

# Myth and Vision

*James Jakób Liszka*

*Dept. Philosophy, University of Alaska, Anchorage 3211.*

*E-mail: [ajjl@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:ajjl@uaa.alaska.edu).*

## Abstract

**Myth** is a powerful kind of story which determines a culture's predominant moral understanding of the world. This paper is an attempt to understand how myths generate such **moral visions**. Using the standard **semiotic** division of a subject into its syntax, semantics and pragmatics, myth is examined from each of these perspectives in order to show exactly how they work together to create these visions. Focussing especially on the syntax, that is, the **narrative** structure of the myth, an attempt is made to show how the classic genre types—romance, tragedy, comedy, irony—each constitute a different moral vision.

**Key words:** myth, moral visions, semiotic, narrative structure.

# Mito y visión

## Resumen

El **mito** es un tipo poderoso de relato que determina el entendimiento moral predominante que una cultura tiene del mundo. Este trabajo es un intento de entender cómo los mitos generan semejantes **visiones morales**. Usando la división **semiótica** normal de un sujeto en su sintaxis, semántica y pragmática, se puede examinar el mito desde cualquiera de estas perspectivas de modo que se muestre

exactamente cómo trabajan juntas para crear estas visiones morales. Enfocando especialmente la sintaxis, esto es, la estructura **narrativa** del mito, se intenta demostrar cómo los tipos de género clásico—romance, tragedia, comedia, ironía—constituyen cada uno una visión moral diferente.

**Palabras clave:** mito, visiones morales, semiótica, estructura narrativa.

## INTRODUCTION

To tell a story is at once to transvaluate the world. To tell a story one must create a crisis and then resolve it (cf. Liszka 1990; Roemer 1995: 13,278). The result is a change in condition or state-of-affairs that may affect only a single soul—or the entire cosmos. Every story has a prehistory, a background, which serves as the focus of the crisis (Roemer 1995:12,14). The story usually begins with the disruption of an order (or lack of order) implicit in the tale. By means of the crisis the raconteur creates disorder and by resolving it she re-orders it. As the poet, Valéry says, “there are really only two dangerous things in the world: order and disorder.” This suggests that both situations involve a certain danger. If an order is disrupted—even in the imagination—the possibility of an alternative is suggested. And even if the order disrupted is restored or enhanced, how that is accomplished may in itself suggest a different order. As Michael Roemer suggests the story “is Janus-faced—at once radical and conservative. We can read it as advocating submission or rebellion; it serves as a source of pacification and resistance” (1995: 149). “It at once gives new life to old structures and invalidates all structures. It creates order and vitiates it” (1995: 150). The public face of the story is the one promoted predominantly and institutionally in the culture; but because of its liminality, the story can be returned for radical interpretations that may undermine the dominant reading. In general, the manner in which the story moves from crisis to resolution evaluates the world as the audience believes it to be and, in the process, creates a certain sort of vision.

A crisis is a meeting place of two orders, or an order and its dissolution; since the crisis is the focus of a story, then the story focuses on the struggle of its resolution. The story is an attempt to articulate and resolve divergent moral codes, and parallels to some extent Bakhtin’s account of the novel’s struggle with the heteroglossia of its language.

A vision, as Thomas Sowell writes (1987: 14), is a cognitive but pre-analytic understanding of the way in which the world is. It includes an account of how we came to be the way we are, what is possible for us to do, and what sorts of things we can hope for. The power of stories to create vision and influence our understanding of the way things are is well known. As Bakhtin says, assimilating a story or text "determines the very basis of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior" (1981: 342). Myths are among the most powerful kinds of stories in this respect and, consequently, they often create the grandest visions.

## 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a semiotic methodology, and uses a number of concepts found in narratology and other studies of narrative. The present work is particularly based on the notion of *transvaluation*, developed in Liszka (1989). Transvaluation is the idea that every representation of something also involves a valuative estimation of the referent. It has its foundation in the well developed notion of markedness, especially as it is found in linguistic theory (cf. Shapiro 1983, Battistella 1990). Markedness suggests that oppositions and differences in language, even at the phonemic level are articulated valuatively in terms of certain types of asymmetrical relations that can be well-defined. Transvaluation is a way of incorporating this notion of markedness into broader contexts. Translated to the study of myth, it argues that myth, and elementary stories in general, value the relative normative structures of the story's culture. The very act of story-telling involves a structure that promotes such transvaluation. A story employs a crisis which ultimately frames the evaluation of the norms and roles which operate within that culture.

