminder of death:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Individuals don't breathe, but sigh; attention has become introverted and narrow:

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Church bells in the morning signify death, not life; conversely corpses are buried in gardens where they 'sprout' and 'bloom':

Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying:
"Stetson!
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

Another foreign phrase, this time in French - 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!'- is drawn from Baudelaire's poetry and is another oxymoron: the reader is a hypocrite but the poet's brother? 'Mylae', a naval battle between the Romans and Carthage, becomes a mythic symbol of war that will never change.

And so it goes on. Eliot draws on a vast heritage of imagery from classical, mediaeval and more recent times to convey a reversal, a disaffection, an isolation from it all. Myth is certainly showing through the flesh of words here, but to impart a sense of malcontented alienation. At our most remote point from the wellsprings of Myth, we find that the water has run out.

Barfield spoke of a new way of participating in the universe towards which humanity might be headed; Frye suggested that Irony might in some way lead back to Myth. Is there a

way to return to the glorious participative innocence of the child, even from the depths of empty, cynical adulthood? Can time be turned back, or the innermost circle of Myth be regained?

Doomed?

It seems we're all doomed, then.

As we have progressed through this book, literature has moved through Frye's modes from the earliest periods of Myth to the contemporary Ironic culture; humanity has lost its sense of what Barfield called 'original participation' with the world and become disaffected and alienated in a compartmented universe; we have left childhood behind and have nothing left but the empty cynicism of adulthood. Next step: death.

From the void came the polarity of light and dark; in the gap between them, archetypes developed to represent the stages of movement either towards or away from the two poles. Myth underlies and is still very much present in the forms, modes and genres of fiction and art and Life generally, but it seems that we have drifted with a kind of inevitability towards the dark pole of emptiness and meaninglessness. There's nowhere else to go.

Or is there?

I recall - dimly now, as it is over fifty years since I saw it - a children's programme on television in which a small set of puppets acted out stories on a tiny and very limited stage. For almost all the episodes, all of the action took place in that confined space; each 'story', such as it was, had its beginning and its end amongst the props and scenery with which we were familiar.

Except one.

In one forever memorable episode, the two main characters looked out through a crack in the backdrop of their enclosed world and glimpsed the woods beyond. It was a painting of a

wood that they were looking at, obviously - but the conceptual epiphany of it lingered.

Was there - is there - a 'way out' after all?

T. S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land* is regarded as one of the most despairing works of art ever written, and who stood as a mighty exponent of modernism in his early career, clashed with C. S. Lewis, the 20th Century's most famous Christian apologist, on occasion. Both Lewis and Eliot lived in England for much of their adult lives and those lives had much in common: both were outsiders in England - Lewis had been born and raised in Northern Ireland and Eliot was an American; Lewis died in 1963 and Eliot two years later. But initially, Lewis struggled to comprehend the bleak Ironic world that Eliot portrayed in his poetry, calling Eliot's *The Waste Land* 'infernal' in a 1935 letter. In 1939, surrounded by modernist works which depicted the world in a soulless Ironic fashion, Lewis lamented, 'I am more and more convinced that there is no future for poetry.' In a letter written in 1953 to Joy Davidman (whom he would eventually marry) he wrote, 'Twenty years ago I felt no doubt that I should live to see it all break up and great literature return; but here I am, losing teeth and hair, and still no break in the clouds.'

In his 1954 poem 'A Confession' - which utilises a line from Eliot's own 'The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock' - Lewis explicitly recognises that he is out of step with the Ironic era in which he was living:

I am so coarse, the things the poets see
Are obstinately invisible to me.
For twenty years I've stared my level best
To see if evening—any evening—would suggest
A patient etherized upon a table;
In vain. I simply wasn't able.
To me each evening looked far more

Like the departure from a silent, yet a crowded, shore
Of a ship whose freight was everything, leaving
behind

Gracefully, finally, without farewells, marooned
mankind.

Lewis also did not agree with Eliot's methods of literary criticism. But, in their later years, their antagonism was replaced with friendship: 'You know I never liked Eliot's poetry, or even his prose. But when we met this time I loved him,' Lewis told his private secretary just a few months before he died. The greetings in his letters to Eliot changed from 'Dear Sir' to 'Dear Mr. Eliot' to 'My dear Eliot.'

What had happened? Had Lewis finally come to understand and appreciate Irony? Or had something happened to Eliot?

