



THE SONG  
— OF —  
MIDDLE-EARTH

J.R.R. Tolkien's Themes,  
Symbols and Myths

David Harvey

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# The Song of Middle-earth

## Dustflap Text

*The Song of Middle-earth* takes a fresh look at the historical background to *The Lord of the Rings*. David Harvey digs deep into the foundations of Tolkien's world, to reveal the complex web of history and myth that lies behind the stories.

The author dismisses the charge that Tolkien's work was merely derivative - that he had extracted tales, elements and themes from other mythologies and incorporated them into his own fiction.

*The Song of Middle-earth* explores the myth of both Tolkien's work and other mythologies. The manner of the telling of the Tales in *The Book of Lost Tales: I* is significant and in the mythic tradition. Many of them are recounted orally and have a lyrical and rhythmic quality when read aloud. Apart from this method of story-telling, major themes, as one would expect in a mythology, run throughout a number of books.

The reader will perhaps only recognise myth as a far-off echo in the narrative. There will, however, be a recognition of the significance of the created world of Tolkien to his or her own experience. In achieving that recognition, Tolkien will have fulfilled, in David Harvey's view, his desire to create a mythology for England.

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# The Song of Middle-earth

## Foreword

This book was written for two reasons: curiosity and dissatisfaction.

The curiosity has been present for the last twenty-three years, and began when I first read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The same question that was raised then continued as, each year, I read and re-read the books. I felt that there was something greater, more significant, more meaningful than was immediately apparent upon the printed page. A cause of the curiosity, of course, lay in the method of Tolkien's writing. He had an incredible depth to his tale, a great sense of time and a deep and rich historical background. The action in *The Lord of the Rings*, although set in a mythical past, takes place at the end of the historical cycle. Preceding the story is a vast tapestry of history, extending over many thousands of years, and to which frequent allusions are made, and, of course, the characters are inextricably a part of that tapestry. The question that flows from this is, 'What are the details of this historical background?'

My attempts to answer this were hampered by the lack of detail and clues that appeared in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* which gave tantalising glimpses only of fragments of the overall design. A part of the problem was that the Appendices to the first edition did not contain many of the clues that Tolkien included in the revised Appendices to the second edition, and it was only when I came to this latter publication that I perceived the first hints of the existence of *The Silmarillion*.

In 1977 *The Silmarillion* was published and for me it was a matter of great expectation. But the book raised even more questions whilst at the same time it answered many others. The answers began to filter through from other sources. Humphrey Carpenter's *Biography*, with its hints of *The Book of Lost Tales*, *Unfinished Tales* itself, and Tolkien's *Letters* began to provide the wind that dispersed the clouds from the face of the sun of understanding. It was rapidly becoming clear that Tolkien had not only woven a tapestry of history, but had also created a mythology. But for what purpose, how successfully, and with what result? It was after my studies for the New Zealand and International Mastermind shows that I determined, once and for all, to try to satisfy my curiosity and answer the questions that had plagued me for so long.

I have also mentioned dissatisfaction. My dissatisfaction is with much of the published literature about Tolkien's Middle-earth. With the exception of Carpenter and Shippey, most of the writers and commentators seemed to have missed a vital point. I did not think that Tolkien's work was merely derivative - that he had examined other mythologies and extracted tales, elements and themes and plopped them into his creation. With great respect to the authors who have followed such a course, it is a simplistic one and unflattering to the creator. Nor did I think that mere critical comparisons with the earlier greats of English and European literature were wholly productive. There was something deeper and more meaningful to Middle-earth than that.

I decided to eschew the derivative approach and avoid, as much as I could, comparisons with other works and examine and analyse the Middle-earth works as they stood - alone. And the

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obvious starting point, and one which has received scant examination in the earlier literature, was myth. Tolkien had left for me, and for others, an abundance of clues - that he was creating a Mythology for England - and I began my examination from the point of view of myth and mythology. Rather than examine the works as derivative from other mythologies, it became clear that the approach should be thematic - study the themes that are common to most, if not all, mythologies and ascertain what elements are present in Tolkien's work. As this book shows, the elements are satisfied.

The starting point must be *The Silmarillion*, a difficult book to read and with which to come to terms. But it is essential to an understanding of the creation and development of the Tolkien cosmos, as well as being a history of the Elves in Middle-earth, and it establishes the framework within which is set the Third Age as portrayed in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet *The Silmarillion* gives hints of other writings and accounts that deal with the Matter of Middle-earth. Some of these accounts are collected in *Unfinished Tales*, and in this volume we find more detail of the acts of Tuor and of Túrin, a background to the realm of Númenor, the Tale of Aldarion and Erendis, and much information about the Istari, the *palantíri* and the early history of the Third Age. For one interested in the stories, *Unfinished Tales* is essential. For the aficionado it provides a penetrating insight into the manner in which Tolkien worked.

The publication of *The Book of Lost Tales I*, the first volume of an extended 'History of Middle-earth', came shortly after the completion of this manuscript, and whilst it was being prepared for publication. *The Book of Lost Tales I* comprises a part of what may be called a 'proto-Silmarillion'. Most of the ingredients of the tales of *The Silmarillion* are present, although it is obvious, both from the Tales themselves, and the notes by Christopher Tolkien, the editor, that the Tales underwent many fundamental changes before they became *The Silmarillion*. But *Lost Tales I* is, in my opinion, almost as significant as *The Silmarillion* in that it indicates that it was always Tolkien's desire to create a Mythology for England. To give even greater credence to his intention (as if we needed more than the confessed desire of the writer), the manner of the telling of the Tales is significant. Eriol, a traveller from Middle-earth (or The Great Lands), comes to the Isle of Tol Eressëa and in his travels in that land comes to a dwelling which is, in some respects, a forerunner of Imladris in Middle-earth. During his sojourn he requests and is told tales of early Arda. Most of the tales are told in a common-room before a Tale-fire which is 'a magic fire, and greatly aids the teller in his tale'.<sup>1</sup> The tales are told by Lindo, Rúmil and Gilfanon, Elvish inhabitants of Tol Eressëa. Now the significance of the setting is that the Tales are recounted orally, and indeed are so written that they have a lyric and rhythmic quality when read aloud. Thus, in introducing his myth, Tolkien resorts to the oral or bardic tradition of story-telling, a feature of mythological tale-telling that predates Homer. Apart from the themes of the cosmological myths that comprise *Lost Tales I*, the whole cycle is distinctively myth oriented and is a clear indication of Tolkien's desire and intention. Christopher Tolkien gives us tantalising hints of things to come in later publications, but perhaps most interesting is the reference to Aelfwine of England. Aelfwine is another realisation of the character Eriol.

Later, his name changed to *Aelfwine* (Elffriend), the mariner became an Englishman of the 'Anglo-Saxon period' of English history, who sailed west over the sea to Tol Eressëa - he sailed from England out into the Atlantic Ocean; and from this later conception comes the very remarkable story of *Aelfwine of England*, which will be given at the end of *Lost Tales*. But in the earliest conception he was not an Englishman of England: England in the sense of the land of the English did not exist; for the cardinal fact (made quite explicit in extant notes)

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of this conception is that *the Elvish Isle to which Eriol came was England* - that is to say, Tol Eressëa would become England, the land of the English, at the end of the story.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the very method of tale-telling, the major themes that I have examined in *The Silmarillion* are present, as one would expect, in *Lost Tales*. Certainly some major changes in plot as well as changes in matters of detail have occurred. But this too is consistent with the development of myth. The tales of myth are never constant, and there is no one 'authorised version' (even the Bible has its Apocrypha). Rather, as I note later, the tale-tellers vary, refine and embellish. But the constant ingredient is the basic theme, and certainly the themes that Tolkien propounds and illustrates do not change.

