

MYTH AND  
CREATIVE WRITING  
THE SELF-RENEWING SONG



ADRIAN MAY

MYTH AND CREATIVE WRITING:  
THE SELF-RENEWING SONG



# DEDICATION



To students of my 'Myth and the Creative Process' course at Essex University; and to my myth teachers, Robert Hill, and Dudley Young, whether they like it or not.

Thanks to poet and teacher Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, and to Philip Langeskov.

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# PREFACE

## Mythic Intentions

— ◆ —

*Who is this book for?*

This is a book for all serious writing students, because it is about something that works to make our writing deeper, more connected to the human condition and connected to the past, present and the future of all writing. These are grand claims for myth, in its broadest sense, all of which will be explored more fully in the Introduction. By ‘serious writing students’ I mean anyone who takes writing seriously: teachers, undergraduates, MA and PhD students, students in adult writing courses and groups and the amateur, by which we mean (paying mythic attention to that word) anyone who loves to write. The book is based on my third-year undergraduate course at the University of Essex, but it is also my own method of working, developed over years as a songwriter, fiction and essay writer and poet. Because of my interest in many genres, the book is not genre specific, but rather concentrates on what all writing has in common. For me, this is the mythic interconnection which links all serious writers, all serious students of writing.

There are many books which, quite rightly, concentrate on the craft of writing, but, at essence, this book concentrates on the process of inspiration, the process of writing and the process of working with mythic material. Other books deal with craft, technique, theory, genre and academic debates, but we dive right into the darker sides of writing. The book is a source-book, to help writers find their own depth, methods and connections, while it has many suggestions and exercises which serious students will want to try or adapt. The book is for those who want to get into the ‘creative’ bit of creative writing.

The hard work aspect of writing is often emphasised by serious writers and this should never be underestimated. The hard work aspect of myth might look more like seeping ourselves in and absorbing the material until inspiration takes over, but there is hard work for us serious students nevertheless. Researching and comparing material, finding elements of contemporary use in old tales and making narrative structure function well are all vital activities. However, the book is for those who want to build up their depth and understanding of the creative and the mythic processes, so that the hard work is towards some rewarding end.

*How can we use it?*

The book can be used directly, as the processes are explored through practical application of the ideas. There are suggestions for writing accompanying every chapter, which will build up our understanding of the themes and provide some suggestions of how myth can be directly useful. Each chapter contains many examples of old and newer mythic material and how it has been or can be used now. There are suggestions for reading too, after every chapter, with something from old mythic material, a newer example and something which explores some of the ideas discussed relating to the creative process. These are labelled old, new and critical.

A creative process is explored in the way the book progresses. We delve into the inner world, starting from the sense of creativity, gradually moving, through key archetypes and big myths, towards the outer world and towards an audience. This can be used to build up a picture of how myth works as a structural device and as a birth-to-death metaphorical view of psychological processes and changes. Once we begin to find these connections – between thought and birth, between writing and the depths we need to explore to do it, between the heroic and the everyday – our own ideas can then come into focus in a mythic way.

As well as directly and in the connection between myth and the creative process, the book can be used to help us get our own ideas and inspirations. It can, I hope, inspire us to be inspired to find examples and instances in all media, both old and new, and to see the mythic dimension everywhere around us. Part Two, the Mythic Subject Dictionary, demonstrates this element, offering some writing and research ideas and an understanding of how a mythic view of the subject might help in our work.

*What is the book (and title) saying?*

The way writers work is itself mythic. As writers, we go into the depths of our thoughts and of ourselves and bring back the treasure, just as a hero in a mythic adventure does. The first chapters of the book deal with this in much depth. We do a mythic job, trying to tell a different kind of truth about what it means to be human – different from the news or the analysis, different from the theory or the cold facts. Myths for us are not falsehoods and definitions are discussed, especially in the Introduction. We try to create something living, which tells us something about living.

