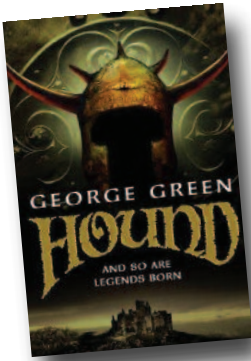


Cú Chulainn in battle, from T. W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 1911; illustration by Joseph Christian Leyendecker.

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But still, the heart doth need a language...

George Green

(Extracts from a journal kept while writing *Hound*,
a novel based on *The Tain*.)¹

Writing stories is not easy. “Discuss, making due allowance for writerly solipsism and self-pity. You may use personal evidence of chewed fingernails, bruised foreheads and marital discord should you have them. Doctor’s certificates and legal documents should be appended where available.”

When a writer tells an audience that they (the writer) write stories that are based on myth, the audience’s reaction will sometimes suggest that this method is somehow cheating, that the story hasn’t been made up by the writer from new cloth, that using myth is the easy route, the way already travelled. The writer may try arguing that a) there are no new stories really and b) everything is based on myth anyway. These points are, I would suggest, crucial for the writer, even though the audience may dismiss them as convenient sophistry. I would go on to suggest that it is every bit as hard to write myth-based stories – if the tale is already at least partly known to an audience then surely, if perhaps counter-intuitively, the story-telling bar goes up and not down. And I would then suggest that the writer quote Bulfinch, that myth is ‘the handmaid of literature’. I take this to mean that myth enables writers by laying down a firm grounding for stories that will strike home in a reader; when George Steiner writes that ‘There are cadences, chords, modulations that break or mend the heart, or, indeed, mend it in the breaking’,² the writer knows that it is myth that best understands this music. If the audience is yet still unpersuaded and the argument persists, I would retreat behind Wallace Stevens: ‘Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities that it can be made into.’³ Which, while both true and relevant, is enough of a paradox to flummox the audience momentarily and allow the writer an opportunity to make a break for the door.

So. Some statements about myth. Myth is always oversized, even when it deals with small things. It deals with revenge not annoyance, passion rather than love, deeds rather than doings. Even where there is domestic contentment, such as that between Cuchullain and Emer; their uxoriousness is heroically extreme and, for the time, unusual, and when Cuchullain strays, their estrangement, Emer’s constancy and her subsequent forgiveness, are similarly mighty. It is no great insight to observe that myth is larger than life; myth requires a Sam Goldwyn-esque

commitment to 'making it big'. It deals with the important things in life; how to live, how to die, what should have weight and what should not, what to believe and what to discard; things that matter. Myth is by definition not concerned with small things, for when it does include the quotidian, the domestic and the trivial, those things are, by association, made large, significant and timeless. Myth must be larger than life.⁴

Myth contains archetypes, which is a statement so commonplace and obvious that it sometimes needs restating lest we forget. Archetypes resonate with the reader, which is a quality devoutly to be desired by most writers, and it occurs at a level deeper than entertainment – which is not, of course, to denigrate entertainment. When writing a story, and indeed when reading one, this resonance assures us that there is something meaningful going on here, a something that we have perhaps lost touch with. The story may appear to be simple, indeed, it may be simple, but the archetype provokes a more significant emotional response than would otherwise be the case. The themes of myth are therefore those that all of us are touched by, however unconsciously, but which the characters within the story must inhabit wholly consciously and by which they are likely to be consumed. This shared experience provokes the reader/audience's connection to the story.

There is no privacy for the mythic protagonist, who is always 'on', embodying the qualities of the archetype regardless of what form they take. There are no part-time Heroes. The graphic novel superhero's alter-ego may appear to contradict this, but in fact doesn't; Superman may be acting Clark Kent some of the time, but that's merely a mask; behind the geek spectacles he is always Superman. Achilles can never be just a man, but is always (sharp intake of breath) 'Achilles!'⁵

Similarly, *The Tain* never allows its Heroes to be ordinary; King Conor cannot just be a prodigious drinker; he is reputed to be able to drain a barrel without taking it from his lips, and he can defeat any man at chess while doing so.⁶ An unusual example of extra-ordinariness occurs in the last few pages of the story. Throughout the narrative, Queen Maeve is consistently depicted as being every bit as ferocious and deadly with a sword as any of her male Champions.⁷ However, once her army has been defeated and is in retreat, in a nice bit of sexist put-downery, her period arrives (having not been previously mentioned at any point over the substantial time covered by the story). The cramps mean that she cannot fight; she begs the men to understand that she must go to relieve herself. They scornfully allow her to go and do what needs to be done. They don't quite mutter 'typical woman, just when you most need her she has to take a day off', but close enough. So far, so domestic and so predictably chauvinist. Maeve shamefacedly removes herself and deals with her problem. By the time she returns, the storyteller's dismissive scorn is somewhat tempered with the observation that she has filled three deep trenches with menstrual blood. No matter how scornful it may be of the Queen's gender and its implications of shame and weakness, the myth still insists that the scale of the event must be far greater than anyone else's. The double standard, it seems, was alive and well even then.