*The Silmarillion*, *Lost Tales* and, to a degree, *Unfinished Tales* set the stage for the drama at the end of the Third Age recounted in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The mythology is complete and the questions that have been bedeviling readers for the last forty or fifty years may now finally be answered. But I believe that the main inspiration for the questions and the curiosity that readers have for Middle-earth lies deep in the realms of myth. Because the Middle-earth saga was conceived as a mythology the reader, perhaps only subconsciously, recognises myth as the sound of a far-distant trumpet echoing through the mind. Can the reader, perhaps, recognise within his own experience the desire for a subcreated realm of faerie that is as meaningful to him or her as were the great tales that rang through the rafters of the mead halls of early England and the Viking lands, or which were majestically and sonorously intoned by Homer sitting by the tale-fire on an evening in ancient Greece. Perhaps that 'desire for dragons' that we all have is now realised in Tolkien's created mythology for England.

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1 *Lost Tales I*, p. 17.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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[The text above comes from David Harvey's book *The Song of Middle-earth*.]

# The Song of Middle-earth

## Chapter 1

### A QUESTION OF MYTHOLOGY

There is a feature common to all human cultures and that is the creation and use of myth. Cultures such as those of Central America and Polynesia did not develop the skill of writing, or the basic technology of the wheel. Yet both these cultures, and many others that lacked similar attributes, had as richly developed a mythology as the civilisations of the Mediterranean, India, Persia and north-western Europe.

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C. S. Lewis said to Tolkien that 'myths are lies'. In one respect he may have been right. Certainly the cosmogonic myths cannot be anything but the hypotheses offered by primitive cultures to explain their own presence and purpose. But the development of myths and their use in societies both primitive and modern is of such importance that to dismiss them as the products of an overactive imagination is to denigrate man's curiosity and his quest for the answers to the eternal questions, 'Why am I here?'; 'Where am I going?'; 'Where did I come from?'; 'What lies at the end of the road?'

In our twentieth-century world myths and mythologies seem rather remote. In the technological age they represent a primitive past - a past that goes before recorded history. Myths to the historian are tales that are unsubstantiated by fact or evidence. Yet they may be based on fact. They may have their foundation in some actual historic occurrence that was not (or could not be) recorded. However, the passage of time and the raconteur's ability for embellishment have submerged or even obliterated what historical facts there may have been. It is valid to suppose that at some stage in history the Greeks came into conflict with a civilisation in Asia Minor that had its centre in Troy. The historical detail of that conflict is lost. What remains is Homer's account of it. The historical fact has become myth. The intervention of the deities explains the ebb and flow of the fortunes of the participants. Even so, Homer's account is a mere fragment of the total history of the conflict and really is the tale, as Robert Graves has entitled his retelling, of the anger of Achilles.

The mythologising of historical events, or the explanation of historical events in a mythological context has continued into the age of recorded history. Aeneas becomes the forefather of the Latin races who founded Rome. That there may have been a Romulus is possible. But his origins and activities that led to the founding of the Roman community on the banks of the Tiber have become the subject of myth. A similar situation takes place with the actions of folk heroes. As time passes the hero grows beyond his immediate community and becomes representative of an ethic or attribute of a nation or a country. St Patrick casts snakes out of Ireland. Robin Hood embodies an individualistic nobility of spirit that was not possessed by the nobility of the time, and also serves as the focus for the feelings of frustration on the part of a disenchanting community. Coeur de Lion becomes the embodiment of the noble warrior king to both Englishmen and Saracen and by the latter was named Melech-Ric and was used to frighten the young Islamic children of the day. Arthur and Barbarossa are the founders of nations, who will come again when the land is beset. Even such an historical figure as Richard III has achieved a mythical stature, mainly as a result of the writings of the Tudor apologists Sir Thomas More, Shakespeare and more recently A. L. Rowse, as the embodiment of evil in search of power, and the archetypal wicked uncle, although the latter symbol has been common through myth, folktale and history, to the displeasure, no doubt, of a multitude of benevolent uncles.

As with individuals, so do classes achieve a mythical stature. The cavalier image, no doubt fostered and exploited after the Restoration, has achieved the status of an archetype that would make it mythical for, as we shall see, myth deals with archetypes both in the actual sense and in the sense attributed to that word by Carl Jung. The 'working class' is a myth that had its origins in the revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and which reached its flowering in the works of Marx and Engels. It is a myth to which politicians pay more than lip service.

The European part of the North American culture is in the throes of developing its own mythology. As time progresses the historical figures of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett

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become the embodiment of the pioneering spirit. The myth of the American frontier as a boundless new horizon was subtly used by President J. F. Kennedy in the catchphrase for his administration as 'The New Frontier'. Longfellow mythologised the Sioux Indian in *The Song of Hiawatha*, using the image of the noble savage, a rich Plains Indian mythology, and the metre of the Finnish *Kalevala* - a New World mythic tale told in Old World mythic form. Similarly the folk heroes of the American West have been raised to mythic proportions, embodying or having attributed to them traits that they never had or intended, and having attributed to them actions that embody or exemplify a philosophy from which, hopefully, later generations can learn. The historical proximity of such characters to the present means that some demythologising may also take place. Thus, the heroic bad guys such as Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, Ma Barker and, in Australia, Ned Kelly, are found, historically, to have feet of clay and black hearts. Yet they do not lose their mythic or heroic status, despite the assaults of historians from the groves of academe.

As the mythic heroes grew in the new lands, so a mythology developed about the new lands. The colonial ethic, the movement of peoples from the old homeland to the new, was historically motivated by economics and the need for supplies and wealth for the depleted home territories. As the colonial movement grew, colonies achieved strategic as well as economic significance. Yet the panacea which was used to encourage departure to the new lands was based largely upon the myths of 'ennoblement of inferior races' or 'spreading the benefits of civilisation' or the downright greed of 'there's gold in them thar hills'.

I do not dismiss such factors as poverty at home, bad crops or a general disenchantment with the old system. But the colonial movement used a form of myth which was factually based to a small degree, but which was inflated beyond reality to justify a wholesale system of landgrabbing.

The mythologising process continues as man searches for answers even today in the modern heroes. In a system that is so profoundly materialistic and historically based as Communism, mythical figures arise and some even suffer the fate of demythologisation. Large portraits of Marx and Lenin in Red Square on May Day attest to this fact as does the removal of Stalin's body from its Kremlin tomb. Even the life of Lenin has much in common with that of the classic hero of epic. It is no accident that Soviet historians have seized upon this in the process of virtually deifying the founder of the Russian Soviet State. Yet, even more surprisingly, another Communist leader lived a life in which, from time to time, he engaged in symbolic acts and who was a myth in his own lifetime. Who can forget the 1967 photographs of Mao Zedong having a recreational swim in the torrents of the Yellow River in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. Mao, like Lenin, is a modern epic hero, whose quest is the liberation of a nation from oppression. The mere words 'The Long March' to a student of Chinese history conjure up a symbol which has its parallels in the exile phase of the epic hero in mythic literature.

Because the process of mythologisation continues, it is wrong to relegate myths to the status of children's tales of the past which have their origins beyond the beginning of recorded history. The fact that the process does continue demonstrates the fact that myth is an important aspect in the continuing development of human society. So at this stage I should like to turn to what constitutes a myth, and how mythologies have developed. This is more an overview than a detailed study, and I intend to avoid an anthropological discussion of the significance of myth in primitive societies. Rather, what I intend to do is to view myths and

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mythologies as a factor in the development of societies and in a following chapter I shall look at how myths have become a part of the literature of societies.

There is no common definition of the word 'myth' or for the concept that it represents. Myth means one thing to an anthropologist, another to the psychologist and yet another to the thematologist. Curiously enough, within all the different views and opinions there is only slight divergence - a shift in emphasis. Each of the various definitions of myth have a small seed of common agreement and because myth has been so important in the past, and as a motivator in the development of man and of his institutions and as an inspiration for, and indeed a part of, much of his literature, we should understand the basis and meaning of myth.