Semiotic, especially as understood by Charles Peirce, is a formal study of signs and symbols (CP 2.227). For Peirce, a sign can be studied from three different aspects: its grammar, its logic and its rhetoric (CP 2.29; Liszka 1996: 9ff). Grammar is concerned with how the sign functions as a sign, that is, the essential conditions necessary for it to become a sign (CP 2.229; Liszka 1996: 10f); logic is concerned with the status of the information, the content which signs convey, especially in terms of their truth-value (CP 2.229; Liszka 1996: 10f). Rhetoric is

concerned with how signs are used to persuade and communicate within a particular sign-using community (CP 2.229; Liszka 1996: 10f). These three aspects of semiotic are more familiar in Charles Morris' terms as syntax, semantics and pragmatics (Morris 1946: 219).

As applied to the study of myth here, the goal of the present paper is to show how the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of myth converge to generate a certain sort of moral vision. The grammar of the story is bound up with the formal structure of narrative, understood traditionally as the *sjuzet* or plot. The grammar concerns those features and conditions which are necessary to produce a narrative as such. The semantics of the narrative is focused in the *fabula* or story, that is, in terms of the events portrayed in the narrative, their patterns, and how they might convey a certain literal or figural truth. Rhetoric on the other hand is concerned with the communicative context of the story, how it affects and is connected to its audience. My argument here is that a myth is created when these three aspects of a story configure in a certain way—and depending on the particulars of that configuration, the myth will generate a certain cosmic vision. Although there is nothing peculiar about the narrative form of the myth, still narrative form generally contributes significantly to its power to create a cosmic vision. In this it shares with all stories—the power, by virtue of telling a story, to transvaluate the world. On the other hand, myths are generally unique among stories—semantically speaking—in that they are almost always about the emergence of something. Pragmatically speaking, they are also stories which are thought by its intended audience to be a true and legitimate source of information, knowledge or wisdom. Together these three aspects may help define the myth in the following way: myth is a culturally legitimated, authoritative narrative about the emergence of something which is generally believed by its audience to be true.

## 2. ANALYSIS

The semantics of a story is concerned, in part, with the contents, the *fabula*, or the aboutness of the story. What distinguishes the myth from nearly all other stories in this regard is that it purports to be about emergence—how something came to be. This can be something as grand as the cosmos itself, or the first human beings, or as particular as how some cultural artefact came into existence. Myths, as opposed to its

closest cousins—folktales and fairytales, show how something which exists as a permanent part of our condition came to be the way it is. The story of how something came to pass incurs a certain vision—what came to pass may be helpful, or necessary (as rain) or unwanted (as sickness). For each thing that emerges there must be an moral order to the emergence; every tale of how something came to be works on the premise that it is the result of series of actions performed by some agents; each emergence is a cut, a division or crisis that exists in the background order of things; and for each emergence there is a transgression, a violation of some order.

But simply being about the emergence of something will not qualify a story as a myth; it must also, in large part, be believed by its audience as true in that regard—and here the pragmatic aspect of the tale plays a vital role. The truth of the tale can be understood either in an historiographical way, i.e., as events that actually happened, or in a figurative sense, that is, as containing some truth about the human condition that is not literally the case. But, as Xenophanes already noted—and as Hans Jauss emphasizes—“that which has been seen through—seen as a fictive human construct—loses its divine dignity and truth.” As soon as myth is seen as fictive it loses its power as myth (1989: 4). So that in order for a story to retain its status as myth—if it does not stand as historiographically true—it must at least stand as figuratively true.

The truth of the story is established through its legitimacy. This legitimacy, in turn, is established in basically two ways: through the authority of the text and through its plausibility—that is, its ability to provide an explanation for what emerges in the story. This conforms to the two types of discourses noted by Bakhtin: authoritative and internally persuasive discourse (1981: 342). Internally persuasive discourse—exemplified in scientific and rational discourses of all sort—must present evidence and justification for its claims on the basis of criteria accepted by its intended audience. Authoritative discourse establishes the truth of the story by the very mundane fact that it is told in the context of legitimate institutions, or authorized story-tellers, all of which have a *de facto* legitimacy. Bakhtin describes it thus:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already

fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given.... (1981: 342)