Myth is both culturally bound and culturally mutable; it can be most deeply understood in terms of its foundation story, but it can also be read equally correctly in alternative ways – indeed, it resists definition, and invites such readings. That's what makes it useful for writers. For a contemporary example, see two of the recent film versions of the story of Beowulf. The first version, starring Angelina Jolie,⁸ offers a bland CGI-ridden story of a Hero who helps a king get rid of a nuisance monster – a straightforward dragon-slaying Hero narrative, bumptious and noisy. The second version, starring Gerard Butler,⁹ while skimping not at all on the swordplay, emphasises the moral choices that Beowulf must make, and makes it clear that his heroism is deeply compromised, that he is not morally superior to the monster, and that he is aware of these facts. Myth can be reduced to a simple romp or elevated to a complex moral fable. Or, most often, both.¹⁰

Myth can be simple, in the sense of presenting a clear problem. A beautiful woman is trapped in a loveless marriage to an older man, and is rescued/abducted by a handsome lover. A thousand ships sail to get her back. It's a simple story, one very familiar though bigger and more complicated than most of its versions. This supposed simplicity is, of course, both seductive and reductive. Because we do not live in ancient Macedon, from our temporal distance we can see, or may think we do, the issues more clearly than the participants. We might suppose that we can strip the struggle down to its essence. We might then deduce that myth took place in a time when things – problems, challenges, issues – were simpler. Perhaps, though one doubts that Ulysses saw his life that way.

I suggested earlier that Making It Big was one of myth's themes. Not all mythic stories need to be, or should be, epic in this sense, but it's more usual. There are few mythic domestic narratives, fewer chick-lit epics. That said, *The Iliad* is one protracted domestic bust-up, a precursor of the simplest romantic storyline: boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy just won't accept it. However, in this version, instead of just boring his drinking buddies silly with his maudlin obsession, the boy demands that they come with him to retrieve the girl, and to lay down their lives and those of their men for his cause if needs be. It's an everyday story, almost banal, made bigger; larger in scope, larger in consequence. Many classical myths start with the Gods squabbling like teenagers and taking sides in human quarrels for their own – often petty and self-serving – reasons. As the audience, this pleases us and engages us for reasons that have always been true: we are always pleased to see that our betters have the same problems as we do. We delight in being shown that wealth and position far beyond our own do not – indeed, almost inevitably do not – bring happiness. Our romantic side is always gratified that, regardless of wealth and position, an older man can always lose his wife to a competitor who lacks everything except youth and the courage to use it. We are always ready to hear that power isn't potency, status isn't sex appeal, and there's more to life than a big sceptre. Celebrities, we are assured, will lose their beauty and are almost always eventually 'tragic' and unhappy.¹¹ Regardless of their power and glory, all kings must one day fall and their monuments turn to dust. The story of the stolen wife – willing and unwilling – speaks to the

ages, and is rewritten to fit them – Helen and Paris, Joseph and Potiphar, Arthur and Guinevere, Chaucer's Miller, Eliot's Casaubon and Dorothea, Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and any number of abduction narratives,¹² all stories singing the same song but rewriting the tune to suit the times.

So, although myths tend to be Big, this also reminds us that there is more to storytelling than just that. Size isn't everything. 'Big' here doesn't actually mean big in the buccaneering full-throttle turn-everything-up-to-11 sense. The heart of storytelling – yes, all storytelling – isn't size, volume or scale, it is *intensity*. Simple size, scale without heart, is just bombast, life as a Michael Bay movie, noisy, frenetic, showy and, crucially, empty. Intensity is what makes us feel the story. Look at Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, a tale written, as Austen put it, on a 'little bit of ivory ... with so fine a brush'.¹³ It is a miniature, not a panorama. No-one shouts, there are no car or horse chases, no fights, no-one dies, yet few readers would characterise the story as one in which 'nothing happens'. A great deal happens. Strong emotions are held in check, self-interest is sacrificed in silence for honour, needs are unacknowledged, desires deeply felt are denied and unexpressed. Just because things happen quietly doesn't mean that the story is any less powerful. The power of such stories lies in our awareness of what is necessary for these feelings and emotions to be held back. One can admire the weight and force of the rushing river, or, knowing its power, one can admire the strength of the dam that keeps it in check. We do not often think of myth as formed of this contained intensity, and yet it is there – Penelope's determination to resist her suitors, and Arthur's personal forgiveness of Guinevere and Lancelot, while performing a public condemnation of their adultery, are both examples of this sort of Heroic Restraint.

