

Mythopoesis: From Simplicity to Sublimity, Uplifting Aspects in Coleridge, Keats, and Shelly's Poetry

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Abstract

This dissertation pursues the exploration of the innermost sublime nature of romantic poetry composed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Such aspects of literature are brought forth by the inclusion of a rather vivid method, the method of myth creation otherwise known after Hellenistic Greek as mythopoesis. Instead of devising a literary work with just reality or rigid mythic elements the process of mythopoesis allows the poet to create a blend of fact and fiction with the freedom of imagination. In turn, mythopoesis inserts a form of wisdom that works well to epitomize the nature of the poem from being a simple construct to becoming a part of the realm of sublimity. Scholars curious about the mythological facet utilize myth as a medium to analyze religion and to bridge between the past and the present. Mythopoesis simultaneously works to satisfy both mythological and realistic criteria within a literary piece. The thesis begins with an analysis of mythopoesis or mythopoeia present in three romantic era poets. It then extends into a dissection of reality and mythic elements that build up a new form of creative imagination. Afterward, the focus shifts to the effects of mythopoeia in said poet's works. It strives to establish that the sublime nature of romantic poetry is largely attributed to the presence of mythopoesis.

Keywords: Myths, Romantic Poetry, Wisdom, Reality, Fantasy, Simplicity, Sublimity

1. Introduction

This graph seeks to explore and expand upon the sublime aspects found in the romantic poetry of Coleridge, Keats, and Shelly which is brought about by mythopoesis. The major intention of the paper is to establish multiple links in-between art and mythopoesis and analyze the uplifting effects caused by myth creation. J.R.R. Tolkien's mythopoeia and Joseph Campbell's idea of a Nietzschean world are utilized to identify the traces of mythopoesis and how the process of myth creation takes place in romantic poetry. The findings are contemplated to find the root of sublimity within art. In essence, the primary objectives of the paper are to trace the presence of mythopoesis in Coleridge, Keats, and Shelly's poetry, dissect and analyze how the mythopoesis came to be then scrutinize the effects of mythopoesis and the resulting sublime nature. Afterward, the aim is to iron out the possibilities of mythopoesis in different fields.

The significance of the study revolves around the idea that romantic poetry is a core premise of literature and the great volume of literary work of the romantics is a culmination of the poet's imagination with age-old lore. Romantic poetry is known for its sublime quality yet what makes it into poetry unbound by simplicity is a question for the ages. Among the elements that

grant poetry its transcendence is the process of myth creation. The prophetic nature of the ancient mariner and his eventual redemption, the trace of the human heart within the Titans and the Olympian gods in "Hyperion" and the mixture of a mortal poet with a god of desire and beauty in "Adonais" are prime suspects when the source of sublimity in the aforementioned poetry is investigated. As it stands, the possibilities are endless as the creation of myth offers a refreshing respite from the set perimeters of the existing objective world and enables the poets to breathe fresh life into the whole new world. Unearthing the inner workings of mythopoeisis should enable the modern scholar to have a profound vision of literary works as a whole.

2. Conceptual Framework

To analyze and investigate the issues in the dissertation, this paper takes into account the following theories:

2.1. Rational Myth

Rational myth refers to the idea that myths came from the attempt to rationalize or make sense of human actions, natural phenomena, and the controlling force of nature, gods, and goddesses (Rani, 2015). The myths of human creation across cultures of the world are prime examples of rational myth.

2.2. Functional Myth

Malinowski (1926) developed a theory of myth that focuses on myth's role in maintaining stability in society. Specifically, it emphasizes myth's power to reinforce societal values and norms to enforce obedience to established rules and regulations. Myths justifying religious, economic, or political systems are noteworthy examples of functional myths.

2.3. Structural Myth

Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that myth is a language or system akin to language, it focuses on the structure which corresponds to brain structure. He classifies myth as an attempt to arbitrate between binary oppositions. In the process, he based his theory drawing on the linguistic works of Ferdinand de Saussure. Portraying the idea that myth is but a high-level language trying to analyze the relationship between "mythemes", or different elements in a structure ("Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'The Structural Study of Myth' (Extract)," 2013).

2.4. Psychological Myth

The psychological myth theory explores myth's connection to human emotions and its origin. Specifically, it studies how myths are not based on cultural history but are intertwined with the biological conception of humans across time and space (Freud, 1899). Oedipus complex and the role of desires in myth creation are viable elements of psychological myth.

