

MYTH AND SYMBOL IN THE PATTERN OF TRUTH

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The same myths, the same symbols, can have vastly different meanings at different times and places. Myths and symbols need not be viewed as unchanging. They might better be seen as vehicles for helping people understand and communicate new ideas.

Now, when I use the word "myth," I don't intend the technical meaning employed by anthropologists but rather the more general usage as shown in the second definition in the *American Heritage Dictionary*:¹

Any real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions.

And by "symbol," I mean:

Something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention;

which is the *American Heritage Dictionary's* first definition.

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, second college edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).

Thus defined, myths and symbols are to be found everywhere. And some of the most powerful and influential occur in popular culture, since these are often the ones that have the greatest immediate social impact.

One current and recurring myth-loaded with special symbols and amply demonstrating how myth and symbol can play an active role in the pattern of that thing we call truth-is the myth about vampires.

The first weekend after its release, the Francis Ford Coppola film, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, raked in thirty-two million dollars at the box office and continued to draw sizeable audiences for months afterwards. Meanwhile, Anne Rice's fourth vampire novel, *The Tale of the Body Thief*, skyrocketed to the top of the best-seller lists, joined in book stores by at least sixteen other new vampire titles, both fiction and nonfiction, including compilations of older short stories by the likes of Byron, Tolstoy and Poe. At the same time, at least a dozen more vampire films were in the works or slated for release in 1993, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Innocent Blood* were readied for video and bookings on cable television.

It's not over, yet: a big burst of film and literary activity can be expected for 1997, the one-hundredth anniversary of the novel *Dracula*. Actor Frank Langella meanwhile stars in yet another road-show resuscitation of the *Dracula* stage play.

So the fascination runs deep, an ever-potent imagery enjoying an incredible revival-which is reason enough to use the literary and cinematic vampire as my first example. Vampires, though nonexistent from the standpoint of science, are far from irrelevant. Pervasive myths and symbols never are: they tell a lot about how people feel and about the times in which one lives.

Take, for example, the fact that the vampire of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, particularly English literature, is almost always an aristocrat. This is significant when a comparison is made to the earlier imagery from folklore, where the vampire is more often seen as a fellow peasant, perhaps a diseased member of the family who has died and who, through his or her plague and imagined stalkings in the night, drains the life from the other family members one by one. (In many cases, this proved to be a reasonable primitive explanation for a phenomenon now better explained by the germ theory of disease.)

So the nature of the vampire changed when its imagery was moved from folklore to literature. It changed because the audience was different. In such literature, produced by and for an emergent middle class, the vampire becomes a powerful symbol of the evils and absurdities of a predatory aristocracy—a blood-sucking royalty, often linked by family ties to foreign governments that feeds off the labors of the middle and working classes. Hence, what had started out as a folkloric and superstitious way of explaining the human struggle against nature now becomes a symbolic approach for looking at a particular *class* struggle, a battle the middle class was already winning.

To demonstrate this view of the literature, I need only note certain recurring story elements. For example, there is the depiction of those who conquer the aristocratic fiend as being members of the middle class. They are clerks, professors, elementary school teachers; and they frequently utilize an industrial technology completely unknown to the hopelessly feudal vampire. This is particularly evident in the 1897 novel, *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker. Here the middle class heroes are able to catch the Count before he returns to his castle because they know how to plan their pursuit according to railroad timetables. He, on the other

hand, is for the most part stuck on a slow-moving sailing ship. Symbolically ratifying and illustrating a contemporary European trend toward throwing off the yoke of monarchy, the heroes pursue him back to his rotting castle, prove that such aristocrats have no heart, and expose him to the public light of day. By this process, the pedigreed ghoul is destroyed and capitalism is freed to flourish.

With the end of World War I, and the resultant fall or diminution of a number of monarchies, this type of vampire imagery slipped from fashion-to be replaced by yet another variety. "The war to end all wars" had brought in its wake rampant poverty and disease throughout much of Europe. And to reflect this suffering, a hideously ugly and plague-carrying vampire entered the scene, most starkly drawn in the 1922 German silent film *Nosferatu: The Symphony of Horror*. Carl Theodore Dryer's equally haunting Danish film of 1932, *Vampyr*, marked the terminus of this tradition as a more seductive image from Hollywood began to appear.

