



THE INTERPRETATION OF MYTH, LEGEND, AND FAIRY TALE IN LITERATURE

Aziz Sami Khumora Ibrokhim kizi

Master Student of KIU

Tel: +998 91 639 97 84;

e-mail: azizsamixushbek@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the interpretation of myth, legend, and fairy tale in literature, analyzing their origins, functions, thematic elements, symbolic significance, and adaptations through history. Myths, legends, and fairy tales constitute foundational narratives within human culture and literature. These narrative forms, while sharing similarities, possess unique characteristics that influence their role in literary tradition. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in folklore studies, literary criticism, and cultural anthropology, this study elucidates how these genres shape and reflect societal values, collective unconscious, and the human psyche.

Keywords: Myth, Legend, Fairy Tale, Literature, Folklore, Narrative, Symbolism, Cultural Interpretation, Literary Criticism.

1. Introduction

Narratives have been integral to human societies since prehistoric times, often serving as vehicles for imparting cultural norms, historical memory, and existential meaning. Among these narrative forms, myths, legends, and fairy tales occupy prominent places, each with distinct origins and functions. While myths are commonly associated with sacred cosmologies, legends often reflect semi-historical accounts, and fairy tales present fantastical narratives typically aimed at moral instruction and entertainment.

The interpretation of these genres in literature reveals the complexity of human attempts to understand existence, identity, morality, and the social order. This article investigates these narrative forms, their historical context, literary



characteristics, and interpretive frameworks. By examining theoretical perspectives and case studies, it aims to clarify their significance and transformation in literary tradition.

Contemporary literary scholarship increasingly recognizes that these narrative forms are not static relics of the past but living traditions continuously reinterpreted and reimagined across cultures and time. The digital age, globalization, and multicultural exchanges have further diversified the ways myths, legends, and fairy tales are told and understood, making their study ever more relevant for understanding the ongoing construction of cultural meaning.

2. Defining Myth, Legend, and Fairy Tale

2.1 Myth

Myths are traditional stories rooted in sacred beliefs that explain the origins of the cosmos, natural phenomena, and human institutions. According to Eliade (1963), myths function as sacred narratives that re-establish a primordial time, connecting human experience to the divine. Joseph Campbell (1949) emphasizes the monomyth structure, identifying common patterns in hero myths across cultures, highlighting universal psychological archetypes.

Myths often serve to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown by providing symbolic frameworks that articulate a society's worldview. They operate on multiple levels, from literal belief to metaphorical truth, informing rituals and social behaviors. The fluidity of myth allows for adaptation over time, as societies reinterpret sacred stories to reflect evolving values or historical circumstances.

2.2 Legend

Legends relate to semi-historical or historical narratives often based on real events or figures but embellished over time. They operate in a liminal space between myth and history, grounded in plausible reality yet infused with supernatural or extraordinary elements (Dorson, 1972). Legends often aim to legitimize cultural identities or convey moral lessons. The persistence of legends within local cultures highlights their role in community cohesion and memory. Through repeated retellings, legends function as repositories of shared heritage,



instilling a sense of place and belonging. Their adaptability also allows communities to assert identity and values in the face of external influences or social change.

2.3 Fairy Tale

Fairy tales are fictional stories characterized by magical elements, fantastical creatures, and clear moral dichotomies. Unlike myths and legends, fairy tales are primarily oral narratives intended for entertainment and education, evolving over time through oral transmission (Tatar, 2003). They frequently address themes of transformation, justice, and social norms. Fairy tales' open-ended and mutable nature makes them particularly suited to reflecting social anxieties, hopes, and norms, especially concerning childhood, authority, and gender roles. The archetypal characters and scenarios allow storytellers to explore complex issues in an accessible and engaging format, which has ensured their prevalence across cultures and historical periods.

3. Functions of Myth, Legend, and Fairy Tale in Literature

3.1 Social and Cultural Functions

Myths serve as foundation narratives, legitimizing religious practices, social structures, and cultural identities (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Legends reinforce community values by connecting audiences with heroic ancestors or local historical events. Fairy tales often act as moral didactics, transmitting societal norms implicitly or explicitly (Zipes, 2006). In addition, these narratives serve to resolve cultural tensions by providing symbolic solutions or by articulating societal fears and ideals. For instance, through myth or fairy tale, societies can confront taboos, negotiate moral complexities, or provide catharsis. Thus, these genres act as cultural barometers reflecting shifts in collective priorities or crises.

3.2 Psychological Functions

Freud (1913) interprets myths and fairy tales as externalizations of subconscious desires and conflicts. Jungian analysis emphasizes archetypes within these narratives, revealing the collective unconscious and human psychological patterns (Jung, 1959). These stories provide frameworks for personal and



communal identity formation. These narratives often facilitate psychological integration by externalizing internal dilemmas into symbolic form, allowing individuals to confront fears, desires, and moral challenges in a mediated manner. This therapeutic dimension underscores their enduring psychological relevance in both individual and societal contexts.

3.3 Literary and Aesthetic Functions

In literature, myths, legends, and fairy tales are reused, retold, and reinterpreted, providing rich symbolism and narrative structures. The intertextuality of modern literature with these traditional forms enriches thematic depth and reader engagement (Hutcheon, 1989). The aesthetic appeal of these genres lies partly in their archetypal narratives and timeless themes, which invite continual reinterpretation. Writers tap into the emotional resonance and symbolic richness of these tales to innovate or critique, often using them as frameworks to question contemporary issues or cultural assumptions.