2.5. J. R. R. Tolkien's "Mythopoeia"

Tolkien (2018) dives deep into the nature of myth and unveils its intimate entanglement with folklore, taking a stand against the trend to define myth as a mere interpretation of wild folk tales. His idea of myth creation included questions of theology, philology, and cosmology. It evolves the idea of myth from being a flat world to a full-fledged globe.

3. Discussion

3.1. Traces of Mythopoeisis in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

The haunting epic of Samuel Taylor Coleridge tells the tale of an ancient mariner shadowed by the burdens of sin and the sailor's eventual redemption. The Christian myth rears its head when Coleridge puts pen to paper. Coleridge's ancient mariner with glittering eyes "hath his will" to stop a wedding guest and spread his tale. The character bears a striking similarity to the ancient prophets who established Christianity step by step with captivating willpower and charisma and had to also survive turmoil to do so. As William Shakespeare once stated "The Eyes are the window to your soul" The bright eyes of the mariner represent perhaps the enlightened soul that resides within. With the mariner Coleridge's myth creation starts to take shape as if an old prophet is present in the poet's work.

The idea of the mariner acting as a prophet is fortified by a perilous journey upon the vast sea which in all likelihood reminds the reader of Noah's ark. Yet, the starting point of the voyage is still adorned with a sunshine and promising atmosphere. The Kafkaesque nature of the poem springing from a struggle against the unseen yet oppressive incomprehensible force comes with a storm-blast which is "tyrannous and strong" and puts the mariner through the first set of trials. Coleridge though had planned further misery upon the ancient mariner as the ship is blown by the storm into a region covered by ice and fog. Both ice and fog here may be a reflection of ignorance present in the world and through this shade of ignorance came the light of Christianity as Coleridge pointed out,

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul
(Coleridge, 1798/2001, lines 61–63)

These are probably the lines that gave birth to a new myth of the Albatross being a pure Christian soul rather than just a bird of good luck.

Mythopoeisis in Coleridge's poem is closely related to the process of sinning. Since the original sin committed by Adam and Eve the human race has enlisted itself as a race of sinners. The ancient mariner too is a sinner without exception as the mariner's tale includes,

With my cross-bow

I shot the ALBATROSS.
(Coleridge, 1798/2001, lines 81–82)

The needless shedding of blood is a crime and even bigger is the crime of taking a life without proper cause and the ancient mariner took the life of a bird symbolizing good faith and fortune. So, just like in the tale of Moses, "When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt" misfortune befell the ancient mariner and his fellow crewmembers. As if the mariner is the Pharaoh who refuses to obey the word of God and is punished along with those that surround him. Sufferings are an unavoidable part of human evolution and the mariner's sufferings are well known to the denizens of the literary world. Here is a reference to the Greek mythology of Tantalus who is teased by water and food that is just out of his reach when he needs it. Such punishment is also delivered to the mariner,

Water, water everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink
(Coleridge, 1798/2001, lines 119–120)

Redemption is another part of mythic figures that are often found throughout fictional works. Coleridge's mariner is not beyond redemption as well. Kindness towards the creation of God is the medium for the mariner's first phase of true redemption. The mythic trend of kindness and love being the ultimate way of repenting is seen in the Mariner case too.

Finally, the mariner just like Ishmael of Hermann Melville's *Moby-Dick* (Melville, 1851/2008) is a survivor. Both the characters perform as storytellers and as examples for all those who would come after. The method of teaching from experience is integrated into mythology. The majority of fictional tales and poems containing myths strive to deliver a moral lesson through the life of a former character. The mariner here is a warning to all those who would kill without consciousness and a way to teach the present generation about mercy, love, and kindness.

3.2. *Traces of Mythopoesis in "Hyperion"*

A blank verse incomplete epic by John Keats showcasing the aftermath of the battle between the Titans and the Olympians. While the poem may be considered strictly mythological, certain aspects make it a poem that focuses on mythopoesis. The titans are as their names suggest, titanic beings where the titan Gaia is considered to be the mother Earth. In "Hyperion" the poor old king of the Titans, Saturn is a gray-haired sadness stricken existence far from being a mighty leader of gods. Keats emphasizes a Miltonic idea of taking myths and making them humane. Transfer of power, position through war, and the passage of time are found in the lines of the work that lights up a mythopoesis where Saturn is replaced by Jupiter, Oceanus by Neptune, and Hyperion's place is ousted by Apollo. The miserable titans are given human hearts as Oceanus surrenders his power to Neptune by declaring that the Olympian is more beautiful and it expresses the romantic idea of beauty being paramount. Yet, the creative intelligence truly shines when the old sky god Uranus comes into the fold and encourages Hyperion. On the opposite side, the sun god Apollo is portrayed as an incomplete deity who requires aid from the goddess of memory Mnemosyne to become a capable one. This according to the friend of Keats Richard Woodhouse, allows Apollo to be a foreseeing God who shapes his acts accordingly instead of being led on by incidents like Buonaparte.