The creative process is mythic. The story of how a piece of writing emerges, which is a combination of idea and structure, heart and head, skill

and perhaps wild abandon, is patterned like myth. It has paradox, change and the working towards some meaning, which can reveal itself as if by magic. Understanding the process can help us make it work. Myths are stories about how change happens in the mind and in the world. We create and return to creation. The process is like a life being recreated.

*The Self-Renewing Song* means the song, or the myth, which recreates its own energy in a new form. Myths have connections with songs. Scholars say that the old mythic epic poems, like *The Odyssey* were originally sung and, in the United Kingdom, the old ballads, still sung today, are often mythic tales. The Bible begins, they say, with what was a song or chant and the old, enchanted truths old tales tell us still self-renew and haunt us like songs.

In participating in the creativity of renewing the old messages for today, we writers also renew ourselves, as mythic beings and creative adventurers. So *The Self-Renewing Song* is the song that renews itself and ourselves, as writers and as readers. Writing, like myth, is about shared experience, or at least about sharing it with our readers.

The book is also saying that myth is useful in all these aspects. It is useful in inspiration, in the growing of the imagination and of creative insight. It is useful in the writing process, where we will understand the mysterious journey and labour of creating a successful piece of work. It is useful in terms of the content of our work, including the connection between themes, narrative structures and patterns and in finding old material that can make our writing new. It is even useful when we think about being published or being famous.

Dealing with creativity, rather than with the craft or the teaching of the subject, this book is written in a relaxed and informal style. I am telling a mythic tale in the old tale-tellers' way, by talking directly to you, the reader/audience. Its mythic intention is to demonstrate its own purpose and be a *creative* book about creative writing. So my passion for mythic, creative ways of thinking will show through and I hope readers will understand if I do not always tone this down. With all that in mind, I have occasionally used pieces of my own creative work as examples of some ways of using myth. I will indicate these by using my initials: A.M.

Here then, we will take the widest view of myth and hope we can find mythic and symbolic connections in all things. Join me in my song of renewal. Myth is about how we cope with change, what we share, what happens and what we need to say to the world. It is how we make the personal universal and how we can make our writing better.

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Mythic Writer



### *Why writers use myth*

The secret that writers know is that they are part of a long tradition of storytelling and word work, whether they call it mythic, intertextual, interactive or original. Exploring the mythic nature of writing, where these connections are revealed and where the writer is also seen as a mythic adventurer, is a way of finding close links to what it is we demand from literature, which is something to do with the essences of human nature. What is remarkable about knowing some of the oldest stories in the world is how little the basic problems of living have changed and, consequently, how modern these old things can be. It is true that writers will be, by and large, more sympathetic to this than critics, but the popularity of the mythic, in contemporary writing, film and children's literature, means it deserves serious attention. Returning to the source for renewal has been a pattern in the history of writing, which is a kind of going back, better to go forward. Discovering and revivifying the stories that tell us best about ourselves helps us connect with ourselves and with our readers.

The concept of myth is famously difficult to define, containing from the start a number of paradoxes. One sure thing that can be said is that myths are narratives of some kind, but when the *OED* goes on to say they deal with the 'supernatural', but also with 'natural . . . phenomena' we are already in two minds. Myth is, then, you could say, being usefully in two minds at once. In meaning 'b.' the *OED* has it being 'untrue', while myth fans tend to think of myth as containing some kind of universal truth. It certainly seems to be about some kind of narrative, or contingent truth, or, as the old definition, from Roman writer Sallust, goes, 'things that never happened, but are always'. My favourite definition is one quoted by Edmund Leach in *Genesis as Myth* (1969), from J. Schniewind: 'The expression of unobservable realities in observable form.' While this could apply to any metaphorical thought perhaps, it does allow for a wider definition of the mythic which could include fairytales, folklore, legends, history, jokes and stories, which is the way I want to use the term. Dudley Young, my myth teacher as an undergraduate, once

told us that myths tend to be ‘short, violent, unintelligible and insane’ therefore ‘difficult to read’. I would add that their meanings reward those trying to find them and that those meanings seem inexhaustible and responsive, with a power of their own to show us what we are inclined to ignore. In this way myths can be maps of what we choose to forget. Myths often deal in difficult or problematic situations, with what is taboo, in the sense of being both forbidden and special. They deal with death, with rebirth, and change is at their heart.