As Bakhtin emphasizes, authoritative discourse has a certain inertia, a certain semantic calcification which resists alteration; there cannot be any free stylistic development in relation to it; there is an effort to transmit it intact (1981: 344) although, of course, each transmission, no matter how intentionally pure, alters it accordingly. This is perhaps more true for historiographically interpreted myth than figurally treated stories, but may also hold for the later types of interpretations, precisely because the figurativeness is thought to be exact or nearly exact. Both the historiographic and figurative interpretation of the myth bases its belief in the truth of the myth, in part, on an estimation of its source: either a divinely inspired source, that is, the fact that the story itself comes from the creator or witness of the events portrayed in the myth. In many respects this can be the only explanation since, especially if the myth is a creation myth, this is inherently an event without witness except for the creator; consequently, in order for the story to be historiographically true, it must have come from the original witness of the event—the creator—whose words may have been directly given to the narrator, or who may have been inspired to tell the story as such. The current narrator must have direct or proven lineage with the ur-narrator; if the story is written down, then the acceptance of this lineage is often, naively, taken for granted.

But, although the myth establishes itself primarily as an authoritative discourse, still it must also have internally persuasive features to it, just as all internally persuasive discourse has authoritative features to it. In other words, the myth must still convey plausible accounts of the order of the world. Plausibility, as Peirce rightly noted, is not the same thing as the truth or credibility of a claim. Plausibility is the hallmark of abduction, and is concerned with the solution to a puzzle, question or anomaly; whereas truth is a hallmark of induction, which is concerned with showing that a claim has some basis in fact. What matters in plausibility is not so much the credibility of the claims or events, as the fact that they do solve the puzzle or question which the

story asks. Peirce emphasizes the distinction between the plausibility of a hypothesis and its likeliness; the likeliness of a hypothesis is measured by the scientist's belief that induction will prove it credible to some degree. Thus among plausible hypotheses, some will be more likely than others and, therefore, more worthwhile testing.

Truth can be understood in an ordinary folk sense, as a claim that can said to be accurate about the world. This belief may not be just the literal truth of the story, it can also be a paradigmatic or figural truth. The first treats the myth as historiography. Some believers of Genesis 3, the Adam and Eve myth, may believe that there were such persons as Adam and Eve, that these were the first human beings, that they were created by Yahweh, who is identical to the God currently believed by the Jews, or the Christians, or the Muslims; that they lived in Eden—and that they did the shameful things they did. On the other hand, others may believe that though there may have been no particular persons called Adam and Eve, nor anything like the Garden of Eden, nonetheless the story conveys a basic truth that, somehow, the human condition is a result of our own failings, which led to a fall from grace. Consequently, what is common to both the historiographical and the figurative reading of the truth of the myth, is the vision which the myth entails. The historiographical understanding of the myth still contains—within a certain interpretative range—the same sort of vision. Whether Adam or Eve were actual historical personages does not change the fact that what they did caused our present human condition. To say, figuratively that what they did represents our human condition, is still to say something generally true about the human condition. In order for the myth to be internally persuasive, whether the belief is in the historical or figurative truth of the story, it must say something about the world, that is, something indexically experienced by the audience. If the Adam myth ends with expulsion from paradise, which means that now we are mortal and must die, that we must work for our food, that childbirth will be painful, that suffering will be part of the human condition, and that we will have a natural aversion for snakes, then all of this must ring truth. In order for the story to be believable it must be a plausible abduction—from the fact of the puzzle of how did things come to be—to the present human condition. The plausibility will bolster our belief in the story of the myth. This is true even at the figurative level. We can still think of the misery of our condition as the effects of disobedience against rules or norms which

the wise and powerful have set for us, disloyalty to others, breaking of promises, naivete, refusals of responsibility, all of which serve to make our lives more miserable than what they should be.

But there are essential differences between the historiographical and figurative accounts. The figurative account allows more of the internally persuasive discourse enter into the picture. As Kendall Walton says, "Sophocles' portrayal of the Oedipus story may improve my understanding of matters of contemporary interest as much if I consider it apocryphal as it would if I thought it were true" (1990: 97), but in treating it figuratively, one must agree to a certain extent that the figurative is internally persuasive —opens up that possibility. The figurative appeals to that aspect of thinking more than the historiographical.