Not suffering as Europe did, The United States experienced a change of values instead. The lyrics, "How ya gonna keep'em down on the farm after they've seen Patee?" expressed the new worldliness of those returning from the war. The changing morality of the Roaring Twenties followed, making it possible to illustrate not-so-subliminally a growing sexual freedom in the stage production of Bram Stoker's novel. New emphasis was put on the sensuous symbolism already present in the book; and Lord Byron's century-old imagery of a vampire as a handsome and charming nobleman, suave and cultured, with continental accent and dashing cape, was easily revived. In October 1927, *Dracula* opened on Broadway with Bela Lugosi as the lead. It quickly became a major hit, followed by two national tours that grossed its promoters millions of dollars.

During the Great Depression that followed, public interest in vampire lore increased more than ever. Ray

Carney, professor of film at Boston University, notes that Dracula always rises again in hard economic times. "Vampires play into our sense of being drained by unseen forces," he explains.² So the play was transferred to film in 1931, where the mysterious and sexy Count continues to feed off of his victims and to wage war against traditional morality. Such a vampire, of course, can never be allowed to win. He (and in the 1936 *Dracula's Daughter*, she) must finally be conquered by cross-bearing religious fanatics who will make it a point to either kill or convert back every sexually liberated woman or man the vampire has created. As such, the vampire tale goes from being a nineteenth-century allegory of revolution to an early twentieth-century image of inexplicable suffering to a mid-twentieth-century allegory of reaction, a story told by those who would save a repressive system of "family values" from the supposed evil influences of an unstable and changing world. Its popularity with audiences, however, stemmed more perhaps from the way it titillated, the way it offered increasingly positive images of "forbidden fruit." Professor Raymond McNally of Boston College, who teaches a course entitled "Terrorism From Dracula to Stalin," has concluded from his research and classroom attendance data that vampires appeal more to women than men. "Women," he says, "find Dracula strangely attractive, a potent, sensuous seducer who knows what he wants and offers safe sex: you can't get impregnated."³

During the 1940s, this sensual approach became a commodity, a product to be marketed through numerous repetitive plots carried out by a stable of recycled actors. The product finally parodied itself in 1948 when Bela Lugosi as Dracula meets his cinematic nemesis, not from the pious vampire-hunter Van Helsing ("We

² Hugh A. Mulligan (Associated Press), "Dracula, a Vampire Doomed to Eternal Remakes," *Buffalo News*, January 7, 1993, sec. C, 2.

³ *ibid.*

have all become God's madmen") but from the bumbling comedians Abbott and Costello.

New postwar sexual revolutions of the 1950s and '60s served to render vampires more attractive, and their victims more willing. Gay and lesbian vampires entered the scene in the 1970s. *Mter* that, a number of other changes began to occur. Ray Carney declares: "The genre really gets interesting in the late '70s and '80s when it gets twisted and reapplied. Bats and bites and virgins are only the costume. The core of the vampire is sexual dynamics, that frightening territory where someone possesses you and you become obsessed. There is a sense of betrayal, of being out of control, of men and women using each other."⁴

During most of this time, from 1958 to 1979, Christopher Lee eclipsed Bela Lugosi as the quintessential blood-sucking tempter, though sadder than his predecessors and for that reason increasingly desirable. The sadness, in fact, soon became a statement of its own, bringing the vampire into its most recent transformation.

Beginning in the late 1960s, alongside a rising social and global consciousness, some vampires were metamorphosed into tormented and self-deprecating heroes. There was Barnabas of the *Dark Shadows* television series and Louis and Lestat of the Anne Rice novels. These are beings who suffer from an existential inner conflict, uncertainty, and guilt. Try as they may, these vampires cannot help the fact that, in the very act of living, they wreak death and destruction on legions of innocent victims. In short, the vampires become *ourselves-a* people who, while enjoying the consumer society that provides so much life and pleasure, unwittingly and ironically rape and destroy the planet; suck the life out of cultures in the Third World, even the cultures of our own poor. The symbol of the

⁴ *ibid.*

vampire thus has come to appeal subtly to a, perhaps, unconscious angst generated by our own witnessing on television of scenes of so many people dying in *M*-rica and in our inner cities. Further, it encourages many to consider the idea that today's fat and industrialized nations are comprised of parasites, albeit well-meaning, feeding off the oppressed.