In 1910-11, Eliot had spent time in Paris attending lectures at the College de France by Henri Bergson on the philosophy of time and was also introduced to the innovative work of the French 'symbolist' poets, as well as to the depth and scope of European cultural and literary traditions. While he was there, Eliot attended High Mass at the Madeleine, attracted by the drama of the ancient liturgy. Eliot came to see that the bedrock of European tradition was the doctrinal rigour, historical traditions and millennia-old customs of the Church. His doctoral thesis on the idealist philosophy of F. H. Bradley brought him to reject Bradley's Idealism and the career as an academic philosopher that his family were hoping he would undertake, and by 1915 he had settled in London and had married an Englishwoman, Vivienne Haigh-Wood.

But the marriage, troubled from the beginning, grew worse under the deprivations that the Great War brought in London, an environment in which Eliot's sense of the laying waste of the Western culture could not help but intensify. As things

grew bleaker and bleaker on every front, Eliot's conviction grew that only orthodox Catholic Christianity presented a solution to the despair of the post-war world, but his belief that the culture and faith of a people should be intertwined drew him to the Church of England. He aligned himself with the Anglo-Catholic movement. Poetry, thought Eliot, arose from suffering - but so did faith. To him, the Christian tradition became a counterweight to the emptiness of modernism.

When the peace agreement was signed between Hitler and Chamberlain in 1938, it confirmed Eliot's worst fears about the moral weakness of the West. 'Our whole national life seems fraudulent,' he wrote. He seemed faced with a choice between only fascism with its paganism or Christianity. Unless England and America established some kind of Christian society, they were doomed, he felt.

This was to have a profound impact upon his poetry. But it also can lead to insights into our arguments about Myth. After all, Irony is, simply stated, merely one phase in a set of primal movements: in Irony, we have approached as close as we can to the hollowness of the dark pole.

There is somewhere to go from there:

Up.

The 'Journey of the Magi' was the first of a series of poems T. S. Eliot later grouped together as the 'Ariel Poems' and was published in 1927 shortly after Eliot's baptism into the Church of England. Critics argue convincingly that this poem reflects Eliot's state of mind as it moved from an old faith in secular modernism to a new Christian faith, paralleling the journey of the 'Wise men from the East' towards Christ with Eliot's own spiritual journey.

Told from the point of view of one of the Wise Men, the poem recalls their journey to Bethlehem in search of the infant Christ. Eliot's elderly speaker has reached the end of

adulthood - the same, cynical and world-weary end of the narrators in Eliot's earlier modernist poems. The physical journey towards Bethlehem parallels the spiritual inner journey; the physical journey culminates in the baby Christ, but the outcome of the inner journey is less certain:

There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and
death,
But had thought they were different: the Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms.
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

'Birth' and 'death' are switched: the Magus, (and perhaps Eliot himself) comes to see that a kind of metaphysical 'death' can lead to rebirth. The birth of the Christ was the death of the old religions.

We have seen the mode of Myth become a kind of theology, and mythical creatures come to inhabit the works of Romance, while the High Mimetic transmutes these into Platonic ideal forms like Virtue in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. By the time we get to the Low Mimetic world of the novel this same mythic energy has become a natural force. In Irony, we are left with mindless genetics, rolling forward without purpose, and leaving behind them only the hollow philosophy of existentialism. As Northrop Frye says:

The existential projection of irony is, perhaps, existentialism itself; and the return of irony to myth is accompanied... in a later stage, by a widespread interest in sacramental philosophy and dogmatic theology.

Barfield put it another way: humanity had left behind the world of 'original participation' and moved into dysfunction and alienation, but there was a possibility of a further stage — human consciousness could evolve to a point at which it regains 'at-one-ment with the principle of creation, only now in full self-consciousness as a self-contained Ego'.

Barfield called this 'final participation': 'a self conscious rapport with the whole phenomenal world' or a 'willed consciousness of [original] participation'.

In simpler terms, adult humanity would become child-like again, but with full adult consciousness. Even in his nineties, Barfield retained the firm faith that 'the world of final participation will one day sparkle in the light of the eye as it never yet sparkled early one morning in the original light of the sun'.

All of this, including the journey of the Magi, is about going Up: moving away from the dark pole towards the pole of light.

Tolkien had a name for that fundamental shift, though he was thinking specifically of fairy stories at the time — Eucatastrophe: a neologism coined from the Greek ευ- 'good' and καταστροφή 'destruction'.

I coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives – if the story has literary 'truth' on the second plane.... – that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made. And I concluded by saying that the Resurrection

was the greatest 'eucatastrophe' possible in the greatest Fairy Story – and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love. — Letter 89

In his famous essay *On Fairy-Stories* Tolkien described eucatastrophe further:

But the 'consolation' of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite — I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.

But eucatastrophe applies more broadly than just fairy stories: it is, or could be, the turning from the dark pole which we approached in Irony back towards the light.

Irony isn't the 'final mode' anymore than the cynical meaninglessness of existentialism is the only possible conclusion of the adult; we can move on from disaffection towards a 'final participation'.

The patterns of Myth apply to us now as they have done all along.

With interesting cultural effects, as we shall see.

Myth and the 'Now'

Surrounded by an Ironic culture in which many denizens of both Oxford and Cambridge had been swayed by modernism, secularism and even communism, C. S. Lewis had abandoned his childhood Christian faith and become a materialist. But, like T. S. Eliot later, he was to undergo a personal 'eucatastrophe' which was to affect the culture of the Twentieth Century.

During my early teens, I discovered that C. S. Lewis, author of one of my favourite books *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, was close friends with J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, which I had first read and fallen in love with in 1974. Tolkien and Lewis shared a lifelong love of 'Northernness', ancient mythology and many other things. I wondered deeply what it was about their books that I found so fascinating and whether or not their friendship had anything to do with it.

In Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, there is a part which describes the still night upon which Lewis and Tolkien went out on a walk together, discussing profound religious concepts with their friend Hugo Dyson. Lewis had by this time slowly come round to the idea that there must be a God, but he was not yet convinced of the relevance of Christ. The conversation turned to the power of Myth. As they wandered through an Oxford college in the middle of the night, Lewis said to Tolkien that myths were lies, though, he admitted, 'lies breathed through silver.'

Tolkien said, simply, 'No. They are not lies.'

The wind stirred some leaves as he said it, and his words had a significant effect upon Lewis. Tolkien later wrote

a poetic response to Lewis' assertion and started a long dialogue with him that resulted in Lewis' eventual return to Christianity.

Tolkien's central idea was that we live *inside* a myth. If we consider Christianity to be a 'true myth', then humanity is within it. As a Catholic, Tolkien believed that the world was created by a loving God and was tangibly blessed: myth was not just 'invented fiction' but a real and potent way of perceiving reality that possessed incredible symbolic and multi-layered power. The Christian Gospel had been the prevailing myth of the West for over a thousand years, affecting the way that men and women viewed the world around them. At the very heart of the 'myth' of Christianity was the assertion that it had actually occurred in an historically verifiable way, and Tolkien identified the Incarnation and the Resurrection as the key turning points in the whole human story.

In terms of our overall argument, this 'turning point' indicated a shift from drifting towards the dark pole as exemplified by Irony to gravitating toward the light. For Tolkien, this was a personal experience that one could directly engage with through the sacraments, but was also reflected in the broader movements of cultures and societies. His fascination for mediaeval literature and ancient languages was not a mere foible but part of a focus back to a culture which had been more orientated to the light.

Tolkien argued that human beings were 'little makers', 'sub-creators'. Art and literature were not, as Irony would have it, the random impulses of a material, chemical brain but came from God. Inspiration wasn't meaningless, but a prompting to fulfil our nature as subcreators. In Tolkien's huge Epic, *The Silmarillion*, the God figure, Ilúvatar, creates the angelic Ainur and then gives them each a theme to play. These themes weave in and out of one another, eventually giving

rise to a new vision which Ilúvatar then gives a being all its own. This becomes the world as we experience it. This pattern of lesser beings creating something which is then imbued with higher power extends throughout Tolkien's works: we see it in Feanor's creation of the Silmarils using the light of the Two Trees; we see it in the Elves creation of realms of their own using the Rings of Power, and so on.

But a central part of Tolkien's Christian hope was that his own humble sub-creations were not just the ramblings of his own mind but were instead mysterious worlds that might one day have more than just a subordinate reality. This belief gave momentum to what he communicated to Lewis. Lewis, accepting Christ as his personal saviour, went on to write extensively about his newfound faith, to broadcast about it, and to act as an apologist for it. Through Lewis's works, millions of people have become familiar with Christian concepts, and many of them have become Christians themselves. Through Tolkien's works, and the multi-billion Tolkien 'industry' which stemmed from it, including the Hollywood films which reached millions internationally and the entire genre of 'fantasy fiction' which was spawned largely by Tolkien's success, we can see the tremendous impact of a move in the culture away from the dark pole towards the light pole as suggested by Myth.

