

Conversation Pieces
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Myths, Metaphors,
and Science Fiction

Ancient Roots of the Literature of the Future

by
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I first fell under the spell of mythology as a child in a post-World War II elementary school in London, listening to weekly BBC school broadcasts about the Greeks and the Trojans, their gods and their adventures. Later, wise teachers showed me these same heroic figures in the plays of Shakespeare. So you can imagine how thrilled I was later to read science fiction and find these old friends alive and well in Outer Space. I wish I could go back and thank those teachers!

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“Metaphoric thinking is fundamental to our understanding of the world, because it is the *only* way in which understanding can reach outside the systems of signs to life itself. It is what links language to life.”

Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*

“These ancient stories have a great deal to tell us...partly because meaning in mythology is so compressed. They allow you to dive in and unpack them.”

Salman Rushdie, speaking about *Midnight's Children*

“Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.”

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

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Introduction

Humankind has been telling and re-telling mythic tales for tens of thousands of years; all around the globe we find recognizable themes and archetypes. It shouldn't surprise us that contemporary stories that affect us powerfully—including science fiction stories—have their roots in this rich mother lode. Myths (and fairy tales) are neither true nor false. Besides their entertainment value, they are psychological metaphors for the human condition and frequently teaching tools too. Myths that purport to tell the stories of gods and immortals are concerned with defining what makes us human. While our formidable brains are capable of marvelous feats of logic and analysis, there remains a vast ocean of experience that we can access only obliquely through our emotions and our intuition, and metaphor is the language we employ to do this. The great myths seek to explain us to ourselves—our exploits, passions, triumphs, and failures. They can be found all over the world, often displaying remarkable similarity.

Nobody—scientist, seer, or science fiction writer—can reliably predict what will happen two days from now, let alone two millennia. Science fiction is really about us as humans—living, loving, fighting, raising families—but set in another place and time so that the message may get through without being censored by the self-protective

function of our egos. The scenery and gadgets are fun to contemplate, the dilemmas posed sometimes thrilling and sometimes terrifying, but in the end, the stories are about humans facing new kinds of challenges and how they change or are changed by their environment.

It may sound like heresy at first, to say it doesn't matter whether we think this imagined environment is actually possible or not. In the case of novels like George Orwell's *1984* (published, 1949), which now looks like some kind of failed prophecy, or stories about aliens on Mars in Roger Zelazny's "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" (1963), where even the author knew it was *not* possible, we appreciate such stories according to what we learn from them about what it means to be human, now and in the future. To understand the difference, take a look at Hugo Gernsback's *Ralph 24C1 4C1+*, first published in 1911. (Today's texting generation can probably understand that faster than Gernsback's original readers!) The man who gave his name to one of science fiction's greatest prizes created a cast of characters who are basically touring the future and gawking at technology, not much else. We get a catalog of gosh! wow! inventions that strike us today as either quaint or amusing ("Helio-Dynamophores" for solar power; "Signalizers," searchlights mounted on tall buildings to guide aircraft; the "Bacillatorium" where germs were eliminated from human bodies by means of a "Radio-arcturium" cathode). The result is an unmemorable story where practically the only pleasure we can derive from reading it today is counting the number of future inventions Gernsback got wrong. What matters is whether the story gives precedence to the glittering gadgets or to the humanity of the characters, and we should judge the importance of the work of both male and female authors by this standard.

The question arises whether the use of, or reference to, or intimation of, ancient myth is conscious on the part of the writers, whether the borrowing is deliberate or accidental; and the answer I think is sometimes yes, sometimes no. The end result seems to me to be the same. Damon Knight once said that the shortest definition of a short story is “something changes for somebody,” and added that sometimes the “somebody” is the reader. Through the medium of the modern mythic tale we call “science fiction,” we ourselves are changed. It’s not important whether or not the author was consciously acting as the “man behind the curtain.”

This collection is not intended as an exhaustive examination of the subject; for the most part, I’ve restricted the discussion of myths to Graeco-Roman ones because these are the ones western readers may be familiar with already. And I deliberately haven’t undertaken a discussion of fantasy and fairy tales, where the elements of myth are usually plainly visible, except in places where I hope it might ease the reader’s introduction to what may seem very odd concepts. Similarly I’ve occasionally referred to, or briefly discussed, familiar mainstream literature or popular movies. And in some of these essays, we’ll stray off the strictly mythic path to look at themes that seem more like racial memories: stories that, while not strictly about gods and magical beings, nevertheless make use of timeless metaphors and have their roots deep in the past.

