

# The Dark Places of the Earth:

Romance and Irony in *Gawain* and *Heart of Darkness*

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‘The central principle of ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways.’ (Frye 223)

Although one of the most frequently cited critics, Northrop Frye now seems to be viewed as a maverick from a defunct strand of academia. Yet Harold Bloom saw fit to argue that ‘Frye’s criticism will survive because it is serious, spiritual, and comprehensive.’ (xi) It may well be that Frye’s ideas have simply fallen foul of the winds of fashion, which blow on criticism as strongly as they blow on clothing. Certainly, his self-dubbing as a genius isn’t something that helps his reputation in the long term. However, in a post-modern, post-colonial world Frye’s advocacy of non-canonical, non-mainstream literature—especially Canadian—resonates, and his lack of a clear affiliation with any main ‘school’ of criticism can be seen as an advantage.

Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* consists of four essays, each offering an approach to criticism: historical, ethical, archetypal and rhetorical. The approaches are interrelated, and yet it is archetypal criticism with which his name is now chiefly associated. This paper will use ideas from Frye’s archetypal approach to criticism to examine two works which display distinctive mythic elements. One of the works is a celebrated medieval text, while the other is part of the ‘canon’ of English literature which nevertheless has affinities with the marginalized ‘Other’: its author was Polish, writing in a foreign language

about foreign people.

Frye’s approach was distinctive for its imposition of pattern and order on the analysis of texts without sacrificing the ability to explain. Drawing on metaphors of the seasons, and linking them with four modes of writing: romance, comedy, tragedy and irony, Frye attempted to explain how and why different forms of writing achieved their effect. In contrasting romance with irony, for example, he noted how the latter appropriated romantic forms, yet in ‘realistic’ ways which yielded unexpected results. If romance is viewed as a more ‘naïve’ mode of fiction—Frye notes its association with basic wish-fulfilment stories of adventure and attainment—it nevertheless appears to take everyday experience as its guiding principle. Irony, on the other hand, while ostensibly more ‘realistic’ in the sense of conforming to real-world logic, takes as its guiding principle story-form: the logic of the narrative itself. It is for this reason that Frye argues that irony can be viewed as a ‘parody’ of romance.

If irony really is to be characterized as a parody of romance, however, we must begin by examining a romance, and attempting to isolate what is meant by romantic mythical forms. The romantic mode of fiction, argue Foulke and Smith, was the dominant literary mode of the medieval period (23), and so *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, a 14th century text, should provide an instructive example. This particular poem, furthermore, is sufficiently complex as to restrain us from falling into the trap of defining romance

in its most simplistic, patterned form—an easy mistake to make when examining a form with a tendency towards naïveté. It is also useful because of structural similarities with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which we will examine for evidence of irony.

Claire Rosenfield, in an archetypal analysis of Conrad's *Nostramo*, summarizes myth as follows:

In myth, as I have noted, the hero must undertake a night-sea journey into an ambiguous region either in the dark interior of the earth or below the waters of the sea. This is a symbolic death that occurs that he may encounter the forces of evil, the monsters that blight the world of natural cycle; he descends, so to speak, into the belly of the whale or into the mouth of the dragon. In overcoming the monster which is death, he experiences the peace of paradise and a knowledge of the unity of existence. But he must be reborn in order to bring his special truth back to a fallen world, in order to redeem mankind. (326)

This pattern will be familiar, not least from the most famous of the myth-scholars Joseph Campbell, whose exposition of the Hero-myth has directly influenced some of the most successful narratives of the late 20th century (though the argument that this makes *Star Wars* closer to irony than romance is one to be addressed elsewhere).

There are critics, certainly, who would be unhappy with attempts to apply this pattern too widely to literature. Haskell Block, discussing the application of archetypal criticism to the works of Joseph Conrad, writes: 'Too often, anthropological criticism has substituted the discovery of analogies for the examination of artistic structures.' (135) Nevertheless the works we are concerned with correspond rather nicely, and so the next stage is to identify those differences in implementation of the pattern which characterize romance, and thus examine the artistic structure of the works.

Comparing *Sir Gawain* to the pattern above, we can immediately see a correspondence at a general level, although the poetic rhetoric differs slightly. Gawain's journey to Castle Hautdesert represents the 'night-sea journey' in which the hero passes through strange, inhospitable territory. His 'symbolic death' too, is represented in the clearest possible way: the Green Knight hefts an axe to pay back the beheading he received at Gawain's hands a year earlier; the death is symbolic because he only nicks Gawain's neck. Gawain certainly comes out of the adventure with a redemptive knowledge, aware of his own weakness through having accepted the gift of a green girdle. The story corresponds in structure very closely to Joseph Campbell's monomyth, allowing for minor displacements such as the moral ambiguity of the Green Knight.