Writers play in the space between the universality of myth and the ways that myth is culturally bound, interrogating different aspects and different emphases in different cultures. By way of illustration, look at the English. We have a potent national myth, a mix of (*inter alia*, but perhaps most notably) Empire, The Few and Dunkirk, with dashes of Arthur and Robin Hood. These images surround us and are constantly portrayed on film and television. Of course, we aren't alone in this. Most countries have such visions of versions (and versions of visions) of themselves. These stories tell us about how we see ourselves, and, perhaps more significantly, how we would like to be seen. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, 'Culture is the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves'.¹⁴ Of course, let it be said straight away that national myths are generally deeply self-serving and clichéd. If these myths showed us that different cultures valued different things it'd perhaps be more convincing, but a brief study of comparative mythology shows that the differences are more apparent than real – is there any culture that does not pride itself on its sense of humour, its toughness, its tolerance, its independence, and its superiority to other cultures – is there a single national myth which prides itself on *not* being better than all others? That would, at least, be original.

The national myth, then, as with all myth, is both universal and culturally bound. For a domestic example of the culturally bound, we may look at the British sense of self and its obsession with the idea of 'fair play'. Some would argue that this concept is more honoured in the breach than the observance, but a brief scan of the media on almost any day will reveal a plethora of examples of, for example, talk about our sense of justice, self-important references to the Magna Carta, and our ongoing resentment of MPs' expenses claims. God is, after all, an Englishman, and we must play up and play the game. But fair play talked about in this way is a very Anglo-Saxon concept. Celtic cultures – and others – find nothing strange in a world in which the gods are viciously playful, in which ideas of fairness are irrelevant, in which the Gods will do what they do because they are gods, in which Trickster¹⁵ will interfere with mankind just because it can. In this vision of the world, the various influences on our lives, be they gods, fairies or the weather; so far from being benign and sympathetic, can be amoral, provocative, wilful, and destructive. English culture is uncomfortable with the Celtic idea of a divine dimension which is neither for nor against us, neither benevolent nor antagonistic, but who is, in a coldly Hobbesian universe, indifferent to us and uninterested in our fate. This universe may seem cruel but is only so in the sense that Nature is cruel to all creatures. It's nothing personal, however much it may seem so; pain or pleasure, sunshine or rain falling on us, is simply the law of averages working itself out.

Of course, on some level the English know all this. These ideas exist in our own culture. We are, after all, part Celtic. But we have driven them to the edges of our minds. As a culture we vote for a sturdy Anglo-Saxon rejection of Celtic indifference and disinterest. We vote for fair play, and none of that foreign messing about, whereas other cultures, and particularly any culture containing a magical realist tradition, are much more comfortable with what Bryan Waller Proctor called 'sweet imaginings'.¹⁶ The English can't be doing with Anu and Danu, the Celtic twin poles of creation and destruction. Such deities don't care about us enough even to dislike us. They are indifferent, and we find that hard to take. Yet the idea of Trickster is part of our heritage. There is enough of it around, albeit in heavy disguise, for us to recognise it. All Fool's Day, Halloween, fancy dress, pantomime, festivals of swapping identity, masks, all are celebrations of inversion and confusion. And Shakespeare knew all about Trickster; Puck and Ariel are both manifestations of this irresponsible and wilful drive, though as an audience the English are reassured to see that they both are surrounded with strong magic, set in dream-like surroundings and – crucially – have powerfully disapproving masters who keep their excesses largely in check. So we deal with Trickster by ignoring him or putting him in harness; anything other than he should roam abroad unchecked and free.¹⁷

But still, 'the heart doth need a language'.¹⁸

Looking at the ways different cultures construct and use mythology tells us what's important to them and us. It's about how we like to see ourselves, as opposed to how we really are, and how we think we should behave, as opposed to what we actually do. The writer's job is to critique this, but the writer needs to identify and understand it first.