This most recent change in the meaning of the image indicates that the old style vampire scares us less and less. From the beginning of World War II, we have existed in an environment that has spawned a Hitler, a Stalin, and a Mao-what can a mere vampire do to top that? We live on a technologized planet that permits us to watch battles on television as they happen and allows our country to utilize weapons of mass destruction in "limited wars." As a result, no vampire, no matter how vicious, impersonal or thirsty, can begin to compete with an ordinary eighteen-year-old American soldier sitting behind a 20 MM electric cannon firing seven hundred explosive rounds per minute. Vampires can stir our fears today only if their evil is psychological and grips us in a vice of inner conflict. So, this is what vampires have become-mirrors of our own socially-aware self-doubts.

As such, vampires remain very much with us. In Anne Rice's words, they are "a fathomless well of metaphor,"⁵ as are so many other myths and symbols.

The common approach in many Humanist and Free-thought circles, however, is to debunk rather than understand a superstition-to prove, for example, that no vampires exist (as if very many people really think they do!). And, when not so engaged, Humanists and Freethinkers tend to forget about myth, legend, and folklore altogether. In the light of a literalistic, almost legalistic, rationalism, symbols and imagery become

⁵ Tom Mathews with Lucille Beachy, "Fangs for Nothing," *Newsweek* (November 30, 1992): 74.

annoying, even loathsome to the Humanist. As a movement, however, I think Humanists react this way at their peril.

Myth, symbol, and art have a tremendous impact on society. Though this is often because their appeal is frequently to very human visceral and subconscious feelings, this should not be cause to relegate them to the misty isles of the irrational. Works of symbolic art, narratives both folkloric and literary, are almost always deliberate and even *rational* products of the mind. Behind them stand difficult creative and intellectual processes, not to mention a long and distinguished history of artistic and literary criticism, beginning most forcefully with Aristotle's *Poetics*, where logical and stringent rules were laid down. Narrative art in particular must stay within certain rational bounds in order to maximize its aesthetic and social appeal.

Humanists who pride themselves in their rationality and common sense need to consider that the story narrative is perhaps the most efficient means of communication known to humanity, one not lacking in intellectual and ethical merits. Whether present in a film, novel, play, poem or song, a well-told story can affect the mind in a way no didactic lecture or philosophical argument usually can—and the idea so imparted will more easily be remembered. That is why, in the lives of so many millions of secular people today, art, literature and music have supplanted religion as the method of choice for examining ethical and moral questions.

If the Humanist movement is to grow, it needs to reach that secular audience. More Humanists should face and tap into the aesthetic, grow comfortable in the presence of striking images and gripping tales, become at ease with the power of myth and symbol. All great political and religious movements have had their images and stories. There have been hero tales, allegories, legends, and songs. And from these, such

movements have derived strength, staying-power and growth.

Jesus told parables. The Bible is a collection of narratives, not philosophical arguments. Fundamentalists give personal testimonies, not scientific demonstrations. In short, human beings are captivated by a good story. It is one of the ways people recreate their experiences in order to make sense of them. Stories are part of the rational and analytical process, not mere superstitious substitutes for thinking.

Stories are also democratic. They can reach a wide audience that includes people not frequently engaged in philosophical and ethical discourse-which is why the story narrative may prove to be the vehicle of choice by which Humanism is taken to the people.

If I am right about this, we might ask if there are already any Humanist storytellers, if there exist any Humanist stories. And one only need view a tragedy by Euripides to find out. Consider the following examples.