Major traces of mythopoesis are accompanied by the supporting tunes that sing of Saturn's wife Ops, his sister Thea, and the giant god of war Enceladus. To construct a bridge between the mortal realm and the seemingly immortals Keats brings about the mentioning of Achilles as a measuring element for Thea by penning,

Had stood a pigmy's height; she would have taken
Achilles by the hair and bent his neck
(Keats, 1820, fragment, lines 10-11)

Besides the characters, there are also structure-based myths like the Memphian sphinx which is used to show the massive build of the goddess's face in,

Her face was large as that of a Memphian sphinx,
Pedestal'd haply in a palace court
(Keats, 1818/2008, lines 274–275)

Continuing with the creations the land of Egypt and the old hieroglyphics mix into the tale of the titanic power struggle to grant a view of an entire new dimension of the mythic tale.

3.3. *Traces of Mythopoesis in "Adonais"*

Shelly's pastoral elegy, "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats" is a simultaneous defense for Keats and a counter-attack on the Tory reviewers. The rebel poet's mythopoeic capacity allows him to coin an idea that brings the mythic Adonis, the god of beauty and desire to another form called Adonais. Adonais symbolizes John Keats who in Shelly's belief was hounded to death by reviewers and Adonis is a mythic figure who died being gored by a wild boar. Just like the death of Adonis the poet Keats is dead too and mythopoesis comes in Shelly's mourning in the first line,

I weep for Adonais—he is dead!
(Shelley, 1821/2000, line 1)

The inclusion of the muse Urania fortifies the myth creation as the sister is called down by Shelly to mourn the fallen poet,

In darkness? where was lorn Urania
When did Adonais die? With veiled eyes
(Shelley, 1821/2000, stanza 7, lines 55–56)

Afterwards arrives the god of music Apollo in stanza XXVIII. His arrows wound the prey just like how reviews hunt Keats in,

When, like Apollo, from his golden bow
The Pythian of the age one arrow sped
(Shelley, 1821/2000, stanza 37, lines 289–290)

Shelly moves to a common field of mythology where the Greek goddess of peace makes her entrance in stanza XXX as the goddess is present in both Greek and Irish mythology. The goddess is an avatar of reconciliation in the poem and is represented as,

In sorrow; from her wilds Ierne sent
The sweetest lyrist of her saddest wrong
(Shelley, 1821/2000, stanza 32, lines 250–251)

Besides the popular mythic figures, there is also Actaeon the hunter who fled after seeing the goddess Diana bath and was punished for it by being turned into a stag which is torn apart by dogs. In stanza XXXI the sight of Keats's body makes Actaeon shrink as,

Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness
(Shelley, 1821/2000, stanza 29, lines 227–228)

Adding to the repertoire of the myths comes Cain and Christ in stanza XXXIV. A question is raised by Urania whether the fallen poet is a sinner like Cain or a savior like Christ and the answer provided is,

Made bare his branded and ensanguin'd brow,
Which was like Cain's or Christ's—oh! that it should be so!
(Shelley, 1821/2000, stanza 33, lines 258–259)

3.4. Formation of Mythopoesis in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Myth is a cyclical worldview and prophets are an indispensable part of myth creation. Coleridge's ancient mariner brings a prophet-like figure in the form of the ancient mariner where the old sailor shares his wisdom with the populace or the wedding guest to enlighten them. The glittering eyes and strong willpower are fortifications for the prophetic mariner who can also be called a storyteller. The mythic idea of a prophet is taken and turned human like a mariner who is imbued with it giving birth to a new myth.

Noah's Ark is a key myth with which Coleridge's poem shares similarities. The hazardous sea journey and the tests are very alike. The voyage of Thomas James into the Arctic may have also played a part in inspiring the poet thus it may just be a mixture of a mythic journey and a modern-day fictional or real journey. Yet, the ingenuity of the formation of the myth lies in the unique crime of killing an Albatross which results in utter misery for the mariner and the crew. A bird of good luck becomes a bird of holy nature and even signifies the "Christian soul".