Myth in its basic form was a vehicle of religious symbolism. It was symbolic in its approach. It was not like ritual which is symbolic or imitative behaviour, or a symbolic object such as an icon or a reliquary. It is a tale told in a symbolic language. A child's definition of a parable is 'an earthly tale with a heavenly meaning'. A parable uses everyday objects and events to symbolise a greater and often divine truth. Not so myth, for frequently the myth uses divine beings either as participants in, or symbols for, a supposed truth. In the main, myths are tales concerning gods or superhuman beings and extraordinary events, or amazing circumstances, in a time that is quite different from normal human experience.

Robert Graves defines true myth as 'the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like'.<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to distinguish 'true' myth from what could otherwise be described as 'mythlike' accounts. He numbers these as:

- 1 Philosophical allegory, as in Hesiod's cosmogony.**
- 2 'Aetiological' explanation of myths no longer understood as in Admetus's yoking of a lion and a boar to his chariot.**
- 3 Satire or parody, as in Silenus's account of Atlantis.**
- 4 Sentimental fable, as in the story of Narcissus and Echo.**
- 5 Embroidered history, as in Arion's adventure with the dolphin.**
- 6 Minstrel romance, as in the story of Cephalus and Procris.**
- 7 Political propaganda, as in Theseus's Federalization of Attica.**
- 8 Moral legend, as in the story of Eriphyle's necklace.**
- 9 Humorous anecdote, as in the bedroom farce of Herakles, Omphale and Pan.**
- 10 Theatrical melodrama, as in the story of Thestor and his daughters.**
- 11 Heroic saga, as in the main argument of the *Iliad*.**
- 12 Realistic fiction, as in Odysseus's visit to the Phaeacians.**

Thus, Graves defines true myth by elimination, and claims that it is a tale embodying a magical ritual, invoking fertility, peace, water, victory at war, long life to the ruler or death to the enemies. He also comments that genuine mythic elements may be found in the least promising sources. In studying mythic writing he says:



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When making prose sense of a mythological or pseudo-mythological narrative, one should always pay careful attention to the names, tribal origins, and fates of the characters concerned; and then restore it to the form of dramatic ritual, whereupon its incidental elements will sometimes suggest an analogy with another myth which has been given a wholly different anecdotal twist, and shed light on both.<sup>2</sup>

Graves' study of the Greek myths is as vast as some of the epics that he studies. His examination is not merely of the myths, or their religious background, but their significance within the political and religious systems that existed in Europe before the advent of the Aryan invaders. Yet his sources are the great writers of the classical period: Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Aeschylus, Plutarch, Ovid, Vergil among many others. In effect Graves must go deep into the stories, past the peripheral words of the tales to discover their true meaning, context and significance.

Graves' approach to the Greek myths may lead him to one definition. His subject matter and his mythology are the best documented in existence. In settling upon his particular definition Graves is able to approach his subject from that point of view.

But despite the apparent sophistication of 'true' myth, and the exclusion of those other tales that may be regarded as 'mythic', Graves could not deny that all the mythic tales both of the 'true' or other forms of myth deal with liminal phenomena. They are tales told or conceived at a time or in a location that is apart from the here and now reality. 'Myths relate' by direct language or by symbols how a particular state of affairs came to be, or 'how one state of affairs became another'.<sup>3</sup>

Myths tell how the world came to be out of chaos, and how an unpeopled world became populated. They tell how those who were immortal forsook their immortality or departed the real world for some other region where immortals dwell. Myths tell or explain how the seasons came, the cause of rain, the origin of particular plants and how a united mankind in a Golden Age became a plurality of nations. There is, of course, religious significance in myth. The gods or supernatural beings of myth were the object of worship. If we see myth as being an explanation of natural phenomena under the control of supernatural beings, a myth then embodies a desire to control nature for the advantage of the tribe, group or society.

However, the field of myth and the purpose and the definition of myth has been a battleground for scholars for many years. Mircea Eliade says:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. [It] tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality - an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be . . . In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the World . . . Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being.<sup>4</sup>

Eliade himself has been the subject of controversy and his views have been subjected to vitriolic academic denigration or paeans of critical praise. The difficulty is that 'there is no agreement as to what the myth and ritual pattern actually is'.<sup>5</sup> Each scholar who has

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established expertise in the field inevitably comes into conflict with others - Frankfort cannot tolerate the views of Frazer; Rose savagely attacks Graves and Graves goes against Carl Jung. And if this academic carnage were not enough, there is no agreement as to the meaning of myth. Whalley describes it as a direct metaphysical statement beyond science; Watts believes that the purpose, source and end of myth is revelation; Wheelwright opines that myth is a set of depth meanings of perduring significance within a widely shared perspective; whereas Frazer says that they are mistaken explanations of phenomena founded on ignorance and misapprehension - they are always false for if they were true they would cease to be myths.<sup>6</sup>

Yet perhaps K. K. Ruthven, although not resolving the problem, casts sufficient light upon it to clarify the difficulty.

We have no direct experience of myth as such, but only of particular myths: and these, we discover, are obscure in origin, protean in form and ambiguous in meaning. Seemingly immune to rational explication, they nevertheless stimulate rational enquiry, which accounts for the diversity of conflicting explanations, none of which is ever comprehensive enough to explain myth away.<sup>7</sup>

Myth and legend have been often equated or compared. They have similarities and differences. Purists would say that myths and legends are quite distinct, because myths have as their purpose the explanation of things and the embodiment of a religious heritage, whereas legends are folk or national tales of the heroes or outstanding persons of a nation, state or tribe.

Legends are stories embedded in some elements of fact and history, however tenuous, concerning heroes and events. In my opinion legends and myths have a point of connection; like overlapping circles they have in common a part of each other, but also may occupy separate areas. Fancy and exaggeration may elevate the hero to a superhuman status; he may have a god for a parent or an ancestor and may, as a result, receive divine aid or suffer divine disfavour. In common with myths, legends were handed down through generations and enriched the lives of their listeners, and their values and lessons were a link with a heroic past and often divine wisdom. Legends became the heroic or traditional stories that were modified or embellished, but although there may have been divergence in the detail of the tales, such modifications were used for the purpose of explanation or clarification. Always the basic theme remained the same. Myths, legends and, to a degree, fable (which was obviously untrue and allegorical only, whereas myth and legend are represented as 'true') all underwent embellishment, addition or modification in the telling process. Yet both myth and legend arise from the nature of man and his desire to know the answers to the same universal questions, demanding to understand the same universal truths. Perhaps it is because myth is so elemental and basic that it is hard to settle upon a fundamental definition that will satisfy all. But if myth cannot be satisfactorily defined, its use, function and purpose merit a study so that we may understand myth within the context of the human experience.

Many views have been put forward to explain the function of myth. These seem to differ in the same way as the attempts at definition. Thus we have Frazer stating that the function of myth is a primitive fumbling attempt to explain the world of nature. According to Muller, myths are the production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages, and to Durkheim, a repository of allegorical instruction to shape the individual to his group. Carl Jung advocates the psycho-analytical view that myth is a group

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dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche, and the view of the Church or organised religion is that myth is God's revelation to His children.

Whatever differences there may be in the sophistication of the opinions, they all come down to the same function in the end - myths answer the awkward questions that seem to be asked, primarily by children, 'Who made the world?' to 'How will it end?' According to Graves, myths justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs. Thus myth may explain why I am here and where I am going and in addition it may explain why things around me are as they appear to be.