In *The Bacchae*, Euripides expresses in poetic drama all the seductions and dangers of cultic and fanatical belief. His characters suffer personal tragedy to the very extent that they allow themselves to become caught up in the Bacchic frenzy, or to work dogmatically and undemocratically to suppress the Dionysian cult. And Dionysus, in the end, is exposed as the cruel, capricious and vindictive god that he is. Through him, all his promises of joy through faith are ultimately broken.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, a priest declares that Agamemnon has sinned against a god, and this is why the wind has not blown and will not blow to send his thousand ships to Troy. Only penance through the sacrifice of his daughter will restore the god's good graces. So, reluctantly, Agamemnon orders the daughter seized and burned at the stake. She is courageous in the face

of death while her father's cowardice before the altar of superstition unwittingly dooms him also—he will later be murdered by his wife to revenge the daughter's death. But, for now, the priest lights the flame, and, ironically, not a moment too soon, because the winds have already begun to blow.

In *The Trojan Women*, the forgotten suffering in the aftermath of every war is laid bare. One undeserved tragedy after another befalls those women of Troy unlucky enough to have survived the final destruction of their once proud city. And why was Troy brought down? For what did so many Greeks and Trojans give their lives? To retrieve a wife charged with adultery.

Euripides criticizes in his plays religious fanaticism, superstition, male domination, war, and other evils. But how often are his works recommended to Humanist or would-be Humanist readers? How often do Humanist groups show the gripping film versions: Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* and *The Trojan Women*?

As an organized movement, Humanists have not been well-served by a frequent forgetfulness of Humanist storytellers. Yet the literary names are legion: Lucian, Moliere, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Atwood, and Kurt Vonnegut, to name just a few.

In the realm of popular fiction, we often think of science fiction writer Isaac Asimov: not only did his work express Humanist values, but he was directly involved with the Humanist movement as was mystery writer Miriam Allen DeFord. Yet, when it comes to the direct glorification of reason through storytelling, perhaps no writer did more than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. His character, Sherlock Holmes, by his shrewd use of logic, heroically personifies the power of rationality in action. (Humanists, unfortunately, prefer to focus on the author's private beliefs in the paranormal,

especially his promotion of some rather curious photographs of fairies.)

Outside of popular novels and short stories, there is the even more accessible material from television. It hasn't always been easy to deliver Humanist views to the wide audience reached by this medium, but today, due in part to the pioneering work of the late *Star Trek* producer Gene Roddenberry, the public has increasingly become comfortable with various aspects of the Humanist message. An avowed Humanist and atheist, Roddenberry made no bones as to what he was up to: when receiving the 1991 Humanist Arts Award from the American Humanist Association, he encouraged his fellow Humanists to follow his lead and continue to "stick it to them," to keep finding ways to insert Humanist messages. Today on television, numerous shows from time to time present humanistic ideas that years ago would have been quickly censored. So noticeable has this change been that Christian fundamentalist groups frequently charge that Humanists have taken over the networks!

Beyond novels and teleplays, there are other ways to relate stories. As already noted, Jesus told parables. Tribal peoples passed tales around the campfire. But today, in our society, one of the most common forms of storytelling is the joke, some of the most frequent storytellers being nightclub comedians.

A good joke can often illustrate a Humanist point better than can an intellectual argument. Take, for example, the Humanist position that it is foolish to believe literally in a myth or superstition no matter how persuasive it is. Need one belabor this point with examples of harm from false belief? Or can one just tell the story of the man skiing down the mountain?

So it came to pass that he was alone on the slope. He had removed himself far from his friends and was enjoying the solitude of

nature. As the winter wind whipped through his hair, its sound fusing with that of his skis blading deftly through the pliant snow, a sense of buoyancy transported his mind. ... And distracted him from the jagged reality of a cliff edge rushing rapidly toward his feet.

His eyes fell upon it at just the last moment. He turned his skis sharply to the left, tried to avoid going over, but it was too late. He tumbled down along the sheer face, grasping at anything he might hold, and, by the purest luck, his hand caught a branch and halted his descent.

Halted him, and there he hung.

He was too far down now to clamber up. And as he looked at his feet, still swinging to and fro from the shock of his sudden stop, he could see nothing but a deep and ragged chasm, its floor easily more than a mile below. The branch was all he had. It cracked from the strain, threatening to break under the pressure of his weight.