Besides the obviously long shadow of Carl Gustav Jung over this work, two other scholars of myth, legend, and fairy tale have influenced my thinking: Joseph Campbell (I recommend starting with *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [1949], which is not as extreme in its speculation as some of his other work) and Bruno Bettelheim. I would be remiss if I didn’t also name Mircea

Eliade and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose studies were also invaluable to this work.

I don't intend to suggest that a successful story follows the outline of any particular myth without deviation. And obviously, not every story published as science fiction contains mythic roots or even mythic themes. But I'm convinced that such roots contribute to the emotional power of a story, making it harder to forget. Ours is a scientific age; we pride ourselves on having outgrown the superstitions of our grandparents, but Jung and Campbell remind us of something much deeper than the intellect, bright though its light shining on our world may be. I want to examine that odd, inexplicable moment we sometimes have when viewing sacred art or reading poetry or perhaps just contemplating a particularly awesome sunset, when we sense a connection to—

What, exactly?

Something, evidently, even though we can't put a name to it. We call this shiver of recognition, the "numinous," and these essays are an attempt to track when it occurs in science fiction.

Sheila Finch
Long Beach, CA, 2014

Of Myth and Memory

A few years ago, after hearing Ray Bradbury speak at a session of UC Riverside's Eaton Conference, I picked up a copy of *Dandelion Wine* (1957), replacing my original copy lost many moves earlier. I looked forward to reacquainting myself with a classic example of his work. I wasn't disappointed. The experience caused me to re-examine just what it is in a piece of literature that captures me, what makes a story unforgettable and moving, beyond the surface levels of plot, or good writing, or even believable characters.

I was introduced to Bradbury long ago by a twelve-year-old boy whose parents were visiting on their way up the California coast. We were living in San Luis Obispo at the time, and friends traveling between Los Angeles and San Francisco frequently took a break halfway at our house. The boy's parents and my husband were musicians, and when he and I found ourselves left out of their very technical conversation, we began to talk about books and learned we were both avid readers. As our guests were leaving, he gave me his paperback copy of *The Illustrated Man* (1951), which he'd finished reading on the family trip—highly recommended, he said. I didn't recognize the name of the book or its author, but since I'm addicted to reading at bedtime and had run out of things to read, I turned to his offering. The rest is

history, as they say. I fell in love with Bradbury's voice as much as the stories themselves, saturating myself in his music. Bradbury's prose is poetry, and best read aloud.

In fact, I realized, as I re-visited these stories of life in a vanished time and place in America, that it's not the story itself that grabs me and never was. Most of the stories have sparse plots that would sound ho-hum if summarized in a sentence or two. And the characters, the innocent children and wise old adults that populate the pages, probably had few counterparts, even in Bradbury's own childhood in Illinois. But that's not really the point. The magic of these stories lies in the fact that they're metaphors, translating Bradbury's personal memories into transcendent myth.

Of course, I'm not the first to remark that so many Bradbury lines enchant the ear out of all proportion to the information they actually carry. Consider the opening paragraph of the first "chapter" (Bradbury doesn't name or number them as such) in *Dandelion Wine*:

It was a quiet morning, the town covered over with darkness and at ease in bed. Summer gathered in the weather, the wind had the proper touch, the breathing of the world was long and warm and slow. You had only to rise, lean from your window, and know that this indeed was the first real time of freedom and living, this was the first morning of summer. (p. 1)

Here's another opening:

And then there is that day when all around, all around you hear the dropping of the apples, one by one from the trees. At first it is one here and one there, and then it is three and then it is four and then nine and twenty, until all the apples plummet like rain, fall like horse hoofs in the

soft, darkening grass, and you see the last apple on the tree, and you wait for the wind to work you slowly free from your hold upon the sky and drop you down and down.... (p. 129)

A lesser writer might have written, “It was an early summer morning,” for the first, and “In Autumn, when apples fall from the trees” for the second—and would’ve missed the dreamlike world that Bradbury’s words create, a world we immediately recognize as true to our own mythic childhood. My childhood passed in wartime London, crowded, grubby, dangerous, and certainly lacking apple trees, but that image is emotionally more real to me than broken paving stones and dusty privet bushes and the sound of air raid sirens. The poet T. S. Eliot called that careful selection of pictures to evoke emotional recognition, the “objective correlative,” the image that opens up the whole experience for us (1921, p. 3). Bradbury’s Spring and Autumn are the way the seasons *should be* in childhood, not the way they actually may be. Nor can we avoid the poetic transfer of subject that occurs from the Narrator observing the fall of the apples to the Narrator becoming the apples themselves, surely a mythic transformation!