The word 'myth' that we use derives from the Greek *mythos* which means 'word' or 'spoken word' or 'speech'. *Logos* originally had this meaning and the use of both words together meant, and still means, 'stories' although in Greek context such stories included the pantheon of Olympus, the activities of the heroes and the allegorical folktales of Aesop. Even to the Greeks, myths were the subject of debate. In the fifth century BC the word *mythos* is applied to those stories for which the truth is not vouched. Pindar considered *mythos* to be decked out with lies in excess of the true story.<sup>8</sup> Thucydides commented that some historians incorporated material into their work which got to the stage of being *mythodes*.<sup>9</sup> Plato described the *mythoi* as being essentially untrue although there may be elements of truth in them. Thus Thucydides doubts the truth of myths whereas Plato views them as a vehicle for imparting a truth, rather like a parable. Plato, in fact, draws upon mythological elements and characters to explain why certain skills may be peculiar to certain members of society, whilst a sense of justice is common to all. Indeed, at the end of the *Georgics*, *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, he recounts what happens to the soul after death. The reason for this account is to evidence a lesson and to lead the reader to a resultant behavioural practice. The story draws on traditional religious symbols and upon traditional religious beliefs. With the passage of time these traditional beliefs became lost, leaving the stories as symbolic vehicles. Thus there is a very strong body of opinion which holds that beneath the apparent meaning of a myth lies a deeper 'real' meaning.<sup>10</sup> Certainly myth has within it the richest of symbols and was the language of the ancient mystery religions with their highly symbolic rites. Indeed, it has been suggested that all the sacred books of the world are written in a symbolic language, and certainly an example must be The Revelation of St John the Divine.

For the anthropologist, myth has a different function or purpose. For example, the controversial Eliade defines 'fables' or 'tales' as false stories. Where myth is still alive, it is a *true* story. Tales dealing with the origin of the world, the adventures of a national hero or of the world of the shaman are true, whereas tales of a profane content, such as those of tricksters, deceivers and rogues, are false. However, caveats must be added to Eliade's theories because for Eliade a myth is always an origin story which functions for existential orientation in the widest sense. They 'transport men ontologically and experientially into the non-temporal "time" of the "beginnings"'. They originate as expressions of the desire to accomplish this orientation.'<sup>11</sup>

But can it be said that myths and mythologies have any relevance to the here and now of the twentieth century. What has become of myths in the modern world? What has taken the place that myth used to occupy in primitive societies? The world of myth is a continuous source of knowledge which is required for the crucial problems of man's existence - war and peace, life and death, good and evil, truth and falsehood. Myth at an individual level has never disappeared. It exists in dreams, fantasies and in the longings of every one of us. Even what we call myths at the present time are expressions of the experience of earlier times, and what

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we are willing to regard as myths current in our own time are, for the most part, what we recognise to be the survivals or revivals of those earlier myths. As I have already stated, Marxist Communism is strongly mythic, especially in its eschatological aspects. It has the part played by the just and good and their redemption (the dictatorship of the proletariat). The classless, stateless society is the Golden Age which pre- or post-dates recorded historical existence. Nazism, with its feet embedded in the Teutonic myth, had problems. The racial myth was limited in appeal, and there was the inevitable pessimism of the Teutonic myth, beset as it was with Ragnarok or Gotterdammerung and the total destruction of everything. Teutonic myth was a bad foundation for a political order. It holds out no hope, unlike Christianity. Rather, it faces a climax in total blood and destruction.

Carl Jung, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, suggests that modern man is on a quest for a new myth, which alone could enable mankind to draw upon fresh spiritual resources and renew its creative powers since its profound break (speculated by Jung) with Christianity. If we accept Jung's theory of myth, dealing as it does with archetypes and the subconscious, the popularity of modern media efforts such as *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* are explicable. They appeal to the subconscious desire for the hero, or the desire to touch the hand of a superior being.

Thus, the images and themes remain the same although the mystical or religious basis for myth seems to have faded. Man harks back to archetypes, expresses his primitive fears and seeks universal understanding. For these reasons, and many others, the popularity of the Middle-earth books by Tolkien is explicable. Tolkien set out to create a mythology for England. His was not a mystic mythology, based in symbolic religious rite. His mythology is founded upon the basic symbols which permeate all mythologies that have come to us as part of the heritage and literature of cultures. Tolkien also uses his mythology to explain a language and the development of the linguistic process. His ability to fasten upon the themes, the symbols, the archetypes and the structure of the mythic tales is not accidental but planned. Because he deals with elemental themes he appeals to man's search for universal truths. Such basic ingredients of myth are present in Tolkien's work. But it is appropriate, before we examine Tolkien's myth, that we look briefly at myth as a literary form, for it is upon this that Tolkien constructed the Middle-earth mythology.

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- 1 Graves 1, Vol. 1, p. 12.
  - 2 Ibid., p. 13.
  - 3 Turner, Victor, 'Myth and Symbol', in *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 10. London: Macmillan, 1968, p. 576.
  - 4 Eliade 1, pp. 5-6.
  - 5 Weisinger, Herbert, 'An Examination of the Myth and Ritual Approach to Shakespeare', in Murray, Henry A., *Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking*, p. 135.
  - 6 Ibid., pp. 135-6.
  - 7 Ruthven, p. 1.
  - 8 Pindar, *Olympians*, I: 28; *Nemeans*, VII: 23.
  - 9 Thucydides, *History*, I: 21, p. 1.

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10 Creed, J., 'Uses of Classical Mythology', in Cunningham, A., *The Theory of Myth*, p. 7 et seq.

11 Strenski, I., 'Mircea Eliade - Some Theoretical Problems', in Cunningham, A., *The Theory of Myth*, p. 68.

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# The Song of Middle-earth

## Chapter 2

### THE MYTH AS LITERATURE

Although myth began as a symbolic tale with a ritual or religious meaning, today myths are the stories of a culture, and as much importance is placed upon their position within the literature of a culture, as upon their significance within its religious or social development. The myth collectors or the myth writers were trying to preserve part of the culture or interpret the cultural tales within the field of literature. It is unlikely that the ancient collectors were as motivated as Sir George Grey who studied the mythology of the New Zealand Maori so that he could better understand their culture and thereby deal with them more effectively. At a later date Grey collected the myths together and had them published, but the primary function of the collection was for the purposes of a cultural understanding.

Voltaire was far more cynical, but was dealing with far less practical and essentially primitive people when he said that the study of myths was an occupation for blockheads. However, the transition point for myths into a literary heritage is impossible to place. I believe that history takes over. The myth becomes part of the history of a culture and becomes recorded with it and, in doing so, becomes a part of the literature of the culture. For example, there *was* a siege of Troy. The myth aspect is the part that the gods played. In such a case there is an overlap between myth and history. The great expedition involves aspects of the sacred traditions. There can be no doubt that the Greeks did believe that the gods or supernatural forces were involved. It was only natural to mingle the acts of the gods with the acts of the heroes. Thus we have, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a mingling of myth and legend for, in my opinion, pure 'legend' has a hero (be he folk or culture) as the main protagonist, whereas 'pure' myth is more religious in that it deals with the gods - the spiritual creative animi. Yet legend may have within it the raw symbolic power of myth that can lift it above folktale into allegory and indeed higher to the level of myth without the religious influence, although the hero of legend may be viewed with an almost religious awe.

Of course, the historians and writers may themselves create myths to embellish or background their history. Aristotle, for example, believed that myths as devised by Plato were a means of subordinating individuals to the devices of the State. In the sense that early societies were superstitious theocracies dominated by shamans, there is obvious validity in Aristotle's supposition. To cross the line from theocracy to autocracy is not a long step, and would involve a small amendment to the tale but not the theme. Machiavelli, although dealing with historical examples, generalises to such a degree that the ancient power struggles which he describes in *The Prince* in Books IV-VIII become almost mythic archetypes for the political philosophy that he advocates. He has 'mythologised' history as a background for his advice to his patron. *Der Mythos des 20 Jahrhunderts* by Rosenberg is the Nazi ideology incorporated into a mythic form. Communist writers, even today, use quasi-mythic symbols in their writing - 'the valiant soldiers, sailors and workers' or 'capitalist roaders' and 'running dogs'. This is not to say that modern political mythology is restricted to the east of the Iron Curtain. The United States system is full of mythic symbols, heroes and folk-legends. The War of Independence and those who were involved in it have achieved a mythic status. The 'temples' to the heroes of the Republic, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the Washington

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Monument and Mt Rushmore all take their places in the sacred political history alongside such relics as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy also made their contribution to the ritual political language with phrases such as 'Communist front', 'Communist dupe' and 'Are you or have you ever been a member . . . ?' Thus, the myth may be a background to a present history or even a part of it.