The poem is realized in an extraordinarily well-developed structure, containing numerous variations and parallelisms. The most notable is the cunning manner in which Bercilak's hunt parallels his wife's 'pursuit' of the courtly Sir Gawain. Others include the recurrence of feasts to mark each stage in the quest, the numerical parallels, and the sets of antithetical symbols, such as the green girdle (representing worldliness and instinctive self-preservation) and the shield (explicitly identified with the spiritual values of the Virgin Mary, and therefore the protection of the chivalric ideal). What makes the poem so fascinating is that despite this wealth of symmetry and symbolism, the poet never steps out of the frame to tell us whether he or she agrees with the final judgments of Gawain or the Green Knight.

Explicatory parallels can be found for the poem in various quarters. If Dionysos is 'the enigmatic god, the spirit of a dual nature and of paradox' (Otto 73), one who 'comes abruptly' and 'frequently disguised' (Hughes 53), then in the Green Knight we have a distinctly Dionysian figure. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an elusive work, and to build on this insight perhaps a useful source of illumination is the closest:

the Arthurian myth itself. There is an unusual relationship between the two, for while Arthurian characters populate the poem, it is not simply one episode in the saga, a story that was, as it were, 'left out'. Charles Moorman argues compellingly that the key to the poem is the figure of Morgan le Fay, so often regarded by critics as little more than a plot device. We are told at the end of the poem that Morgan was 'testing' the chivalry of Arthur's court, and we can see that the flaws being probed are those of sexual temptation and unfaithfulness. These were the cause of the downfall of Arthur's court, as every reader of the poem in the 14th Century would have known. 'The *Gawain* poem, I maintain, is presenting us, within a deliberately limited form, a microcosm, or better said, a semi-allegorical presentation of the whole history and meaning of the Round Table.' (Moorman 183)

This correspondence with the surrounding Arthurian myth reinforces the ambiguity surrounding the poem. It is a romance in the sense that Gawain is victorious, and the values of chivalry with which he opened the poem have been affirmed, albeit with a recognition of human imperfection. At the same time, it prefigures the Arthurian tragedy, and this parallel yet opposite current undercuts the romantic affirmation. The interplay is not just with tragedy, however, for there is also a rich comic vein in the poem.

This is not the way a romance is supposed to end; the glorious affirmation of the hero's virtues and of the ideal he represents is conspicuously absent. Yet Sir Gawain could hardly end in any other way, or this final scene is only an extension of the recurrent alternation of romance and unromantic elements that repeatedly undercuts the high seriousness of the narrative. The poet never allows us to view Gawain's actions in the simple light of romance, and Gawain's heroic deeds and attitudes are constantly juxtaposed with the comic or humiliating. (Benson 28)

Irony, there is, then, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But is the poem as a whole

applying 'romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content'? Well, with a jolly green giant capable, quite literally, of recapitulating himself, it's hard to argue that the poem is realistic. Foulke and Smith suggest:

The more intricate and sophisticated romances may so radically modify these assumptions as to seem to verge on the ironic, but for one element: for the writer of romance, man's nostalgia for the past or the innocence of childhood and his yearning for a simple moral world are serious and ultimately necessary aspects of human existence out of which good will come. (48)

For all the smiles and ambiguity, and the practical recognition that an extreme form of chivalry is not humanly possible, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* meets these criteria.

Foulke and Smith write: 'For the writer of romance, man's nostalgia for the past or the innocence of childhood and his yearning for a simple moral world are serious and ultimately necessary aspects of human existence out of which good will come. Irony denies this.' We should therefore look for such a denial in *Heart of Darkness*.

Like *Gawain*, *Heart of Darkness* has an extensive Dionysian component. To the mystery, charisma and ambiguity of the Green Man, Kurtz adds the characteristic madness of Dionysos. Both Gawain and Marlow are on a quest, and in both cases the real quest isn't quite what the protagonist thinks it is. Both Gawain and Marlow start off as representatives of the dominant value system of their period: in one case chivalry, in the other imperialism and the 'white man's burden'. 'Marlow, the central figure, is like a knight seeking the grail, and his journey even to the end follows the archetype.' (Thale 159) This is a telling point, for if *Heart of Darkness* is to meet Northrop Frye's definition, then it must employ romantic mythical forms.