This is not to say that the culture as a whole is somehow emerging from the modernist Irony phase. The broad movement that developed in the mid- to late-20th Century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism has been called 'postmodernism' and is characterised by its rejection of grand narratives/meta-narratives and ideologies. Anything that suggests that there might be some kind of objective reality, morality or truth comes under attack from postmodernists, who assert that any such value systems are merely products of particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and

hierarchies. Think moral relativism, pluralism, subjectivism, and irreverence for anything 'conventional'.

Postmodernism has infiltrated literature, music, science, economics, linguistics, architecture, and almost every aspect of culture. In terms of our argument about Myth, this breaking down of stability or structure can be seen as another aspect of Irony, which seeks to invert or subvert anything ordered or stable. In other words, though moving away from the dark pole and up to the light may be possible as we can see through the work of Tolkien, Lewis and others, it is not inevitable: humanity hovers on an event horizon, poised in seemingly perpetual orbit around the black hole which is at the bottom of the mythic scale.

What this eclectic journey has shown us, though, is that Myth has very much to do with the 'Now'. The act of making something, as we asserted earlier, is the act of pulling something out of an ultimate Non-Existence into some kind of Existence. Before you begin creating something, the theory goes, there is nothing. Artistry, creativity, imagination, something, pulls some kind of creation into the light. And this creation by definition has a kind of polarity or dichotomy: its constituent parts seek to move towards one pole or another.

This applies to storytelling; it applies to history and culture; and it applies to Life. All of fiction, of whatever mode, is about the interplay of elements and entities as either one pole or the other pulls things into its orbit; a study of history shows something of the same thing happening globally; and a look into any individual's heart reveals much the same.

What Myth teaches us about Now has been underestimated not because its influence is subtle: its influence was too large to be noticed.

Myth and the 'Now'?

Myth is the Now.

Simplicity

I've always liked simplicity.

To me, when examining any area in any detail, if my mind is asking questions such as 'But why is this so?' or 'How does this work?' then I haven't gotten to the bottom of something.

In addressing the subject of Myth and its role in fiction one inevitably encounters the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by American mythologist Joseph Campbell. First published in 1949, it is a work of comparative mythology in which Campbell discusses his theory of the journey of the archetypal hero found in world mythologies. Such was the theory's power that it has been applied by a wide variety of modern writers and artists, including, perhaps most famously, George Lucas, in the *Star Wars* films. The book itself has been acclaimed: in 2011, *Time* magazine placed the book in its list of the 100 best and most influential books written in English.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces is so prevalent in the culture that as soon as I mention that I am looking at Myth in literature, the first response is usually 'Oh yes, Campbell.'

Campbell's theory claims that important myths from around the world all share a fundamental structure. Campbell called this the monomyth:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

There are a number of stages or steps along this journey: the hero starts in the ordinary world, then receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events (a call to adventure). In accepting the call, the hero sets off in a stage known as Departure or Separation, and then faces tasks and trials which he or she may have to face alone, or with assistance from companions. A severe challenge is faced, called the Initiation, and if the hero survives this, a great gift (the goal or 'boon'), can be obtained which often results in the discovery of important self-knowledge. A decision must then be made whether or not to go back to the ordinary world with this boon (known as the Return). If the hero is successful in returning, the boon or gift may be used beneficially in some way.

Some myths contain many of these stages; others contain only a few. Often both the focus and the sequence is different. Mythic stories used as examples include the tales of Osiris, Prometheus, the Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, and Jesus, among many others.

Campbell uses Freudian concepts of the 1940s and 1950s (particularly the Oedipus complex) as well as a mixture of Jungian archetypes, unconscious forces, and other philosophic sources to support his theory.

The trouble with all of this, from my point of view, is that it is all too complicated.

It's a fascinating and worthy study, of course. But my mind asks continually 'Why would this be so?' If there is an underlying basic pattern in fiction which follows this theory, *why* does it follow the theory? Who is this 'hero'? Why does he receive a 'call to adventure'?

Why should he Depart or Separate, and what exactly from? What is the meaning of the tasks and trials that the hero faces, and why are there companions in some stories? What is the underlying meaning of the Initiation, and the gift?