To define the indefinable will be an on-going aspect of what we will be doing in this book, so I will offer a definition of my own, based on the *OED* meaning: *Stories that embody the symbolic mysteries of nature, human nature and magic*. The word ‘myth’ is closely related to the word ‘mystery’ and also to ‘mouth’. The Greek ‘muthos’ means both speech and narrative, so speaking the story, or writing it, is close too, as is the mystery of telling. Myths are common to all cultures and have been dismissed as pre-science explanations of the world or discussed as religious rituals. It is characteristic of myth that the meaning changes to suit our needs. My definition has the caveat of ‘symbolic’ which then allows me to use the word ‘magic’, without too much scepticism.

Other discussions put ‘Mythos’ versus ‘Logos’, which is story versus logic, and these oppositions are at the heart of myth too. Myths deal with opposition, with death and rebirth, with truth and lies, as we shall see. Explaining the difficult to grasp is something writers do. How else can a tragedy be uplifting? How else can a comedy make you think? We use myth so as not to deny the difficulty and paradox of living.

At a simple level, and myths deal in natural, life-and-death simplicity too, the classics are the old source stories of myth, but I would want to include all and any kinds of *useful* strange old tales, jokes and bits of narrative we all live by. Things in our lives become legendary. We all knew someone who we like to tell stories about, because they say something to us about what we need from the world. At the end of the Introduction, there is a list of some essential primary myth reading and some essential critical reading to help you use this book. We will find the myths and find that the myths are inside us.

Myths, in my sense then, are the stories which are part of us. They can help us in the urge to be objective without losing the subjective, circular without losing linearity, rooted without being against progress, connected but still able to act personally, and inclusive without being adrift in a sea of relativism. These are strong pulls for writers, which show that myth is not only used as an urge towards escapism. Myths are not just old Greek stories, separate from life. Stories are all around us and within us, too. We live by stories which

attempt these balances between what we know and what we feel. Laurence Coupe, in his book *Myth* (1997), quotes ‘the myth of mythlessness’ to describe how even an apparently sceptical writer like Philip Larkin constantly calls on renewing images of nature in his poems. If nature is mythic, as it is, then we only have to look to the source of a word like ‘pollution’, which can be traced back to the Greek ‘lume’, which means ‘a soiling’, and to think of the environment, to know we live in times that struggle with the mythic in an urgent and pressing way.

The use of myth now, in popular as well as literary writing, in film and television, in music, both popular and classical, is ubiquitous. A look at the bestsellers will show you J.K. Rowling or Philip Pullman. Literary writers like Marina Warner and A.S. Byatt in the United Kingdom use myth continually. Poets like Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney use myth, while contemporary UK poet Simon Armitage has published a version of the Arthurian mythic poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007). Myths are about testing the human spirit in its quest for truth and these old/new themes are with us always.

Myths tend to come back and are often themselves about something ignored, surprised or forgotten coming back and this, from the outset, links myth with the creative process. The oldest written-down story, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is about a green man having to be created by the gods to balance the corruption of mankind. Obviously, it could be about now. One of the appeals for writers is that they, like myths, were once perhaps more central to life, as they performed their mythic reminders. In an age where we have stopped trusting pure materialism, we might feel that writers want to, or need to, be important again. Myths can help us stand up for non-material wealth and the mythic is the place to start to discover what is more enduring and, potentially, a gift of infinite value.

### *How writers can use myth*

Writers can use myth to help get beyond the merely personal. The biggest problem for new writers can be the very thing that makes them want to write. This desire wells up from inside, in a way which is demanding and personal. It is the externalising of a need for what we suppress to be expressed, which has the intensity of a physical response. Just as it is, it is a good thing, too. Those of us who are serious about writing do want to take it further. We want this feeling of release to relate out towards other people, even out into the world. The urge towards writing comes like a call from the Muses, a breathing

in, or inspiration, of a need to express something. The patterns of myth can aid this connection, as they often address such things.