4. Thematic and Symbolic Elements

4.1 Common Themes

Across the genres, themes such as creation, heroism, transformation, good versus evil, justice, and the quest for knowledge prevail. These universal themes offer insight into human concerns transcending cultural boundaries (Campbell, 1949). These themes serve not only as narrative drivers but also as allegories for existential human quests such as self-discovery, moral growth, and the confrontation with mortality. Their recurrence across time and culture points to fundamental human experiences articulated through symbolic storytelling.

4.2 Symbolism and Allegory

Myths and fairy tales often employ symbols representing larger concepts — the serpent as danger or transformation, the journey as personal growth, or the enchanted forest as the unconscious mind (Propp, 1968). These symbols enable multifaceted interpretations and adaptability across contexts. The flexibility of symbolic elements means they can accrue different connotations depending on cultural or historical context, contributing to the plurality of interpretations in



literary analysis. This versatility is key to the genres' survival, allowing authors and audiences to navigate complex realities through familiar motifs.

5. Interpretive Frameworks

5.1 Structuralism

Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach analyzes myths as systems of binary oppositions (e.g., life/death, order/chaos) reflecting human cognitive patterns. This framework applies to legends and fairy tales, revealing underlying structures shaping narrative coherence (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Structuralism's emphasis on universal human thought patterns suggests that despite cultural differences, myths and related narratives fulfill psychological cognitive needs. This approach has prompted further interdisciplinary studies linking linguistics, anthropology, and literature to decode the underlying grammar of human storytelling.

5.2 Psychoanalytic Criticism

Freudian and Jungian readings uncover latent content related to psyche, desire, and archetypal motifs. For example, the hero's journey reflects individuation processes with psychological significance (Jung, 1959). Psychoanalytic criticism not only illuminates individual narrative elements but also addresses how myths and fairy tales function collectively by shaping group identity and cultural memory. This dual role underscores the deep interrelation between individual psychology and cultural constructs within narrative forms.

5.3 Feminist and Postcolonial Criticism

Feminist interpretations often critique gender roles and representations within fairy tales, revealing patriarchal ideologies and exploring possibilities for empowerment (Warner, 1995). Postcolonial perspectives examine how myths and legends reinforce or contest colonial narratives and cultural hegemony (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Both feminist and postcolonial criticism also highlight the transformative potential of these genres when reinterpreted by marginalized voices, challenging dominant narratives and opening spaces for alternative identities and histories. This dynamic interaction evidences the genres' ongoing relevance and adaptability.



6. Adaptations and Transformations in Literature

6.1 Oral to Written Tradition

Many myths, legends, and fairy tales originated orally and were later transcribed and adapted by authors such as the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and contemporary writers. This transition affects the narratives' preservation and interpretation (Zipes, 1997). The shift from oral to written forms often entails changes in narrative structure, audience engagement, and ideological framing. Written versions carry the imprint of the author's cultural and historical context, which may codify or alter tales' original meanings and functions.

6.2 Modern and Contemporary Revisions

Contemporary literature frequently revisits these genres, often subverting traditional motifs to address current social issues. For instance, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* retells fairy tales with feminist perspectives (Carter, 1979). Similarly, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* reimagines mythological figures in a modern setting. This ongoing reimagining serves to critique or expand traditional narratives, challenging stereotypes and engaging with pressing contemporary debates such as identity politics, power relations, and globalization. It illustrates the genres' vitality as mediums of cultural dialogue.

8. Discussion

The interplay between myth, legend, and fairy tale in literature reveals the dynamic nature of storytelling as both preserved heritage and creative expression. Their hybridization in modern literary forms testifies to their enduring power and adaptability. However, interpretive approaches must consider historical context, cultural specificity, and the evolving societal functions of these genres. The boundaries among myth, legend, and fairy tale are frequently porous, with narratives crossing and blending genres. This fluidity enriches literary studies but also challenges rigid classification, encouraging more nuanced, hybrid, and interdisciplinary methodologies in contemporary scholarship.



9. Conclusion

Myth, legend, and fairy tale remain vital components of literary discourse, offering rich sources for understanding human cognition, culture, and identity. Their interpretation requires multidisciplinary approaches encompassing anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism. Future research may further explore digital media's impact on the transformation and dissemination of these narratives.

References

- 1.Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., Tiffin, H. (2002). The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures. Routledge.
- 2.Campbell, J. (1949). The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Pantheon Books.
- 3.Carter, A. (1979). The Bloody Chamber. Gollancz.
- 4, Dorson, R. M. (1972). Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction. University of Chicago Press.
- 5.Eliade, M. (1963). Myth and Reality. Harper & Row.
- 6.Freud, S. (1913). The Interpretation of Dreams. Standard Edition.
- 7.Hutcheon, L. (1989). The Politics of Postmodernism. Routledge.
- 8.Jung, C. G. (1959). The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious. Princeton University Press.
- 9.Lacy, N. J. (Ed.). (1991). The Arthurian Handbook. Garland.
- 10.Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). Structural Anthropology. Basic Books.