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## The Myth Misunderstanding: How to make stories linger...

By Allen Stroud

In June 2014, Morgan Geysler and Anissa Weier, two twelve-year-old girls from the Milwaukee suburb of Waukesha, Wisconsin, lured a classmate into woods and stabbed her eighteen times. When questioned, Geysler and Weier told police they read about the fictional character 'Slender Man' on a website wiki known as Creepypasta (<http://www.creepypasta.com>), where scary stories are submitted by users.

The origin of the Slender Man dates back to 2009, when it first appeared in a photoshop contest on the Something Awful Forums (<http://forums.somethingawful.com>). Eric Knudsen altered an image of a group of children at camp to include a mysterious humanlike creature looking over them. The creature was quickly named, and other images followed, playing on the idea of observation. Each time the addition changed the tone of the picture, giving it a sinister quality.

In July 2012, a free to download first person mini-game called 'Slender: The Eight Pages' appeared on the internet. Written in Unity, it pitched the player into darkened woodland, with a torch, looking for pieces of paper. Each use of the torch attracted the Slender Man and when the player looked at him, they started to die. The personification element along with the sound ambiance and established legend made for a visceral and chilling, but wholly bloodless experience.

The website crashed multiple times owing to the number of downloads. Since then, multiple sequels have been created by other programmers and a plethora of fiction has appeared across many websites. The Slender Man is the ultimate in mythic monsters; a character engineered by creative democracy appearing everywhere someone has the inclination to place him. A myth built on the classic phenomenon of spirit photography popularised by William Mumler back in the 1860s.

Whilst the circumstances of Geysler and Weier's criminal behaviour are deplorable, their connection to the Slender Man myth can be likened to a whole lineage of incidents. Irving Lee 'Bink' Pulling's suicide after allegedly playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1982, Martin Denham's suicide after watching *Ghostwatch* in 1992 and the James Bulger murder in 1993 after his killers John Venables and Robert Thompson were allegedly influenced by watching the 18 rated film, *Child's Play 3* (1991).

The examples demonstrate the enduring qualities of mythmaking. The popular perception of myth revolves around the ideas of the ancient and forgotten. A mythology is a collection of myths and indeed these ancient tales are collections along a theme. Readers think of the ancient Greeks, Romans or Norse, for example, which are all strong groups of writing dealing with all manner of human and godlike behaviour.

When examining the meaning of myth, mythology and the mythologising process, we find a great deal more of interest to a writer who is attempting to make their story memorable.

Myth permeates all writing, whether through conscious intent of the writer or not. Joseph Campbell's work, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) outlines the principles of the monomyth;

the idea that mythology is all pervasive, that humanity looks for meaning and symbolism in all things.

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation. (Campbell, 2012: 1).

Although less prosaic in his assertion, influential French writer, Roland Barthes agrees:

Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.

(Barthes, 1972: 109).

Barthes and Campbell share the view that popular myths have evolved through time, reflecting the changing nature of perceived reality and truth to which society has had to adjust. We empathise and sympathise through familiar forms, though each perception and identification of the familiar is coloured by our individual experience and cultural context. This cloak is a common garb that may be worn by the story to draw the reader in. When used in this way it can deliver a cathartic escape. The cares and passions of the story protagonist are felt keenly by the reader when they at first seem similar, but then take on a rationalised path of their own.

There is an opportunity for the writer in this to tap into the mind of the reader audience and make use of their imagination to support their own work. The conceptual images that set out a story's initial premise are often related to the reader's own context, particularly when defining character attributes or circumstances.

It is the mark of the timelessness of a story when the relatable context can change depending upon the reader's own experience. Many tales retain their original quality when this resonance remains poignant, but others are reinvented to emphasise the new cultural context in which they are being received.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work. Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand. Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

This process of writing supportive fiction is a longstanding tradition at odds with our modern concepts of intellectual property. The characters of popular stories drew an audience, so the creation of new narratives for them by a storyteller in any context seems a natural choice. In a less global society, such appropriation remained locally limited. There were few Hesiods or Brothers Grimm walking the world to collect up variations. Stories remained fluid, their changes designed to appeal to each differing audience. Yet, as the world grows smaller to us, so the myths collate and become rigid.

For example, the legend around vampires has existed in literature since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (and arguably earlier). The vampire in modern stories comes with a lexicon of baggage (crosses, stakes, garlic, coffins, fangs, can't go out in daylight, etc.). When using the archetype, a writer can assume they their reader is approaching the text with knowledge of vampires derived from other stories. They will imagine scenes and characters based on what they already experienced in other works. The writer can use these assumptions or challenge them. In some cases, the use provides a framework to the story, in other cases, a limitation. A challenge can provoke interest and confront the reader assumptions.

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I can't get used to it, though I've been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glistening like crystal.

(Meyer, 2005: 228)

Stephanie Meyer's decision to make her vampires sparkle in sunlight goes against the established lore of previous vampire novels by other authors. It provoked conflict amongst readers of this fiction, some defended her work and her decisions, others rallied against her, even fellow vampire aficionado Anne Rice commented that her characters, 'Lestat and Louie feel sorry for vampires that sparkle in the sun' (Rice, 2011).