The idea of personal originality can get in the way. It is a twentieth-century notion to be hung up on being original and new in writing. We all know that ‘new’ often just means the packaging. However, we demand to be individual. This kind of self-ego can be useful, especially to the advertising industry, but it has its limits. We have all heard of the ‘me’ generation, the greed and materialism of some aspects that underlie Western cultures. Shakespeare never bothered himself about original plots, yet the voracious nature of the media-culture demands ‘new’ ideas, as if they were really new. But this is really novelty, rather than real newness, real renewal. It is easy to mistake the trivial for the genuinely innovative. To be really innovative, you have to know what you are improving on. Depth is attained by other methods than the demands of fashion.

Even Hollywood found the idea of constant novelty redundant after a while and has looked towards the mythic. Most writers in film would now know about the mythic work of Joseph Campbell, via Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (1992; revised 1996). They found out what serious writers had known all along. The human spirit has much in common from person to person and the stories we all tell can talk the same language through the ages.

If we start from the personal, as we must, there can be no serious challenge to the uniqueness of the individual, however. Uniqueness is a given. Your writing can never be other than a part of you. We all say it differently. The things we have in common, which is where myth can help, are what we tend to take for granted. These deep connections do not challenge the self, but enhance it. We have more in common than we know and this can help us writers reach an audience. Like many things about writing, there is a duality here, which is a widening of vision, not a narrowing to the self, alone. It is not getting beyond the personal but, again, taking it further. ‘The message is: Widen the area of consciousness’, as poet Allen Ginsberg (1961) says, on the last page of his collection *Kaddish and Other Poems*.

It is a mistake to see myth as merely formulaic. ‘No new thing under the sun’, it says in Ecclesiastes (1:9), with a kind of cosmic despair, from a passage that is, paradoxically, both personal in tone and exhilarating, if you look at it another way. The best mythic work is both personal and communal. To connect the personal to the world is to take writing as a very serious thing to attempt. Myth gives us the key to reach from one world to another. At best it moves beyond the surface of its strangeness towards a universal wisdom. Here the self becomes bigger and more deeply connected, more deeply humane.

As well as getting the personal to include the world, myths can help you be innovative. They can challenge us in unexpected ways. Many writers find old stories, myths, folklore, fairytales, traditional poems and songs attractive, but it is important to remember that while they might fascinate us, at the same time they are often alien to us. They are full of potential, but full, literally and metaphorically, of dangers. Writers pay them serious attention and respect to get the best from them.

As a very young writer, I'll admit that I failed to see the point of them, myself. I had to be shown that they were not just for children, or for posh classically educated mythologists, and not just anti-realist. I had to discover that they were subversive and spoke to our mythic, archetypal inner culture. Originality, so often sought, writers realise, means to do with the beginning, the roots, so it does not necessarily mean absolute newness. If we take new to mean *renew*, we move towards something more cyclic and natural, and more fruitful, creatively. Stories begin 'Once upon a time', which is both now and timeless.

In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), T.S. Eliot says that if we have a sense of the past, we can use 'the timeless as well as the temporal together, [which] is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.' We only know where we are now, if we know how we got here, in other words.

Eliot was a great admirer of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which is known to be both modern and mythical. It is worth noticing how much Modernism in the arts is traditionalism or myth in disguise. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and the paintings of Picasso, are two examples. The influence of the primitive nature, the immediacy of traditional, mythic material, cannot be overestimated. This 'nowness' of the old stuff is part of myth's appeal in, for instance, the translation work of poets like Ted Hughes and Tony Harrison. The use of stock phrases in blues, for another example, give us the story fast: 'I woke up this morning' with the blues. We know where we are. We have to know the old story for immediacy and for depth.

We live now, as always, in narrative, as we are story-telling creatures. As Dudley Young says (Intro. to *Origins of the Sacred*, 1991), we have to do this:

[The] potential tyranny of the fictive is often poorly understood these days . . . we take little mythic instruction . . . But in the *absence* of an authoritative myth or poem, the lights simply go out and the soul is closed down: no name, no game. In other words, we *have* to play; if we refuse, our robotic bodies are simply wired up by this week's television commercials.