In the ancient and not so ancient historical writings, mythic backgrounds are used to place a contemporary leader or ruler into a mythic framework. Vergil links Augustus with Aeneas, the two being the embodiment of Roman virtues. Merovingian tradition traces the ancestry of the Franks to Francus the Trojan. Arthurian tradition claims a link with the Trojan Brutus, grandson of Aeneas who established the British in Albion. Henry VII used the Arthurian legend to give his tenuous hold on the throne more legitimacy. He referred to Monmouth's *Chronicles*, claiming that 'The Matter of Britain' was unfinished and that another Arthur (his son) would return to rid the land of her enemies. Henry, in tracing his ancestry to Cadwallader and thereby to the Trojan Brutus, claimed to be a 'British' king ruling Britain. Henry's granddaughter, Elizabeth I, was the subject of pseudo-myth in her own lifetime in Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, William Warner's *Albion England* and Drayton's *Heroical Epistles* all of which glamorise Gloriana. Shakespeare had cause to refer to 'mythic history' in *Macbeth*. In Act IV Scene 1, Macbeth's prophetic vision of Banquo as the ancestor of kings points in fact to the legitimacy of the claim of James I to the throne of Scotland and England. It was no accident that the play was written within a few years of James' accession and creates a form of mythic background to give legitimacy to a present state of affairs.

The use of myth over the last five centuries by European writers has taken on an aspect that was never contemplated by those who developed the proto-myths. Most of the names of the heathen gods are nothing but poetical or ritualistic names which have been allowed to assume a divine personality to an extent never intended by the original inventors. Of course, myth today operates on a number of different levels. Children especially appreciate myth which to them is a make-believe reality. The questions, 'Tell me about yourself when you were little?' or 'Is that what it was like in the old days?' demand a mythical response because the information and concepts contained in the answer are beyond the child's concept of reality. Similarly, a child's view of a parent is that of an all-wise, all-knowing person, capable of almost anything. Growing up and adolescence in particular is that time when the myth of the parent undergoes a gradual destruction, often to the resentment of the child.

Yet myth, dealing as it does with archetypes, still functions on different levels in society today. Advertising especially uses archetypes and attempts to create a situation which, if duplicated by the purchase, wearing, eating or whatever of a certain item, will have consequences beyond our normal existence or expectations. Similarly, archetypal animals have been used to portray qualities or characteristics of nations and Sir John Tenniel in *Punch* last century was particularly skilful in such archetypal creation. Many of the characters of modern television soap opera dramas and pot-boiler novels are archetypal. The doctor of the soap opera is the modern magician, all-wise, all-knowing, possessed of the power of healing - a twentieth-century Merlin. The aggressive stick-at-nothing businessmen who sweep all before them embody the image of the all-powerful hero Herakles and his successors in the American Dream, Daniel Boone, Paul Bunyan and others. Furthermore, we develop our own mystical mythic attitudes. Science can solve anything, yet the Saviour Science has within it the seeds of its own downfall in the form of the archetypal Mad Scientist whose ancestor is

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the tragic Victor Frankenstein. For modern audiences, Doctor Strangelove is an instantly recognisable figure.<sup>1</sup>

Mythic ritual still continues in the religious sense, and is present, alive and well in the form of the Eucharist, the act of recreation. But beyond this, myth provides a richness within the human experience that goes beyond the perpetuation of archetypes or rituals. Myth has had a profound influence in and on literature and the myth in literature is especially important in any discussion of the works of Tolkien.

The first point that must be made is that despite the proliferation of mythologies, tales and names of deities, the types, themes and subject matter of myths are basically the same. The common themes of myth or mythologies are the study of the comparative mythologist who examines the basis of myth, layer by layer, and in doing so finds patterns that express the nature of a society as a whole. An examination of and search for the themes of myth inevitably becomes a search for that which is essential to the human condition and what the symbols embodied in those themes represent. Claude Levi-Strauss has observed that throughout the world there is a great similarity in mythic themes. In such a study one is inevitably drawn to the archetypes of myth. By using the word 'archetype' I am not referring to the Jungian psycho-analytical term, but rather in its common sense - an original or model symbol which constantly recurs. Mythologies carry such models of absolute values or paradigms of human activity. The presence of archetypes assures Man that what he is about to do has already been done, and therefore can be done. The heroes - Jason, Herakles, Perseus, Odysseus, Sigurd, Beowulf, Gawain - all ventured beyond the seas into the wastes or vast mountains, to the Perilous Realm in a fabulous time. All that Man can do is follow their example. Their grandiose feats, which took place in a far-distant and glorious past, can be imitated if only to a degree, and the models of behaviour that are revealed in the heroes give meaning to our present endeavours.

The most common theme in mythology is that of The Creation - the cosmogonic origin myth. This myth sets the pattern for everything else in most traditions, and, at the time of origin, irreconcilable opposites arise. The myth explains beginnings from the existing situation. No one can explain in mythological terms how chaos (be it the vast and dark nature of the Greek myths, or the 'Spirit of God' moving upon the face of the waters in Genesis) began, or from whence it originated. Always is presupposed the existence of something *before*. Creation myths explain the creation of the circumstances leading up to a state of affairs from a particular point. In all cases the cosmos is a divine work and the archetype of every creative situation. In many mythologies it is common for a supreme god to create and leave the governing, ordering or completion of his creation to others. In Tierra del Fuego, although there is an omnipotent god or creative force, his creation is completed by the mythical ancestors. In the Slave Coast cosmogonic myth the sky-god Olorum leaves the completion of his creation to Obatala, a subsidiary deity.

Eliade considers that the myths of primitive societies are always concerned with creation. Myths, he says, always relate how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behaviour, an institution or a manner of working was established. By knowing the myth, one knows the origin of things and can control and manipulate them at will. One lives the myth and is grasped by a sacred exalting power of events recollected and re-enacted. Thus, within the context of Eliade's discussion, the creation myth is a blueprint for everything that follows and is essential for the survival of society. The myth contains vital and essential lore and knowledge.



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At the other end of the time-scale is the eschatological myth - the myth of the ending. Of the non-Christian mythologies, the most dramatic eschatological myth, and the most bleak, is the Ragnarok of the Norse myths - or Gotterdamerung as it was called by Wagner. Ragnarok was presaged. All knew that it would come, and certain signs and events evidenced its advent. The year-long winter named Fimbulwinter, which was preceded by a hideous war, was one of the signs. Following Fimbulwinter are mighty earthquakes during which the wolf Fenrir, offspring of Loki the Trickster, breaks loose. A ship bearing the Undead from Hell and captained by Loki journeys to Asgard, the home of the gods. The forces of chaos in the form of fire and frost giants together with the World Serpent and Loki's minions descend upon Asgard. Ragnarok is announced to the Aesir and the heroes of Valhalla by the single crow of a cockerel. A mighty battle follows in which the forces of the Aesir and their enemies consume one another totally. All that remains is Yggdrasil, the World Ash. After Ragnarok, it is said, Midgard will rise again, more beautiful than before. The land, cleansed of distrust and evil, will be a fit place for the habitation of men and gods together. The ancestors of the second race of mankind emerge from the trunk of Yggdrasil. In a sense Ragnarok contains a germ of hope in that there will be a new and better world rising from the ashes of the old. Yet it places present existence within a context of doom and without hope. There will be no reward at Ragnarok - death, doom and destruction will come to all.