It is possible that there is a pattern here and it is certainly clear that many myths resemble each other. But until one arrives at the basic unit or bedrock or foundation of the thing, then there is more to discover. One should be able to get to the point where one can no longer ask 'Why is this so?' or 'How does this work?' There should come a moment of epiphany, when one sees the answer, rather than more questions.

In this book about Myth and its relation not only to fiction but to society and the individual human being, that unit, that bedrock, that foundation has been revealed, I believe.

This universe is built on emptiness. Or so it seems, at first.

Regions of space so vast that the human mind gives up seeking for comparatives; eons of time so long that clocks torment us; quantum mechanics so indisputably weird that they defy logic: it all adds up to a reality which is fundamentally a void.

And yet, there isn't just nothing. Something, whether it is 'there' in any comprehensible way or not, spins around in those voids, lasts through those epochs and occupies those spaces.

Emptiness is what drives things, at least at first glance. But there are, apparently, things to drive.

From the mysterious 'possibly not even there-ness' of quantum physics to the black holes that apparently give galaxies their shape, emptiness is all around us. It affects the physical universe, but it's also what seems to define what it is to be human. All human beings have a void, a gap, a space in their hearts, and it is in an effort to fill that space that they move and act.

The mediaevals (far cleverer people than they are usually given credit for) believed that the reason why planets moved in circles was that the circle was the closest to perfection that a motion could be, and that everything in Creation was trying to

emulate the perfection that was God. (Yes, I know that the planets don't really move in circles, but that's not the point.)

We're all trying to fill that void; we all move in our own circles.

The same principle applies to health, to relationships, to the workplace, to the interactions that we all have with each other.

The thing that we call 'writing' is also a manifestation of this. A 'writer' is someone who creates worlds in order to fill a void - their own or another's. To reach others successfully a writer needs to fulfil voids faster and more comprehensively than others, especially in today's reading marketplace which is saturated with options just a click away.

To succeed as a writer, you need superlative, engaging, intimate, ongoing connections with readers - and you get that with characters and plots built around reader vacuums and needs.

But does that mean that writers must worship emptiness in order to succeed?

No.

Emptiness, the void, the core vacuum that seems to lie at the heart of all things, could equate to the 'dark pole' of Myth. Perhaps after all, it seems, that dark pole is senior to everything, revealing itself to be the engine at the heart of existence in this way.

Except that it's not.

Desire creates emptiness. Emptiness moves us towards fulfilment.

It is possible to fulfil vacuums, to satisfy yearnings, to satiate hungers, to consummate relationships, to bring plans to fruition, to fill up emptinesses, even until they overflow. Yes, it appears that the dark pole has the primary role at first, until one asks why that might be - the answer is that it is the desire for fulfilment which gives the dark pole its power.

We progress towards health, happiness, satisfaction, contentment and joy, not darkness. If the darkness grips and drives us, so much the better if it brings us closer to the Light - but the aim is the Light.

So why do we need myths?

A standard answer might be formulated along the lines of 'because humanity needs meaning, and myth was a first attempt to seek meaning in the universe around us'. But there we go with that historical thing again, as though somehow 'primitive humans' woke up one day and looked around and decided that what they saw needed some kind of 'explanation'.

We've seen throughout this series that Myth isn't just an earlier form of literature but a kind of raw understanding of the world which applies not just to history but to our growth as people: children apprehend the world mythically as much as early humankind. We've also seen that any act of creation involves a set of mythic suppositions - a basic 'void' from which binary poles emerge. So there's more to myth than any historical interpretation, no matter how much some of us would like to think that we have 'advanced' from earlier ages.

Why do we seek meaning? What is actually happening at the most fundamental level when we talk about 'myth-making'?

It could be argued that there are two broad interpretations of the world around us: one is that the basis of the world is static, the other is that it is kinetic.

In a static universe, all is explained: everything that was, and is, and shall be, fits together and is at peace with itself. All things have a place, and into that place they are slotted, there to find their true meaning and potential, like the jewel in their own crown - everything is 'jewel', and from the viewpoint of each jewel, all is crown. According to this model of the universe, anything that resembles disorder or dysfunction is

an anomaly, an illusion, an apparent deviation, which, when appreciated properly and from the correct perspective, resolves into part of the cosmic pattern as though it was always meant to be.