The better the stories we tell, the better we are, if ‘we *have* to play’, and we have to make it work for us now, to renew what is there.

Writers use myth to deepen their sense of the symbolic significance of life then, where an old story gives us a pattern. We can use myth simply to turn an idea into a narrative. If we want to talk about a pop star, we might choose the Greek tale of Orpheus, charming all with his song. We can disguise it, so no one can tell the source, but when we get to him trying to bring his girlfriend back from the dead, we will know that we are learning that success can be fatal, remembering how he ended up in a bad way, in pieces.

If we do not use the story directly, we can always have a character knowing an old story that sheds light on the one they are in. Shakespeare and *Star Trek* both do this. They make their stories layered with other stories, to add that symbolic and mythic truth. The patterns of myth are discussed later, especially in Chapter 4, Mythic Navigation Devices, and are used by many as blueprints for crafting stories. There are overall patterns of how myths and tales work and also patterns of individual myths that might relate to a subject or tale we have in mind.

Using myths in these creative ways gives writers narrative and symbolic force and also helps us develop our own mythic muscles. Then our ideas will tend to flourish and show themselves in a multifaceted way and we will begin to think mythically.

Reading *The Self-Renewing Song* is designed to help in this way and also to help in your own process of creation. Myths map a creative approach to life and we can find ways of connecting the process of writing with the way myths show their process of change and renewal. We will tell many tales along the way, symbolically charting the creative journey into the world of creativity, which is the world of myth. If this sounds too mystical for you, don’t worry. Plenty of practical examples will guide you through, to help you see what myth can say about how life and the symbolic writing life unfold. We will move from creation, through darkness, towards light, bringing with us the fruits of our symbolic life.

Writers use myth to be useful, to give life back to life. Like the hero, they bring fertility to enable the world to flourish. Our writing can flourish in the same way.

*Danger, mythic traps ahead*

An aspect of the mythic worth reinforcing is the tendency of myth to hide its power until it receives our serious attention. Myth is easily mistaken for

escapism, for example. The truth of myth can be invisible, but not to the mythic writer, who seeks to use the secret power in writing. From the outside, mythic material can seem too playful, too distant, merely whimsical or totally irrelevant. The serious mythic writer does not pander to this trick of appearance. If we know the dangers, we can avoid them. Here is a list of some traps, which might be there, ahead.

1. Use of myth can make you seem humourless and over-serious, if you don't use it lightly. Robert Bly was accused of this in a review of his book about masculinity, *Iron John* (1990). I do not agree with the reviewer, but still know that we should make sure myth is not an excuse to assume superiority, in tone or topic.
2. You can appear to be mad if you go too far with magic and old theories. Myth needs to be grounded in the real, to be useful, which was its original role.
3. You can seem merely whimsical, perhaps like some writing for children, and some mythological fantasy sci-fi, with its unpronounceable names, clichéd plots and pseudo-archaic language. Some seem to think that myth equals a pastiche of nineteenth-century literary language. If we want our work taken seriously, these traps are best avoided.
4. The primitive can seem trivial to some. Most pop music is primitive but *very* often trivial, although it really need not be so. Myths can do simplicity well, but make sure this is not mistaken for being simplistic.

### *Conclusion: reading, writing, key myth texts*

‘There is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there never will be’ (Joseph Campbell, ‘Epilogue’ to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), 1. ‘The Shapeshifter’)

All our thoughts, dreams and minds, all our actions, adventures and plans are narrative: we are narrative. Our thoughts, feelings and intuitions come from and towards narrative. Even the most abstract kind of thought-works, or maths, are thought-stories or equation stories, for example. Myths could be defined as the stories we live by, to call their presence to hand here. To call them in this way is to engage with the world in an intense way, just as any writer aspires to do.