For the audience which does not hold the story to be true in one of these senses, the myth is a mere relic or curiosity, much in the way in which an ancient map, no longer accurate about the terrain it maps, sits in a museum; it no longer functions to do what it was designed to do, and it may serve as a curiosity about how the world was once thought to look. The myth in order to be a myth must have this connection of belief with its audience. The power of the myth lies in the belief of its truth by the audience.

The grammar of the myth can be understood as the formal conventions which engender the possibility of a coherent narrative. The grammar of the story composes those organizing principles which generate, minimally speaking, the sense that something is a story. What I want to show is that the formal conditions lend themselves to a transvaluation of whatever contents is supplied to them. Or, to put it even more radically—the formal conditions are themselves inherently valiative.

Using an extrapolation of the formal conditions for narratives established by Gerald Prince (1973), Hayden White (1987) and others, in order for a story to be a story it must satisfy at least three conditions: temporal contiguity, event concatenation, and teleological coherence. To use Peirce's idea of the gradation of meaning, we can say that temporal contiguity provides a sense to the story, event concatenation a possible meaning, while teleological coherence generates a certain significance.

In order for a story to be a story it must have temporal contiguity. This need not be linearly realized or successively displayed in the narrative. Narratives such as Robbe-Grillet's *the Voyeur*, stylistic devices such as flashbacks, or stories—such as *Citizen Kane* which begin with the ending—still implicitly employ temporal contiguity. It is also excruciatingly clear that temporal contiguity—although necessary—is not sufficient to generate a narrative. Hayden White clearly: annals, such as the *Annal of St. Gaul*, merely list events in temporal succession yet hardly constitute a narrative; temporal contiguity without event concatenation creates simple non sequitur lists. A cartoon, called *Jim's Journal*, specializes in this sort of humor:

In the first panel, Jim and his two friends are sitting around watching a video on TV. Jim narrates as follows: "Ruth had us all over to watch a movie last night (it was *Total Recall*). In the second panel: "We ordered pizza with extra cheese, which everybody wanted." In the third panel: "After the movie, Ruth said, 'There was too much blood, I thought.' Finally in the last panel, Jim returns the video to the store, and says, "On my way home I dropped off the movie and the cashier at the video store looked bored."

What this example illustrates is that in order for a story to be a story, it must also exhibit event concatenation. Event concatenation creates *followability* in a story. The narrative shows how subsequent events can be connected to previous events, that such subsequent events are either causally or intentionally connected to previous ones. Subsequent events gather meaning from their connection with previous one that serve as their motivation or source. It is one thing to learn that Jones is killed, but when that event is shown to the result of Smith's jealousy of his wife, and Jones' flirtations with her, then the event acquires a level of meaning not possible without that concatenation. We can see now why Jones' death follows upon Smith's jealousy. The concatenation of events is established by either an implicit appeal to a rule, convention, pattern or natural regularity, or an explicit connection in the case where none may exist or may be unknown.

Finally, in order for a story to be a story, it must also exhibit teleological coherence. This generates a certain *directedness* in the story. For example, we might say that in the story, the hero must combat the villain, and as a result there are at least two possibilities among others:

the villain is defeated or the hero is defeated. Either possibility could be made followable, but the fact that one outcome is chosen rather than another indicates a certain directedness in the story, a certain teleology. "To succeed as a narrative the account must first establish a goal state or valued endpoint.... With the creation of a goal condition, the successful narrative must then *select and arrange events in such a way that the goal state is rendered more or less probable*" (Gergen and Gergen 1986: 25-26). In this regard we can also think of the narrative as a certain kind of abduction, one that establishes a certain crisis then resolves it in a certain manner. Depending on the type of resolution, different abductive results appear for the audience (cf. Polkinghorne 1988: 19).

Teleology can be seen as the ultimate organizing principle of the story and shows the valuative character of the narrative. As Aristotle writes "the end is the chief thing" (*Poetics*, 6.145a), and not simply end in the sense of the final event in a story but the manner in which events in the chain of concatenation are directed and made coherent. S.H. Butcher argues that poetic unity is found not only

in the cause connection that binds together the several parts of the play, but also in the fact that the whole series of events, with all the moral forces that are brought into collision, are directed to a single end.... The end is linked to the beginning with inevitable certainty, and in the end we discern the meaning of the whole (1951: 284-5).