So, from a storytelling point of view, what does all this mean? Using myth isn't cheating, it's inevitable, as in one way or another myth is the basis of all the stories we care about. If anything it's harder, as using myth raises expectations. Myth can powerfully affect emotions and self-perceptions. The writer who co-opts myth is thus challenged to maintain that deep level of affect while transforming the surface into a new story. Myths are a useful repository of ideas and characters, a library with which we are all familiar and from which we can borrow for free. Myths are important to us – they wouldn't be myths if they weren't – so it makes sense to draw on them. Myths are a jumping-off point for writers, from which the ideas contained within them can be interrogated, deconstructed, reformed, replaced and re-cast. This is perhaps most often done by re-contextualising them in a modern(ish) idiom. Seamus Deane suggests of Derek Mahon's poetry that it expresses a desire 'to be free from history'.¹⁹ By re-casting myth the writer allows this desire freedom. Dave Simmons' *Ilium* is a recent example: *The Iliad* re-written as space opera, and it works, both as science-fiction and as myth. C.S. Lewis understood the importance of myth when he wrote about a schoolboy reading first Buchan and then Rider Haggard. He first looks at Buchan and asks, 'will the hero escape?'; then he reads Rider Haggard and feels, 'I shall never escape this. This will never escape me. These images have struck roots far below the surface of my mind.'²⁰

Far below the surface of the mind. Where myth lives.

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George Green

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Notes

1. This essay assumes some broad familiarity with the Irish epic *The Tain*, the story of its protagonists Queen Maeve and Cuchullain, and Emer, Cuchullain's wife. Such familiarity is, however, by no means essential.
2. G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago, 1991).
3. From 'Opus Prometheus' (NY, 1966), 178.
4. As M.I. Finley comments, referring to Samuel Butler's description of Odysseus' return to Penelope as the 'utmost domesticity': 'Historical husbands and wives grow old, but the plain fact is that [after 20 years] neither Odysseus nor Penelope has changed one bit; they have neither developed nor deteriorated, nor does anyone else in the epic. Such men and women cannot be figures in history: they are [...] as timeless as the story itself.' (15/16) This transcendence makes the mythic.
5. It would be useful at times to have a font called 'Heroic' which would imply that excited exclamation without having to spell it out. One is reminded of the young woman back in the 1960s who spent the night with Mick Jagger: 'It was good,' she reported, 'but it wasn't like sleeping with Mick Jagger.' She was seduced by the Heroic font, but ended up in bed with Courier New.
6. The Kings of Ulster were not permitted to fight, but had to be both heroic drinkers and champion chess players, usually simultaneously.
7. Queens of Connaught, on the other hand, did fight. Their chess-playing ability is not recorded.
8. *Beowulf*, dir. Robert Zemeckis (2007).
9. *Beowulf and Grendel*, dir. Sturla Gunnarson (2005).
10. Which is not to make a case for either film posing a threat to *The Odyssey*. For a more complex example of this argument see Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, which is, amongst many other things, a series of retellings of the myth of Europa, and an examination of that process of re-telling.
11. The female ones anyway.
12. Not least an entire genre of living-with-the-Noble-Savage narratives written by the early European settlers of North America.
13. Letter, Jane Austen to James Edward Austen-Leigh, 9 July 1816.
14. C. Geertz (attr.), quoted in 'Cultural Geography and the stories we tell ourselves' by Patricia L. Price, in *Cultural Geography* 17(2), 203-10.
15. The article on 'Trickster' in Wikipedia is perhaps as good a place to start as any. Therein is given a list of some forty fictional versions of Trickster. Some – Brer Rabbit, Bart Simpson – will be familiar, but all are imports; the only one written by an Englishman is Puck.
16. Bryan Waller Proctor, *A Sicilian Story with Diego de Montilla and other poems* (Columbia University, 2009), 66 st. X.
17. It goes without saying that this is a pagan idea; a follower of the Christian tradition will perforce accept that God cares for us and that any misfortune that we suffer is in no wise part of His intentions for us, except when events seem unavoidably to point to this conclusion, in which case His intentions are deemed too inscrutable for us poor mortals to understand. But this is an argument for another day.
18. S.T. Coleridge, *Piccolomini*, ii 4 (Oxford University library) <https://archive.org/details/piccolominiadra00colgoog> (accessed 15 March 2015).
19. S. Deane, *Celtic Revival: Essays in Modern Literature* (Faber and Faber, 1985), 156.
20. C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 48.