Coleridge creates an ambivalence by including subtle hints of Greek mythology like the myth of Tantalus. The mariner's punishment is similar to the cursed king where they both have water sources near them but may not drink from it. A blend of popular myth with realistic life elements to create a myth that can be classified as a moral lesson becomes rather evident throughout the poem.

3.5. Formation of Mythopoesis in "Hyperion"

War and its aftermaths are subjects of mythology that are found aplenty. John Keats's Hyperion is perhaps a poem that deals with the war for power between the Olympians and the Titans. While strict mythology delivers the names and characteristics Keats creates his pieces by inserting within the gods the traces of human emotions.

A most acute indication of "Hyperion" being a poem forming mythopoesis is given by Keats's friend Woodhouse, "the poem if completed would have treated the dethronement of Hyperion, the former god of the Sun, by Apollo---The incidents would have been pure creations of the poet's brain" (Keats, 1819/2001)

The titans and gods are treated with emotions such as sadness, grief, greed, confusion, and such. By making the immortal into mortals Keats gives birth to a world where even the mysterious beings can relate to human lives.

Keats's poem is heavily influenced by Milton's works. Similar to how Satan is represented in a different light in Milton's "Paradise Lost" the kings of Titans Saturn, Hyperion, and Apollo are of different build in Keats's poem.

Utilizing the life experience of the poet he can shape the destiny of the ones above with simple strokes of the pen and "Hyperion" is the carrier of said strokes. The life experience of a romantic poet allows him to initiate an exchange of power based on beauty which is highly praised in the romantic era. Also, it advertises the freedom of the individual poet to write as his heart desires and this is also reflected in Apollo who becomes a foreseeing God instead of one who follows steps set for him.

Old heroes like Achilles are renowned for their remarkable strength and Keats shows that the titan Thea is much stronger than those heroes of the old. By incorporating several mythic elements Keats can create a mythology of his own.

3.6. Formation of Mythopoesis in "Adonais"

"Adonais", the title itself is a result of mythopoesis. The myth of Adonis is used and the name is transformed into Adonais who in turn signifies John Keats. Shelly's ingenious oversight adds a mythic attribute to the deceased poet. Symbolism aids in attracting the reader to find the hidden meanings that defend Keats and criticize the reviewers who once demoted the merit of Keats's poetry.

From Greek mythology, the goddess Urania, Irene is brought to pay homage to Adonais and this shows that Keats is indeed a poet worthy of divine attention. As a poet, Keats is admired by Shelly and is placed in a shrine that makes the poet into a mythic figure or similar to a mythic one.

Apollo is another presence that is common in myths but the god here is likely brought for his golden bow and arrow by Shelly. As an arrow is to hunt animals the review is to hunt the poet and the reviewer is harshly criticized.

Shelly did not limit the myth creation elements to just Greek and Irish but there is also Christianity in the work. The tale of Cane and Abel shows its presence when Keats is questioned about his nature. Christ is the savior whereas Cane is the killer and the poet Keats is neither but he is known for his hard work which is evident from the sweat upon the brows.

4. Inferences

4.1. Sublimity Submerged within Merging Dimensions

Edgar Allan Poe's essay on cosmology called "Eureka" suggests that,
space and duration are one
(Poe, 1848/2005, p.82)

The three Romantic era poets being discussed in the paper have one rather identical aspect. An aspect that involves the amalgamation of higher dimensions like the fourth or fifth dimension. Such dimensions are alternate or parallel universes or even imagined planes of existence.

Coleridge's mariner could have been a simple sailor with an ordinary tale but the character is made extraordinary with one added word, ancient. From a simple sailor, the mariner becomes an ancient prophet who learned his lesson the hard way and survived to share his experience with the world. A certain uplift from a simplistic world to a world of intrigue and wonder made possible by merging with the mortal flesh a touch of the divine dimension. The albatross is but a bird that is considered as a sign of good luck but Coleridge adds a twist by adding with it a pure soul of Christianity.