In a kinetic universe, on the other hand, all explanation is relative: everything that was, and is, and shall be is in flux. What appears orderly, sequential or logical is an illusion, a phantasm which will not last. Nothing has a fixed place, just a temporary habitation, constantly in motion; meanings and potentials are all shifting in relation to each other. There cannot be a 'crown' nor a 'jewel' except as a fantasy. According to this model of the universe, disorder and dysfunction are the norm and the only pattern is entropy, the breakdown of association into a disassociated void.

At the root of the kinetic universe is insanity, because insanity is the mental reflection of a reality in which everything is relative. Myth, in the kinetic framework, is an attempt to scabble for order in a void of meaninglessness, an association of images and significances which must eventually break down.

The static universe, on the other hand, is built on reason: Myth is a glimpse of that reason, that pattern at work 'behind the scenes'.

Static and kinetic: another set of binary opposites.

Moving towards the kinetic end of this spectrum, one loses one's grip: perceptions shift, sequences tumble, vacuums grow larger in size and in force. Moving towards the static end, certainty grows: perceptions stabilise, sequences become apparent where before there was only disorder, vacuums shrink and fade.

As humanity grows older, and as each individual within it grows older, our experience of Life sometimes has the flavour of losing a grip and sometimes of finding a pattern. In fiction, these motions are played out for us over and over again,

whether plainly as myths or in subtler forms like medieval romances, Shakespearian tragedies or comedies, novels, plays or films. We see heroes and heroines lose and gain certainties; we see stories end with triumph or nightmare; we have our emotional yearnings fulfilled or laid open.

Myth is all around us, sometimes plain to see, sometimes hidden. With its templates we can see our paths and choices laid out before us, and we can determine whether our own universes are ultimately going to be static or kinetic.

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I'm reading through *How Stories Really Work*. I've studied writing books for years but I've never seen anything like this!

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Loved the book. Have used the principles in many a story. It all makes so much sense. If you want help in drawing readers in - this is the book to get. -M W-B (Author)

This is a book every author should own. Grant P. Hudson does an outstanding job explaining story structure and the mechanics involved in creating a story or novel that readers will love. His examples are explained in an engaging manner so this book doesn't seem like reading a text book. I have already implemented many of his ideas in building a novel. This book contains great advice and I highly recommend it to all authors. -D. T. (Author)

After reading this book, I'll never look at stories the same way. This step-by-step how-to book is full of wisdom about how classic stories are structured. You will see how to apply these principles to your own stories and novels, converting them to page-turners. -P. V. A. (Author)

An essential purchase for anyone wishing to not only improve their writing but understand the art of story telling. You will never read a book the same way again. Nor watch a film or play without seeing the theory, that Grant so eloquently describes. Brilliant, worth every penny. -D. S. (Author)

I have had nearly 100 short stories published and thought I knew about writing. This book taught me new ways to look at my own writing as well as other writing. Grant Hudson doesn't recycle old ways to look at the writing process, he invents new ways for a writer to examine almost every aspect of writing fiction, and provides a new vocabulary for how to do it. Very highly recommended for anyone who writes or wants to write fiction. -A. C. (Author)

I wish I had found this book sooner. It was fascinating and insightful. I am now very annoying when watching films as I apply the techniques learned in this book, and quickly guess the twists! Very helpful in planning and forming ideas and I use this technique when writing stories. -S. C. (Author)

I love the way Grant has approached the whole subject in this excellent book, in a very different and almost 'obvious' way compared to other books that attempt to teach the craft of writing. As a writer myself I now see in a different light what I am writing. Where was this book 35 years ago when I first started writing? One of those 'I wish I'd known that years ago' books. -J. W. F. (Author)

I finished this book over two nights and had an epiphany. Such common sense and thought provoking ideas. This should be a mandatory text book for any serious writer. I'm excited to inject more purpose to my writing. This book will become a constant reference book for me now. Highly recommend it. -R. C. (Author)

Your book is teaching me all the stuff that the other books don't! I can learn all about three-act structures and all that stuff elsewhere - this book is telling me exactly what to put INTO the structure! It makes writing so easy and you can immediately spot where you're going wrong! Excellent! -L. J. (Professional)

This is an absolutely amazing achievement! I highly recommend it to anyone interested in writing fiction. -T. R. (Student)

I was extremely impressed. This is not idle flattery. You've done a superb job in uncovering the factors that go into making a great piece of literature. -B. R. (Executive)