The Christian Apocalypse contained in Revelation offers more hope. The final battle is preceded by the advent of Anti-Christ which, as in the Norse myth, is the resurgence of chaos. The Anti-Christ or false Messiah is often portrayed as a dragon or a demon. His coming results in the total overthrow of social, moral and religious values. After the great battle near Jerusalem, Satan is thrown down and God comes among Men in the New Jerusalem. The overthrow of Evil is a characteristic of the Persian apocalyptic myth. After a world age of three thousand years Ormazd, also known as Ahurimazda, conquers Ahriman or The Lie.

A comparison of the Christian and Norse myths reveals presages; the coming of chaos, the rule of Evil followed by its ultimate overthrow. The Christian Apocalypse gives hope for those who believe in Christ for they shall rise again to be judged. The Earth will be renewed, but there will not be the all-engulfing disaster. The Christian end, terrifying as it may be, has overlays of symbolic language and a message of Hope. Common to both myths is the concept of rebirth and renewal. Even the gloom of Ragnarok cannot destroy the phoenix of the human spirit and its hope for better things.

Within the span of aeons between Creation and Apocalypse are many common themes that predate historical time. There is, for example, a common belief in a Golden Age preceding our present brutishness. In some mythologies such a period implies blessedness or wisdom. Golden Age men in the Greek myths were subjects of Cronos, father of Zeus. They lived without care or labour, eating acorns, wild fruit and honey, never ageing, laughing and dancing. Death to them was no more terrible than sleep. The Greeks tell of a silver race, divinely created, who ate bread, were non-violent and were destroyed by Zeus. Following them were the two races of bronze, one warlike and cruel who ate flesh and bread and were destroyed by a Black Death; the other noble and generous, the progeny of gods and mortals. Of this second race are the heroes of Thebes, the Argonauts and the Trojan War who dwell in Elysium. The last race are the men of iron, those of the present. Unworthy descendants of the second race of bronze men, we are cruel, unjust, immoral and treacherous. Graves explains the symbolism of metals in terms of cultist worship. Silver is the metal of the moon Goddess and the myth of the men of silver records the rituals of a matriarchal society. The first bronze

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men were the Hellenic invaders; the second bronze men were the Myceneans. The men of iron were the Dorians who bore iron weapons. The symbolism of metals in the degeneration of Man is also recorded by Daniel who refers to the kingdoms of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay which precede the Everlasting Kingdom.

In many myths, the Golden Age and the Apocalyptic Renewal are linked. There is a cyclical pattern with a fresh beginning. The Paradise which was lost will, in the fullness of time, come again in a second or future perfection. Myths of origin too are linked to the end of the old and the beginning of the new. For Christ to die he must be born. While he is with us in the flesh, he symbolises the Golden Age. He must die that he may be reborn, return to the Father and come again for the Second Golden Age which follows the Apocalypse. Christ microcosmically embodies so many of the symbolic mythological themes that the attraction of Christianity, dealing as it does with such a powerful archetype, is not hard to understand.

The end of the First Golden Age occurs with a fall from Grace where man loses the perfection which he once enjoyed and descends to the here-and-now realities of existence - life, death, pain, hunger, envy, greed, lust, jealousy and the thousand and one trials of life. Symbolically, the tribulations of life as we know them are released or imposed by the deity following upon a departure from an established mode of conduct. In Greek mythology Pandora, the first woman, was sent by Zeus as a punishment to Prometheus and Epimetheus for stealing fire, and to man for receiving it, although the myth reveals that another punishment was also imposed upon Prometheus. Pandora was said to be endowed by the gods with beauty, persuasion and music. Epimetheus had within his house a box which Pandora, being curious, opened. From the box poured forth all the trials and tribulations of men. Only Hope remained. Another version of the tale is that Pandora had within her marriage chest all the blessings of the gods. These she allowed to escape with the exception of Hope.

Curiously enough, in the Judaeo-Christian mythology it is a woman who initiates the Fall from Grace and places before her man the choice of Good and Evil, although to be fair Evil itself did not emanate from the woman. The expulsion from Eden is indeed the Fall of Man. Yet this is not enough for he falls even further as a result of the first murder by Cain. This demonstrates the depth of the Fall and establishes murder, and especially family murder as the most heinous of crimes.

A further common theme in mythologies is that of the Flood or some similar form of natural catastrophe such as earthquake or conflagration. In the Judaeo-Christian myth the Flood and the reasons for it are still related to the Fall and the way in which Man behaves to his fellows and to God. Similarly, a catastrophe overtakes Sodom and Gomorrah because of sinful ways. Similar catastrophes are set out in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh and in the account of Atlantis by Plato, although no rationale of divine wrath is given for the demise of the Atlantean civilisation. Apart from warfare and kin-strife, nothing else seems to have caused Zeus to drown the world, leaving only Deucalion and his wife as survivors. But the catastrophe, although it may seem to be the end of the world to the participants, is not a final end. It is the end of one stage of the development of the human race and the beginning of another. The flood or catastrophe opens the way to a recreation of the world and a regeneration of humanity.

The theme of the migration of peoples explains the diversity of the human race, yet presupposes not parallel developments but in fact one cradle within which mankind was nourished. This goes back, of course, to the concept of the Golden Age and the time when

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Man existed in close proximity to Heaven and communed with the gods directly or by way of some link with the home of the gods, such as a tree or a vine. The location of the tree is viewed as the centre of the world (as was the case with Yggdrasil the World Ash) and from this central point the diaspora took place. The wanderings of Abraham and the peoples of Babel are examples, although it is significant that in the Babel tale man wishes to build a tower to re-establish a face to face communication with God.

The themes that have been discussed so far are the more cosmogonic and generalised themes of mythology. From this point on the themes are based more upon the acts of individuals. There is the constantly recurring theme of incest which is linked to a form of sacrifice on the part of the participant(s). In the case of Oedipus there is the ritual sacrifice of a Sacred King, a theme which is the basis of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. We see the theme of the Tyrant opposed by a returning King or one marked for kingship, as was the case with Saul and David. There is the theme of the Mother Goddess (often representing the Earth Mother) and the Divine Child, exemplified by Isis and Horus and Mary and Jesus. There are the tales of the hero Kings, the *patri patriae*, such as Alexander, Asoka, Arthur, Charlemagne and Frederick Barbarossa linked with the concept of the returning King who will come back from the dead, and the eschatological and apocalyptic themes which are a part of this and which have already been discussed.

This inevitably leads to a consideration of the most common theme in myth and legend at the individual level; that of the hero and his Quest. The development of the hero and the Quest that he undertakes are often inseparable. For the hero to be a hero depends upon the manner in which he undertakes his Quest. In some cases the Quest is the pivotal issue in the life of the hero and we are not given a full biography, but merely his undertaking of the Quest. Sir Gawain is a well-known figure in the Arthurian legend. His most significant Quest, that related in the tale of the Green Knight, is but one of the many tales surrounding this hero.

The hero is an archetype. In his life he exemplifies man's ideals and aspirations. He represents the higher goals that man can achieve. His actions are the symbolic leaps forward in man's spiritual and moral progress. He has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to serve as a model or example to a wider community. He ventures over the hill of everyday human existence to confront a possibly dreadful unknown, and does so willingly. The hero is symbolic of man's desire to progress, not physically or materially, but spiritually and ethically, to find himself and his place in the nature of things. He is the creature of myth (or legend) in search of the meaning of myth. His goal may not be generalised absolute truth but in his quest he may achieve an absolute truth and self-realisation. Consequently, the life of the hero is a Quest or in the life of the hero a Quest may be a pivotal activity. Thus, in the Arthurian legend, Gawain speaks most significantly and symbolically in the tale of the Green Knight. Perceval's most important function is his role in the Quest for the Sangreal. But the Quest is not restricted to the Arthurian or medieval myths. The Epic of Gilgamesh is entirely a Quest tale, as is the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*.