I re-read the book with a great deal of pleasure, recognizing the parts I’d admired before when I knew so much less about the skill that lies behind the apparently effortless ability of simple words to stir emotion. Bradbury, like all the best poets, makes it seem easy. And that realization brought me to remember the words of another poet I’ve always loved, whose work is a rhapsody about simple places and simple people: Dylan Thomas.

I hadn’t read *Under Milk Wood* (1954), a radio play, in a very long time, though I re-read Thomas’s collected poems at least once a year. I remember hating twentieth

century poetry while I was in high school, until I encountered Richard Burton's reading of Thomas's poem "Fern Hill." For the first time, I had the experience of being swept away by the emotional torrent of images, with only the slightest understanding of what the poem meant. The American poet Archibald MacLeish was speaking of this experience when he wrote, "A poem should not mean/But be" (1926).

Like Bradbury, Thomas loved childhood and small towns, though his are in his native Wales:

...herring gulls heckling down to the harbour
where the fishermen spit and prop the morn-
ing up and eye the fishy sea smooth to the sea's
end as it lulls in blue. Green and gold money, to-
bacco, tinned salmon, hats with feathers, pots of
fish-paste, warmth for the winter-to-be, weave
and leap in it rich and slippery in the flash and
shapes of fishes through the cold sea-streets.
| (p. 50)

I've never lived in towns anything like either poet describes, yet I seem to remember them; the music of the words conjures them in my imagination. How real those men propping up the morning! How vivid the smell of the herring flashing under the cold waves! I have no childhood memory of a place like that—how could I? Yet I know its seasons intimately. Here's another example:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town,
starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent
and the hunched, courtiers'-and-rabbits' wood
limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow,
black, crowblack, fishing-boat bobbing sea. (p. 1)

The thing is, these aren't memories of the places where Bradbury and Thomas spent their childhoods either. These visions are dreams, metaphors their au-

thors have constructed about remembered places, and as such they're truer than bricks and stones. We may call them "mythic." Myths and dreams arise from the unconscious, and their insights are not analyzable by daytime logic; they're neither true nor false. The neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist tells us in *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), "Metaphoric thinking is fundamental to our understanding of the world. It is what links language to life." The powerful emotional reaction such images provoke, a response to the numinous long before intellectual understanding takes place, is the hallmark of myth. And thus, through poetry—a language our hearts respond to even when our brains have difficulty understanding the words—they remake our own memories into something richer and more meaningful.

That's all very well, you may be thinking, but is this effect possible to achieve in a far-future story, something more hard-core than Bradbury's visions? Consider this scene from C. L. Moore's short story "No Woman Born" (1944), in which a lover first sees the rebuilt, robotic body of his beloved who almost perished in a devastating fire:

She stood quietly, letting the heavy mailed folds of her garment settle about her. They fell together with a faint ringing sound, like small bells far off, and hung beautifully in pale golden, sculptured folds.... She swayed just a bit, vitality burning inextinguishably in her brain as it once had burned in her body.... The golden garment caught points of light from the fire and glimmered at him with tiny reflections as she moved...like Phoenix from the fire. (p. 160)

We might never have imagined that a cyborg could be so hauntingly lovely, but Catherine Moore refers to

the mythical golden bird arising re-born from the consuming fire, and poetic images (“small bells far off,” “points of light from the fire...glimmered”) to make a possible future situation—and a bizarre one at that—at once vivid and moving. Something we may never have thought about previously, we now find we respond to on a deep level.

The more we study the literature of science fiction, ostensibly a collection of dreams and nightmares about possible futures, the more we come to realize that it gains much of its emotional power to move us through the myths it embodies and re-creates. We may not consciously recognize these elements, charmed and distracted as we are by the surface components of next-generation technologies and the conflicts and quandaries they may bring. Robots and starships and quantum worlds are exciting to those of us who love to speculate about “coming attractions” (as Fritz Leiber might have called them), but in the best examples of the field there’s more going on than just a display of the author’s fertile imagination of possibilities. This is the realm of the numinous that Carl Gustav Jung speaks of, that deep tug at our emotions, that odd thrill of something otherworldly, transcendent. We can’t explain it—and would probably deny it if we could—for it surpasses our conscious understanding, perhaps *bypasses* it, evoking echoes of forgotten mysteries.

It seems to me that the way to unlock the full treasure of the stories told by writers such as Bradbury and Moore is by giving ourselves up to the poetry, the rhythms, alliterations, images, and metaphors, by recognizing their underlying myths and allowing ourselves to respond to them. In even the hardest of “hard sf,” with its emphasis on science and technology, its exploration of troubling and important questions, it’s the underlying

resonance of these ancient themes that gives the best work its timeless quality.