*Gawain and the Green Knight* is highly structured, replete with variation and symbolism,

and *Heart of Darkness* also exploits such devices. Most obvious is the use of black and white, or light and darkness, to contrast the conscious with the unconscious, the ‘civilized’ with the ‘primitive’. Yet despite the extensive use of symbolism, the story has an undeniably realistic content. It is well documented that it is based on Conrad’s own trip up the Congo in command of a steamer, during which he met a company agent by the name of Klein (Guerard, Introduction 12–13). His insights into the reality of the European grab for Africa are praised by the likes of Sir Hugh Clifford, a literary critic and former British Consul in Africa, who might be expected to know whereof he writes (Clifford 144–145). Many of Conrad’s compelling images in the story are drawn directly from his experience up the Congo, yet as Albert Guerard explains, he seems to have deliberately avoided using real observations where these might appear contrived: ‘Conrad did not use the skeleton tied to a post that he saw on Tuesday, July 29. It might have seemed too blatant or too “literary” in a novel depending on mortuary imagery from beginning to end.’ (‘The Journey Within’ 168) In *Heart of Darkness* we have therefore established quite clearly that an archetypal romantic form is being applied to more realistic content. For the final confirmation it is necessary to establish how this application is appropriate in ‘unexpected ways’.

While Kurtz lies at the heart of the novel, this should not distract us from the fact that our protagonist is Marlow. Kurtz may loom large in our imaginations, yet he is, in a sense, Marlow’s psychopomp, a guide to the land of the dead. It is in the nature of the ‘special truth’ which Marlow brings back to fallen mankind from that land that the unexpectedness, the irony of the novel is to be found.

A romance points towards an underlying unity, a cosmic order. It says *after all, there is meaning*. A crude form of irony would simply reject this, saying *after all, there is no meaning*. Such a stance would be little more sophisticated than the crudest

of romances based on the premise that the nice guy always gets the girl, or a version of *Gawain* in which he meets his temptations perfectly and the Green Knight’s axe-blade is deflected by the intervention of the Virgin Mary. Such an unsophisticated version of the tale would be as boring as it was superficial. The author of *Heart of Darkness* was by no means unsophisticated. ‘By means of the conventional imagery of myth, Conrad reveals how these men who idealize and spiritualize the material give their actions the sanction which Greek or Shakespearean tragedy invested in an orderly but unknown cosmos.’ (Rosenfield 320) Although Rosenfield was referring to Conrad’s *Nostromo*, her description applies equally to *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad is staring into the abyss, but goes beyond it. Kurtz steps over the threshold, while Marlow is able to pull his foot back.

Conrad believes, with the greatest moralists, that we must know evil—our own capacities for evil—before we can be capable of good; that we must descend into the pit before we can see the stars. But a price must be paid for any such perilous journeys and descents; we must atone for even temporary alliance with the powers of darkness. (Guerard, Introduction 15)

In Marlow’s case, he is forced to exorcise the ghost of Kurtz by breaking his own most firmly held moral prohibition: that against lies. Here is the ironic heart of the story, in which ironic elements also present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are given their full significance. When the ‘hollow man’ Kurtz pronounces ‘The Horror! The Horror!’ it is a recognition not only of his own evil, and the emptiness of his high ideals, but of the potential of the entire human race. Marlow admires Kurtz because Kurtz was, at least, able to face this dismal truth without equivocation. ‘In a way, this is the most that the ironic writer aspires to: to say it, to be known as one who at some final moment looked into the dark heart of things and spoke.’ (Foulke and Smith 864)

In this ‘final moment’, Conrad also reveals that the apparent ‘contrast’ between the civilized and the primitive is no such thing. While such a distinction was important to the real-life models of the protagonists of *Heart of Darkness*, offering intellectual justification for the imperial project, even at the time the novel was being written the cosy consensus was breaking up. By the time Malinowski—like Conrad, a Pole—wrote his two works about the ‘savage society’ of the Trobrianders, (*Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, 1926; *Sex and Repression in a Savage Society*, 1927) ‘the cherished distinction between primitive and civilized societies begins to look less stable.’ (Gorak 72)

At the end of his quest, however, and returned to ‘civilization,’ Marlow is able to take the step beyond nihilism. There is more to the question than the lure of evil in the absence of a transcendent cosmic order. It is a matter of how to create out of oneself an authentic human, an enterprise which, as Marlow’s uneasiness and alienation makes plain, is not one to be won without cost.

As Frye reveals, the key to the ironic form is the use of the romantic pattern, carrying as it does expectations of success and improvement. Subverting these expectations makes it possible to employ a familiar narrative structure, and yet not to be bound by the philosophical limitations of that structure. In this way, Frye succeeds in using an analysis based on the imposition of a analytical framework—a set of categories, essentially—to illuminate the artistic core of a work of literature, to show how and why it achieves its effect. In an age when post-modernism has nurtured suspicion of order and the ‘grand narrative’, this is perhaps an achievement to be cherished.

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