As Dudley Young suggests (see above), we have a choice of the stories we live, and we need, like we need food and water, to get the best and most nourishing stuff. Mythic stories, I believe, are the truest, weirdest, most potent,

most challenging, surprising, pointed stories we know – ones that deal with change, with human nature and moral resonance. These kinds of stories have an accumulated potency that can enhance our lives. Mythic stories repay our attention over and over – they are a form of inexhaustible wealth that can work for us now.

It might seem, then, an obvious thing to say, but, if someone else had written this book, it would have been different. A book about myth and its creative use, however, must insist on its difference as a principle, both of its purpose and nature. The self-renewing and adaptable aspect of old stories and symbols are their magic and their message. If this comes across, the book has served its purpose in passing on that sense of power, with its potential to sing, to sing again and anew.

My emphasis will always be from a writer's, practical point of view, aimed at all writing students and enthusiasts, to encourage them to find their own ways of discovery and enrichment. Feel free, then, to ignore me if I get too pedantic or prescriptive. Insist on creativity for me as well as for yourself.

This is a statement of freedom as much as a caveat. Beware anyone who lays down the law about writing and beware more anyone who lays down the law about myth. My story is for the same purpose as any good story: to open the mind to possibility.

### *Writing*

Write down a 'strange but true' story from you or someone you know. What does it tell you about change, about human nature, about the wild and the tame, the known and the unknown?

### *Reading*

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* (old); Dudley Young, 'Introduction' to *Origins of the Sacred* (new); *Myth*, by Laurence Coupe (critical).

### *My top ten key myth texts*

Soak yourself in these and add your own favourites:

1. Any good book of Greek and Roman myths.  
My favourites are Michael Grant's *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (1960) and Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths* (1955; revised 1960).

2. Books of myths from other cultures.  
These should include all and any you can find, even books of the World Myth kind, which give you a snapshot of many. Choose especially ones close to you, or your own interests.
3. A Classical Dictionary.  
Lempriere's (1864) is great, if you can get a modern reprint, and also find a good modern one.
4. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.  
Any version, but perhaps try an old one too, like Golding's, which was Shakespeare's favourite myth source book.
5. Books of fairytales.  
*Grimms, Perrault, Joseph Jacobs' English Fairy Tales, Andersen, Aesop's Fables, The Arabian Nights*, etc. Many of these are available on-line for free.
6. Books of local folklore.  
Books about your area, country, or others that interest you. Search your local library for local history and legends.
7. Sabine Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (1866).  
Loads of strange stories, including the Pied Piper and the Wandering Jew.
8. A good Dictionary of Symbols.  
Try the one by J.E. Cirlot (1971) or by Tom Chetwynd (1982).
9. The Bible and other religious texts.  
These are full of great symbolic stories.
10. Chambers' *Book of Days* (1864).  
A personal favourite, full of folklore and seasonal stories associated with each day. Modern selections are around and other books of days, or seasonal lore are useful.

Key texts to help you use *The Self-Renewing Song*:

Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* (1934).

The classic book of insight into the creative writing process.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

The greatest guide to the use and relevance of myth.

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Part One



MYTH AND THE  
CREATIVE PROCESS

*Each chapter concludes with suggestions for writing, and for readings of old, new and critical texts.*

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## Chapter 1

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# STARTING CREATION

### CREATION MYTHS

#### **The Tongue of Mist** (by A.M.)

Driving home at dawn  
I pulled over to a lay-by  
because a tongue of grey, silvery mist  
was curling around the river Colne  
waiting, its dark body gone with night  
close by the pallid movement of cars

On cue, the sun appeared  
and, having spoken its ethereal mystery  
of the ordinary, miraculous day's arrival  
in a breath of light, the tongue of mist  
vanished away

Who am I to deny  
being bespoke fresh  
in Remembrance Avenue  
beside the dumb intention of traffic  
on just another Monday morning?

**T**his poem of dawn, perhaps a most obvious theme, nevertheless attempts to give a sense of the wonder of creation, of the mystery of life itself, embodied in a natural image. The language of creation is one of wonder, of dark and light, of experiencing something beyond, but close to, the bounds of normal human experience. This is the language of myth and the language of religious myth. Writers, in their attempts to make the world fresh, take part