But why? The vampire is a fictitious creature, why does a redefinition matter? Perhaps because it interferes with the established image in the mind of the reader. The idea of a different image, where the story is decoupled from other similar fiction and the vampire is different to such an extent that it denies the place of other stories in its world, forces the reader to reassess the story on its own terms. In some cases when this happens, the illusion of depth constructed by making the story supportive is cast aside, leaving a weaker tale standing awkwardly on frail legs. Perhaps this might be ignored when dealing with location or circumstance, but the specific differences in character weakness and physiology in the example above is for some, a contrivance too far.

Nevertheless, the argument alone makes the story memorable. Granted, others may cite the testimonial prose, or the clarity of identifiable character constructed in the text, relating back to the point on identification and empathy, but these are a matter of craft. The divergence from established lore is an obvious conscious choice, forcing the reader to make a similar decision in their acceptance.

Another means by which a writer can make use of myth is by invention. This can be initially through establishing ideas that the reader can relate to that are shaped in the text to leave an impression long after the story has concluded, or by pure invention of the loose end that will remain.

If you look in the mirror and you say his name five times, he'll appear behind you breathing down your neck.

(Rose & Barker, 1992).

Dad, do you think there's people on other planets? I don't know, Sparks. But I guess I'd say if it is just us... seems like an awful waste of space.

(Zemeckis, 1997).

'I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.'

(Tolkien, 1975: 14)

Constructions like this encourage speculation in the mind of the reader. They make you look around the corner for Hobbits, stare into mirrors and say names, or gaze up at the sky and wonder. They entice readers toward additional stories. Unanswered questions or missing details when carefully balanced, let the tale continue on, but if they are not balanced, they can frustrate.

The obvious examples here lie in cliff-hangers and setups for sequel writing, yet these have a clear purpose. The television series, *Lost* (2004-2010) drew a massive audience owing to its open fictional premise and feel, coupled with a supernatural conundrum. It learned the lesson of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), maintaining an accessible narrative along with accessible characters, whose stories were told in a patchwork of perspective and flashback. The propensity of speculative episode endings and enigmas defined patterns of behaviour. The audience spent a great deal of time watching episodes and came away speculating over what they'd learned. It seemed on every level that any time you got close to getting an answer for something, that answer raised two more questions.

*Lost* engaged the imagination of its audience through the speculation. The Internet became an outlet, with Lostpedia (<http://lostpedia.wikia.com>) providing one dumping ground for theories. J. J. Abrams' production team encouraged this further by launching spurious websites that contained more information, but this wasn't just expanding the narrative. Clues and Easter eggs abounded, creating hierarchies of audience privilege. If you knew more, your theories and speculation might be nearer to the truth. Of course, all this fevered possibility wasn't what everyone wanted. After a while, the habitual questioning became tiresome and frustrating. If you ask people 'Have you watched *Lost*?' your next question was usually, 'When did you stop?'

Any television series advertising a new season with the slogan 'the answers are coming', must be aware of how frustrated audience had become. This is the essence of speculative fiction. Science Fiction lends itself to speculation on the future as this is part of its functional mode. Fantasy is often a pure escape and can draw inspiration from past forms and brings us systemised magic, where unexplained feats and miracles are rationalised into a talent or skill, which becomes an aspiration for the reader to acquire. Horror can amplify fears and mysteries of the unexplained and seeking to involve us in its outcome.

All three genres use the reality of the reader as an anchor in part and it is this blurring that can sharpen the poignancy of mythologised components in the text. The idea that the new fiction offers an explanation for old ideas, large questions or familiar themes becomes part of its attraction. Of these, Fantasy is the most diverting, Science Fiction the most rationalised and Horror the most remembered.

Returning to the example of Slender Man, we find ourselves presented with a question on this particular version of mythologising. If myth is all pervasive as Campbell and Barthes suggest, are we not all influenced by the stories we are told when we are young?

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouses curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; helping to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.

(Bettelheim, 1976: 5)

Bettelheim's comments on fairy tales can be ascribed to the speculative genres as they actively seek to encourage imagination, albeit with different agendas. The 'solutions' assertion though suggests a rounded and wholesome outcome that helps the young define their world. There are many historic examples of stories where this was not the case. The boastful Miller of Rumpelstiltskin never received punishment, the Little Mermaid died of a broken heart, Heracles killed his children and Medusa was punished for being raped. Each tale finds a new audience with different cultural experience as it is passed on and where the story is altered its meaning is also changed.

In the case of Slender Man, the world definitions of Morgan Geysler and Anissa Weier are connected to their reading in some way we may never learn and in turn, the mythology of the subject takes on new meaning to its audience through the associated events. The story will linger, whatever our moral judgment over its connection to the attack or otherwise. The fact that it lingers, demonstrates a lasting achievement. Although it for each of us to determine how much value we place in this legacy.

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