War is perhaps a lie and peace may just be an illusion is a famous saying in the modern era where human greed for power reigns supreme. Keats' "Hyperion" brings down the divine Olympian gods and titans to the level of humans with a similar hunger for power and conflicting nature. Saturn becomes a gray-haired being too tired and filled with sadness at the loss of position. The titans and gods also become humanlike when Apollo is a god who is imperfect and becomes better through experience. Hyperion the titan and Apollo the Olympian god are in a mythic dimension and come down to the muddy earth shadowy fields, and sea shores with the magic woven by Keats.

Adonis, the god of desire and beauty is often used to signify the most precious or desirable. Shelly painted a picture in "Adonais" where Adonis merges with the mortal Keats. Artistic appreciation becomes crystal clear when the goddess Urania is summoned by Shelly to mourn Keats. A defensive and offensive world takes shape with Keats's memory, Shelly's rebellious invocation, and the mixture of a god with a man that makes the simple admiration into a piece of sublime art immortalized in the caverns of time.

4.2. The Beating Heart of Art

A French slogan from the early 19th century depicts,
l'art pour l'art
(Gautier, 1835/2005)

That art has a purpose of its own and it is to appeal to the author's sense of artistic beauty. However, there was an underlying hint of manipulation by the church and the communists. On the other hand, this idea was replaced by,

Art for Life's sake
(American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021)

Art for life's sake represents art as something to benefit a larger audience and not just the church or a select group of people. In mythopoesis, such boundaries are removed and art becomes a free-flowing stream incorporating both the artist's senses and experiences which in turn becomes the organ pumping the lifeblood of art.

"Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as romantic poetry may be considered art for the sake of art when seen from a certain point of view. Yet, when the mythic elements and the mythopoesis are brought to the fold the poem becomes so much more than simple art and it teaches life lessons for a huge portion of the audience. The hard tests the misery caused by sin and the gradual procedure of gaining experience through sufferings are illustrated through the imagination of a poet in his mythic mariner.

Keats is unique in the sense that the impending death forced him to seek out refuge in a perfect world which made his works look like they are for the sake of art. Yet, even Keats returned to the way of life in the latter odes. The beauty of Keats' "Hyperion" is that the perfect world of gods and titans is also wrapped in perils and even such beings are inflicted with confusion, worry, greed, and rage. Bringing the mythic to impart knowledge upon the physical world is perhaps only possible due to mythopoesis.

Beauty is most likely the core element of romantic poetry to the point where Keats mentions,
Beauty is truth, truth beauty,
(Keats, 1819/2001, line 49)

To defend this admirer of beauty, Shelly breathes life into "Adonais". The god of beauty and desire, Adonis may have been for art's sake but mythopoesis makes it so that the character Adonais who represents Keats is a mixture of both art and life

experience. The reviewers in the poem may just be the ones who represent art for life but with Adonis, the poem transcends such lines and sets foot in the realm of sublimity.

4.3. *The Ethereal String Connecting Knowledge and Wisdom*

Knowledge and wisdom are intertwined elements that complement each other. Mythopoesis is a medium of connecting old wisdom with new knowledge and increasing its effectiveness as a whole. Knowledge may be gained through studying yet it alone may not suffice when leading life. Wisdom is the catalyst that makes knowledge useable as it comes from experience and makes the knowledge usable. Mythopoesis is a field where old wisdom from lore, and myths come together to create a whole existence tampered by the skill, and experience of the author.

4.4. *Elevating Cognitive Freedom*

Mythopoesis or myth creation is a free form that allows for the freedom of the poet, and author's cognitive abilities. If myth is a glass jar filled with fireflies that gives a warm glow mythopoesis is perhaps the process of removing the lid from said jar. All creative facilities require freedom to shine and mythopoesis allows for said freedom to be granted to the authors.

5. Conclusion

Art and creativity go hand in hand and mythopoesis aids in the process of connecting the two. The age-old wisdom from myths becomes a base to refine the experience, knowledge, and imagination of the author which finally results in the creation of myth. As a method of narration, it incorporates both the real world and the metaphysical to combine the idea of "Art for Art's Sake" and "Art for life's sake". With just one of the ideas, a literary piece loses much of its potential while mythopoesis makes it so that the possibilities remain intact. It is perhaps the catalyst that makes it possible for literature to evolve with the passage of time. Coleridge, Keats, and Shelly are also carriers for this evolutionary element that has become popular in the modern era. Multiple dimensions come together to create a harmonious symphony that is art and it is made possible through the freedom of the author's cognitive process. Mythopoesis may just be the hidden gem shining upon the falling world of creativity that would restore and renovate a lush field of art filled and shaped with a tinge of sublimity.

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