In general, as Thomas Leitch argues, the perception of unity or wholeness of a series of events depends upon closure, and so "the primary function of narrative endings is ...to provide or confirm a teleology or retrospective rationale for the story as a whole, and stories which lack such endings, whatever their fascinations, are often accounted unsatisfactory" (1986: 43). What the audience wants to know is not only what happens next, but what is this all leading to, what it all means (1986: 44)

This teleology hangs on the framework articulated in earlier work: disruption, crisis, resolution (Liszka 1989). It is argued there that this framework can only be articulated valuatively. A genuine narrative has as its focus an event or series of events that is disruptive to a certain way of life. This leads to a crisis in regard to the norms, values or beliefs germane to that crisis; and the narrative attempts some resolution to that

crisis which projects a certain valuative attitude towards those norms and values, although the crisis itself creates a certain ambivalence in regard to those value and norms.

This is a view certainly supported by others. As Iser argues, the text recodifies the norms and conventions selected. The repertoire (by which Iser means the literary conventions responsible for producing the text) reproduces the familiar, but strips it of its current validity. Iser maintains (1978:69) that the manner in which conventions, norms and traditions take their place in the literary conventions of the text, varies considerably, but they are always in some way reduced or modified as they have been removed from their original context and function. In the literary text, according to Iser, these norms become capable of new connection, because they are in a state of suspended validity (1978: 70).

### 3. SUMMARY

Assuming the validity of the valuative schema presented here, and depending on how these parameters are filled in—in terms of who causes the disruption, and what sort of order is disrupted, what sort of crisis is created and who resolves the crisis, certain narrative genres, generally speaking can be generated. Also, correspondent to these narrative types, each will engender a certain moral vision. These can be summarized as follows:

1. *Romance*: the disruption of an existing order is caused by an opponent, and the resultant crisis is resolved by the hero by means of the defeat of the villain, and as a result leads to the restoration and enhancement of the original order.
2. *Tragedy*: the disruption of an existing order is caused by a high-status hero and the resultant crisis resolved by the defeat of that hero through the guardians or forces of that disrupted order, the result being that the disrupted order is righted or restored.
3. *Comedy*: the disruption of an implicit order is caused by a high-status opponent, leading to a crisis; the hero—who is usually of lower-status, facilitates the transformation of the opponent, who is now incorporated into this more original, implicit order.

4. *Irony*: the disruption is caused by a weak or ineffectual hero, whose efforts to change or violate the order prove fruitless; the order reimposes itself.

When the narrative types, with their particular valuative organization of the disruption-crisis-resolution triad, are merged with the semantics of the myth—the emergence of something—and given that the myth is believed as such, a certain kind of cosmic moral vision is the result. Some of its general features can be summarized as follows:

Narrative Type	ROMANCE	TRAGEDY	COMEDY	IRONY
	Victory	Defeat	Victory	Defeat
	Agon	Pathos	Anagnorisis	Sparagmos
	Polarity	Violation	Monadism	Will to
	Duality	Transgression	Reconciliation	Power
	Positive Order	Inexorable Order	Utopian Order	Oppressive Order

As a result the myth becomes a powerful tool for articulating a world view, a cosmic vision and a moral order.

### Bibliography

- BAKHTIN, M.M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- BATTISTELLA, E. 1990. *Markedness: The Evaluative Superstructure of Language*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- BUTCHER, S.H. 1951. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New York: Dover.
- GERGEN, K. and GERGEN, M. 1986. Narrative Forms and the Construction of Psychological Science. *Narrative Psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. New York: Praeger Scientific.
- ISER, W. 1978. *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- JAUSS, H. 1989. **Question and Answer**. Translated by M. Hays. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- LEITCH, T. 1986. **What Stories Are. Narrative Theory and Interpretation**. State College: Penn State University Press.
- LISZKA, J. 1989. **The Semiotic of Myth**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. **A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles S. Peirce**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- MORRIS, C. 1946. **Signs, Language and Behavior**. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- PEIRCE, C. S. 1980. **The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce**. 8 vols. Vol. 1-6 edited by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss; Vol 7-8, edited by A. Burks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- POLKINGHORNE, Donald. 1988. **Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences**. Albany: SUNY Press.
- PRINCE, G. 1973. **A Grammar of Stories**. The Hague: Mouton.
- ROEMER, Michael. 1995. **Telling Stories**. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- SHAPIRO, M. 1983. **The Sense of Grammar**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- SOWELL, T. 1987. **A Conflict of Visions**. New York: Quill.
- WALTON, KJ. 1990. **Mimesis as Make-Believe**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.