As he held on, pale with fear, he slowly, cautiously, so as not to stress the branch even more, let out a cry: "Is anybody there?!"

The words bounced off of the ridges and echoed through the gulf. He waited. There was no answer. So he called out again. "Is anybody there?!"

Again, the words reverberated against the silent rocks. But this time, slowly, sensuously, with increasing clarity, a soft and protective voice began to rise up from the depths of the chasm. Feminine and sweet, it spoke with welcome words. "I am here." Its delicate tones seemed to fill the mountains. "I am here

for you, the Goddess of the Abyss, the Mother of the Crag. I will protect you! Let go of that branch and allow yourself fall, safe into my arms. Trust me. Have faith in the salvation of my warm bosom."

As her last words slipped away, cool into the depths, the man continued to hold on, perplexed. He looked about. He thought and wondered.

And then, after a long and considered silence, he shouted out, "Is anybody *else* there!"

Or let's take the Humanist argument that it's an easy thing to believe in the wrong religion, the wrong god. What proof has anyone that they've chosen aright? A person needs verification if he or she really wants security.

But why go on? Just tell the joke about the sky diver.

And 10, the time had come to pull the rip cord and release her chute. So she pulled it. She pulled it as she always had. She pulled it hard and waited.

But nothing happened.

She pulled again, harder, again and again, until it broke loose in her hand-but the parachute remained as tightly packed as before.

And she continued to fall free, the green earth rising up, rapidly, to greet her.

In her struggle, a beaded cross she'd chained about her neck worked free of her blouse and began to swing out in mid-air. It dangled before her eyes. It dangled until, suddenly, in a desperate rush of panic and faith, she grabbed it. Holding it tightly she shouted out loud, "Oh, Saint Francis, save me!"

She prayed as she shouted, hope linked with fear in what she knew was her last gasp of belief.

When out from the clouds above streaked a giant hand. Like lightning it seized her body and held her firm. Protectively it ended her fall. And the woman heaved a sigh of relief and thanksgiving.

"Oh thank you! Thank you, dear Saint Francis. You are my guardian, my hope, my solace. I will honor you forever, dear, dear Saint Francis!"

But a thunderous voice in the sky inquired loudly, "'Ignatius' or 'of Assisi?'"

The woman swallowed hard and thought. She looked at the hand that held her. And then, with a trembling voice she chose, "of Assisi. "

Suddenly the hand opened, her free fall resumed, and the voice boomed loudly, "Wrong!"

Then there's the point about how, with blind faith, agreement between people isn't really possible: once the Humanist triad of reason, observation, and compassion is abandoned as a standard of judgment, there no longer is any common ground humans can find. Might becomes right, and differences between individuals and groups must be settled by force.

No need to venture into the labyrinth of logic and epistemology to argue this. Just do as Mark Twain did in *The Damned Human Race*, and tell the story of a little scientific test.

Among my experiments was this. In an hour I taught a cat and a dog to be friends. I put them in a cage. In another hour I taught them to be friends with a rabbit. In the course

of two days I was able to add a fox, a goose, a squirrel and some doves. Finally a monkey. They lived together in peace; even affectionately.

Next, in another cage I confined an Irish Catholic from Tipperary, and as soon as he seemed tame I added a Scotch Presbyterian from Aberdeen. Next a Turk from Constantinople; a Greek Christian from Crete; an Armenian; a Methodist from the wilds of Arkansas; a Buddhist from China; a Brahman from Benares. Finally, a Salvation Army Colonel from Wapping. Then I stayed away two whole days. When I came back to note results, the cage of Higher Animals was all right, but in the other there was but a chaos of gory odds and ends of turbans and fezzes and plaids and bones and flesh-not a specimen left alive. These Reasoning Animals had disagreed on a theological detail and carried the matter to a Higher Court.⁶

Finally, there's the point we like to make about the credibility of outrageous reports, about how extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. David Alexander recounts this story, a great testimony to use on those door-to-door witnesses trying to tell *you* a tale. He wrote:

Penn Gillette, the loquacious member of the magic and comedy team of Penn and Teller, has a friend who writes comedy. When Penn's friend is approached by a Bible-thumper, he jumps right into the following dialogue:

"Have you been saved, brother?" asks the fanatic.