In all the Quest hero tales the hero ventures forth from the world of common or everyday events into a region of mystery or supernatural wonder. He encounters fabulous forces, achieves a decisive victory and returns, enriched and enlightened, to his fellow man and, by his actions and existence, bestows good fortune upon his community. Opposing the hero is the monster who may be a beast or a human tyrant, the latter acting regardless of the rights and sensibilities of those over whom he holds power. The characteristics of the monster are essentially the same. He is the hoarder of the general benefit, avid for the greedy rights of my

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and mine. He wreaks universal havoc throughout his domain. His ego is a curse to himself and his world. He is self-terrorised, haunted with fear and ready to oppose violently any threat to his rule. Wherever he rules a cry goes up for the redeemer, the saviour, the hero, carrier of the shining blade whose blow, touch or mere existence will liberate the land. By such an act of redemption the hero bestows benefits upon the oppressed victims of the monster and advances further upon the personal quest for self-realisation and moral righteousness. By slaying the monster he symbolically puts aside the black part of human nature, that penchant for evil that lies within us. The hero turns away from lust, greed, cruelty and megalomania and towards the more acceptable modes of behaviour that, theoretically at least, mark Man's moral progress from savage barbarity to moral civilisation. So it is that the hero is archetypal. He represents us all. His actions are an example for us to emulate and follow. By following in his footsteps we become the hero.

Within the life of the hero are a number of steps or stages. These may occur over his whole life or may be reflected within the Quest that he undertakes. His life or adventure follows a pattern, involving separation from the world, the achievement of a source of power and a life enhancing return.

The advent of the hero, his birth or his background, is shrouded with mystery or surrounded by miracle. Quetzal, Attis and Jesus are examples of the miraculous birth, accompanied by portents and prophecy. The hero may, upon birth, be cast out from his home which is what happened to Siegfried, Moses, Oedipus and Romulus. He may be fostered in a different environment, quite alien from his true origins, or be totally left in the wild, abandoned to nature. Such situations symbolise his universal origins and nature. He is at ease in any environment. He appreciates power and wealth, poverty and degradation. He communes with the wild side of man's soul. He speaks the language of animals. He is at one with nature and with his humanity and is thereby the universal representative of man.

At an early stage of his development the hero will undergo some form of initiation during which time he will reveal a part of his potential as a mover of events. The initiation is a form of rite of passage and as such is as much an indication to the hero himself of his potential as it is to others. It is the dawning or awakening of self-realisation. The initiation may take place in the infancy of the hero, such as Herakles and the serpents or Odysseus and the boar, or at a later time, such as David and Goliath. Jesus had two stages of initiation; one, the Youth Christ at the Temple, is preliminary. The main initiation comes at the Baptism in the Jordan and is a prelude to His ministry. From that point the events in the life of the hero follow swiftly upon one another for Him.

Following the initiation, and preceding his great acts, the hero goes through a period of withdrawal. Having been confronted with the potential of his being he must, psychologically, come to terms with it. He has a choice in the manner of the use of his powers. The choice that he makes, the path that he selects to follow, must be the right one. Consequently the withdrawal phase is a period of inner trial, as well as self-confrontation. Yet from such period of withdrawal the hero emerges to undertake his most important feat, which is the Quest.

The Quest, as I have indicated, is a search for the self and the essence of man's being. The hero may receive and refuse the call, as did Perceval. Such a character represents those of us who would rather avoid self-confrontation. Perceval avoided the confrontation with mystic reality. Gawain, on the other hand, asked the question and was held to be a true seeker. He saved the King and the Kingdom and is an imitation of Christ. The Quest inevitably involves

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magic, beasts or the supernatural, or a combination of all three. The wizards, dragons, demons, giants or mystic dreams and visions are all part and parcel of the effort that the hero must put into the achievement of his goal. They symbolise the darkness, ignorance or temptation that stands in the way of progress towards true understanding, awareness and self-realisation. They must be, and are, overcome. The Quest within the life of the hero reveals an eternal struggle for self-realisation. But frequently associated with the Quest and its achievement is the death of the hero which may be actual or symbolic. I can think of no better example of symbolic death than Aragorn's passage through the Paths of the Dead in *The Lord of the Rings*, which I shall discuss more fully in a later chapter. The actual death of the hero is not final, and may often be linked with nature and the concept of rebirth. Thus, when Odin's Quest for the runes results in his death, and Christ's Quest in a similarly actual and symbolic way, we see the hero in death cradled in the promise of rebirth. The tree, on which both Odin and Christ perished, has its roots in the unknown - that final part of the Quest to be attained.

Associated with death is the descent to the Underworld. Because the death of the hero is so often sacrificial and to conquer death he has first to die, the hero faces that which man fears most - the ultimate unknown from which there is no return - death. The hero becomes the scapegoat for humanity by the frequently sacrificial nature of his death. He carries our sins with him and on our behalf descends to the Underworld to confront Death or the Lord of the Underworld, or the Ultimate Evil itself. If the death of the hero is of a symbolic nature so too is his descent to the Underworld. His descent is not as one who is dead but *as if* he were one dead. Thus, Christ, who physically dies, descends to Hell to deliver His ultimatum to Satan and commence the Harrowing of Hell. Orpheus descends as part of his Quest for Eurydice and conquers death with his musical skill. His is a symbolic descent and a symbolic challenge. His descent represents the power of love and the immortal nature of pure art.

It is by Resurrection that the hero returns - and again this may be actual or symbolic. By rebirth, death is defeated and the cycle of Nature is re-established. The hero evidences his universality as the Man in Nature by actual or symbolic rebirth and the confirmation of the established order of things. He has not only confirmed order but also his self-awareness and self-realisation. His rebirth is a return to the source of his origins, to take up the promised honour, kingdom or throne which was foretold before or at his birth. His resurrection is a fulfilment of being.

The final stage of the hero's development is his Apotheosis, his reception into Heaven or the confirmation of his universal and immortal nature. Christ, Mithras, Dionysius, Elijah and Galahad are received into Heaven. Arthur, Charlemagne and Barbarossa are not dead but sleeping, awaiting a time to return. Their departure from the realms of reality is but temporary and death for them is not absolute. Immortalisation may take a number of forms. The hero may vanish, so that none may confirm his death. He may be received into Heaven or taken to a sacred isle or mountain. He may undergo some change at physical death that makes his passing so unique that it is not a natural death. And in the tales of the returning King the eternal hope and security of the renewal of the natural order of things is assured, such return being the re-establishment of the absolute archetypal and prototype natural order - the Golden Age.

Thus the hero is called to adventure and is set aside as one who is unique. That he may resist the call is evidence of the folly of flight from an omnipotent deity. His adventure involves the supernatural both in the form of aid and hindrance. By undertaking the Quest he crosses the threshold to put on trial himself and, as Everyman, all Mankind. His challenges may involve

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the eternal opposites - the meeting with the male side and a form of atonement with the father, and the confrontation with the female side; the woman as temptress Death, the Underworld and Resurrection represents a denial of the World, a confrontation with the Ultimate Question and the crossing of the return threshold to the real World. The hero is the master of the two Worlds, spiritual and temporal. He is Universal, Everyman, man in Nature, fulfilled and aware. He is the epitome of existence and achievement.<sup>2</sup>

It has been said by Northrop Frye and subsequently by other literary critics that the Quest myth has been the central myth of literature and the source of all literary genres. T. S. Eliot praised James Joyce for having invented a 'mythical method' or 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity'<sup>3</sup> which enables a modern writer to give 'a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the Quest myth in literature is nothing new. Myth telling originally commenced as an oral tradition and, as society developed, the tradition and mythic tales were incorporated into the literature of the society. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are quaint tales and part of the Latin literary heritage. Yet they are myths of origins - of how things came to be. That myth telling was an oral tradition is confirmed in the Norse word *saga* which means 'things said'. Saga, and its close relation epic which is an extension of saga, deal not so much with 'true' myth but with the ancestors or heroes of a society. Both rely heavily on 'true' myth for a background, and presuppose a knowledge of myth among the listeners. It is wrong to assume that the *Eddas*, the sagas of the North, and the *Kalevala* are representative of a written literary tradition for they are not. The *Kalevala* was not recorded in writing until as late as the 1830s and even though the tales have been written down there is a heavy oral tradition whose function is to stir the spirit of warriors to heroic action by praising the exploits of ancestors in the mead hall or before battle. The *Chansons de Geste* not only tell of deeds, but are also a genealogy. The themes of the epics were heroic and followed the pattern which has already been outlined.