⁶ Mark Twain, "The Damned Human Race" in Bernard DeVoto, ed., *Letters from the Earth* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1962), 180-81.

"Yes, I have," replies Penn's friend.

"Praise the Lord."

"Yes, I was a sinner, awash in alcohol and drug abuse, but I was delivered from sin and saved by the Lord," the comedy writer continues.

"Praise the Lord," replies the proselytizer.

"But that's not all. I was working in my shop a few weeks ago when I accidentally cut off my index finger with a saw. It was just hanging by a thread of flesh. I cried out to my wife to call an ambulance, and then I realized that I had Doctor Jesus! So I put the finger back in place and prayed to Jesus for a healing. I felt heat in my hand and when I looked, my finger was almost completely healed."

"Praise the Lord!" comes the automatic but enthusiastic response.

"Then just last week," the comic goes on, "my son accidentally fell in front of a steam-roller working on the road. Flattened the poor kid right down like a pancake. But not to worry, I had Jesus on my side. I prayed a mighty prayer and my son popped right back into shape and began to play. Praise the Lord."

The proselytizer belts out the perfunctory "Praise the Lord," only now with a hint of skepticism.

"But that's not the most amazing thing. My wife was working in the garage and slipped on a puddle of grease. She fell on some garden tools and accidentally cut her head off. Well, after my experiences with my finger and my son I didn't even bother to call an ambu-

lance or a doctor. I just put her head back on straight, prayed to Jesus as I've never prayed before, and in an instant she was complete and whole."

By now the religious salesperson is quite perplexed and looks the comic in the eye and says, "I find that hard to believe."

To which the comic instantly responds, "Oh? Which part?"⁷

Stories can go a long way toward making a point. Therefore we need not define our philosophy exclusively in abstract and intellectual but in aesthetic terms as well.

Which is where postmodernism comes in.

In many ways, postmodern philosophy is an expansion of all that was least helpful in early 20th-century Humanism: the infatuation with analysis and the scorning of art. Taking a lead from the Logical Positivists and their "ordinary language analysis," postmodernists not only continued the view that religious statements were essentially poetic utterances, but applied the same linguistic dissection to science as well. To them, all our supposed truths are "metanarratives," mere myths and stories.

But this ought to teach us something. Instead of seeing their efforts as serving to rob the world of science, to reduce it essentially to some sort of fictional literature, we can view their work as rather equalizing the two, and hence unwittingly lifting the story narrative closer to the level of meaning traditionally ascribed to science alone! Then storytelling can become philosophically respectable again. Plato, in his dialogue style of philosophizing and with his frequent use of examples

⁷ David Alexander, "Fun with Missionaries," *The Skeptical Eye, The Humanist*, 50:5 (September/October 1990), 46.

from mythology, helped show that this is the way we humans naturally explore and communicate. Why shouldn't we, then, see this as permission to be who we are?

In its extreme forms, of course, postmodernism analyzes away its very own principles: if science and philosophy are "mere narratives," so too are the ideas of the postmodern philosophers! Because these philosophers have, like Wittgenstein before them, tolerated and accepted such a self-contradiction, they must share the fate of their ancient forebears, the Pyrrhonic Sceptics. That is, though they may reign in academia for a time, a new breed of thinkers will grow tired of espousing ideas that ultimately self-destruct. There can be no real future in postmodernism. But its interim influence will, for Humanists at least, have been salutary: to induce less smugness about supposed "objective truths" and to increase recognition of the rich and human "story value" to be found in Humanist conclusions and ideals.

Humanism has a story to tell; it has works of art which it may now call upon and use without apology. Myths and symbols play a natural part in the pattern of truth and understanding. Myths and symbols are also uniquely human, as decidedly so as reason and science. As such, it is only normal that a broad-based *Humanist* philosophy should include them within its universe.