Those who recounted the myths and legends, the priests, shamans or bards and poets, were the keepers of the sacred tradition and the sacred stories. The initiation for shamans and priests was long and complex and, like the Irish 'seanchan' or 'master poet', required passage through various stages of wisdom. Poets, like shamans, were believed to be a medium between man and the gods and were considered seers or soothsayers, yet, as in the case of Homer, Tiresias or the Delphic Sybil, may have had to contend with some physical disability or disorder. By being so disabled they were not totally of the world. The disability set them apart and allowed an acceptable link with the supernatural.

So the poet is not merely an artist, but an inspired artist and a keeper of the sacred tradition. It is therefore no accident that myth, legend and literature were, in early days, so closely linked. Even the use of verse forms is part of the ritual tradition. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written in a dactylic hexameter, a form inappropriate to both Greek and English. But it was the metre of prophecy and religious narrative. In using this form, Homer's work invokes a quality that makes it transcend a mere tale and takes it to the point of religious myth. Of course, an oral tradition results in modifications with the passage of time, although poetic forms would contain mnemonic tricks of metre or rhyme form. An example of the former is the *Kalevala* with its distinctive metre adopted by H. W. Longfellow in *The Song of Hiawatha*. But despite such aids the tales changed, not necessarily in theme but in detail. Much would depend upon the audience for whom the tale was written or created. According to Eliade, Homer created

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his work for a military and semi-feudal aristocracy. Thus Homer may have avoided some of the themes which would not be of interest to his audience, and rather glorified certain aspects.

Despite such critics as Pindar and Thucydides who rejected the incredible myths and fabulous tales, the Greek myths represent a literary work which documents a religious belief. None of them have come to us in their cult context and, were it not for the work of Graves, it is doubtful that the religious or ritual explanation of them would be available to any but a few scholars. Any myth that has been documented or has been the subject of a literary work is primarily literary in nature. Thus we see the *Eddas* and sagas not as religious documents but as linguistic records and part of the literary history of society.

Myth has appeared throughout the history of literature even down to the present time. Mythical archetypes survive in the modern novel in the symbolic sense. Hemingway's *Old Man is Everyman*, adrift on the Primordial Waters undertaking his Quest for the Monster of the deep. Dickens returns to the folktale idiom. *Nickleby* searches for his real background kept hidden by his wicked uncle, Ralph. Dickens' characters may be wicked witches or people or institutions and his heroes are often aided by the guileless fool who leads them to salvation.

The writer, in creating his own myth, will accept the supernatural as operating within nature. Within the world of nature exist inexplicable forces which are fickle and can turn at will. The use of mythic forms and archetypes by the writer is an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural forces into a manageable collaboration with objective and experience facts of life in such a way as to stimulate unconscious passions and the conscious mind. It can bring together the real experience and the submerged impulses of life. The use of myth in the creative sense is the province of the poet or bard; the artist not the historian. The poet may feign a history for his artistic purpose and pattern, using an imagined history or an historical form within which to cast his fictional or symbolic action. Thus the poet's or artist's world is a 'middle-earth' situated between the lower present day historical world and an unexperienced but nevertheless mythically real Heaven.

Fiction, imagination and myth all occupy the same level for the artist. Fiction may be a deviation from reality or an approximation of it. With fiction, the artist can explain the inexplicable. There has been a tendency in modern literature to dispense with the mythic forms and the successful achievement of the Quest or the 'happy ending'. Such literature is literature without hope and says little for Man's ability to transcend or overcome his universal tragedy. But by the same token it is important to consider the element of tragedy in myth. So far we have looked at the hero and his Quest from a positive or 'eucatastrophic' point of view. Tragedy can provide us with a positive point of view, but with anything but happiness for the protagonist. The tragic hero carries within him the well-being of people and the welfare of the State. He engages in a conflict with the representative of darkness and Evil. He suffers a temporary defeat or setback. After a period of shame and suffering he emerges triumphant as the symbol of the victory of light and good over darkness and evil, a victory sanctified by the covenant of the settling of destinies which reaffirms the well-being of the people and the welfare of the State. In the course of the conflict comes a point where the protagonist and antagonist merge into a single challenge against the order of God. The protagonist commits an evil he would not normally do, and fails to do good when he should. At this moment we become aware that the real protagonist of the tragedy is the order of God against which the hero has rebelled. The pride and presumption which is within us all as a result of our mixed

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state is symbolised and revealed, and it is this hubris which is purged from us by the suffering of the tragic hero.

It is the function of the artist, the writer, the creative myth-maker to highlight and focus the symbols in his creative effort. As Blake says in 'Jerusalem', 'I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's.'

The end product of such creativity may be an eclectic synopticon such as W. B. Yeats' *A Vision* or Graves' *The White Goddess*, or a creation-like myth such as that of Wordsworth's personal cosmos in *The Prelude*. Furthermore, it is difficult to achieve a totally clean break with the allegedly extinct mythologies and source studies have been devoted to Blake and Yeats. No matter how hard a creator may try, inevitably he draws upon extant mythology, and the mythopoeic impulse in imaginations as powerful as Joyce and Mann may be impeded by a reluctance to let go of the traditional mythologies. The invented mythology rarely contains the resonances of an inherited one and must always remain private except to the happy few who take the trouble to work it out. Those who advocate that myths are collective in nature consider it impossible for any one person to be credited with the creation or invention of a myth. What Melville and Kafka create is not myth, but an individual fantasy expressing a symbolic action equivalent to and related to the myth's expression of a public rite. Yet initially the myth must have a source in the form of ballad, narrative or saga. Someone has to supply the raw material to which others may add or may alter. Thus, anyone can contribute his 'bit' to a myth but is obliged to respect the original integrity of the raw material. In literature myths are moulded and shaped. Imported materials are adapted to fit local custom, landscape or belief and usually suffer slightly. In the continued retelling of a traditional tale, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable.

Tolkien created a setting for his mythology. His world was Arda, the realm of mortals, Middle-earth. The themes of his mythology are universal. Many of the themes have been borrowed and reworked to fit the artist's structure. Tolkien's mythology is, however, rare. It is a private mythology but it is available to all. Although it began as a shared experience with a small group, it carries within it elements of universal acceptability. Tolkien's themes, archetypes and symbolism can appeal to us all in that they are universal. It is the use to which they are put, the tailoring within the created mythological world, that makes Tolkien's work one of the most significant of the created mythologies of English literature.

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1 Leeming, *Mythology*, 1970.

2 This discussion has drawn heavily upon the following: Campbell, J., *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*; Leeming, *Mythology*; Kluckhohn, C., in Murray, Henry A., *Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking*, pp. 46-61; Weisinger, H., in Murray, Henry A., *Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking*, pp. 132-41.

3 Eliot, T. S., 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', reprinted in Ellmann, R., and Feidelson, C., *The Modern Tradition*, pp. 679-81, and cited in Ruthven, pp. 76-7.

4 *Ibid.*

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