The Politics of Fairy Tales

One of the commonest insults one can lobby at other people’s religions is likening it to a fairy tale. Of course, this isn’t limited simply to religion, but to politics at large. If a politician wants to discredit one’s political opponents, one can’t go wrong with bandying about terms like fairy-tale and mythology. Perhaps what this speaks of, is an age of much division in politics and religion, it is strangely unified on our condemnation of fairy-tales and mythology.

It seems that whatever your particular worldview, one that is religious or entirely materialist, it requires one to believe in miraculous events, and happened outside one’s personal experience. In Christianity this is the creation of the world, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ etc. For the person who believes in evolution, it is the belief in species changing from one to another, in terms of Jordan Peterson, the evolution from lobster to human being. These stories are the things from which Fairy-tales and mythology is made.

This created a strange contradiction in the modern world, of people whose primary stories, the narratives which speak of their origins as being supernatural, a story in which the natural world has been intervened with at some point, to them having a contempt in public life for the fantastical, on the basis of it not being real. This contempt for the imagination, has an aesthetic underpinning, a modern belief that originated in the nineteenth century, where naturalism, presenting the world as nothing short of the truth, was the highest expression of art. Some people have quibbled about this, notably Oscar Wilde, who believed the world was becoming a duller, and depressing place, due to what he termed as being ‘The Decay of Lying’. Artists were being praised for creating works of art that were journalistic in content, reflecting the world back to the reader, as grim and deprived as it often was. The school of realism is often associated with Charles Dickens, though this isn’t necessarily so, and although there is much social criticism in his works, there is also caricature, fairy-tale endings, and sentimentality. These aspects come to most of Dicken’s art help to raise his art above the charges of an unimaginative literature, concerned solely with social justice. Although this mode of literature came to fruition in the 19th and 20th century with writers such as Zola, Chekhov, and Dreiser.

Not long after this, the only viable form of literature for the serious artistic expression for the artist was a true to life mimesis, something that was ingested by the people at large. In time this state of mind spilled over into the realm of religion and politics. The charges against one’s political opponents became a blasé repetition of an in-vogue literary paradigm.

My main beef with this, in which the fantastical, and the imaginative, are seen as being inferior modes of narrative fiction, is that it says far more about us than it says about literature as a whole. The majority of literature that has been written throughout the ages has not been believable, being fantastic tales, where magic is as common as breathing, set in uncanny settings, as make-believe as a dream. The literature of before was not interested in mirroring the drab reality of their society back to the reader.

Realism seems to be a wholly modern concept, one that has usurped the possibilities of what literature could be, its ability to speak of places not of this world, ones envisaged. There is a kind of proof to the way in which the realism of the modern novel has become normalised. In the 20th century, sub-genres of literature were invented, one’s so as to differentiate the work of writers from the expected mode of literature. These included genre’s such as fantasy, science-fiction. There was an expectation that the kind of writing that presented what was, with nothing added or subtracted had the benefit of being treated with a degree of seriousness that was lost on other works.

Although we can recognize a work such as those that were written by Jonathan Swift as being serious works, it would be dismissed from this in the modern day, due to the fantastical elements. It would probably be filed away under the fetishistic category of fantasy.

This thinking has unfortunately spread out into the world of politics, a world where the realistic, the unimaginative, and the dull is revered. Could realism, the elevation of the actual, explain the failure of modern architecture, that seems to be dull and matter of fact.

If literature is to have an effect on society, at least as it relates to this day and age, it couldn’t have done so in a more questionable way, than this cult of realism, seeing as in a literary lifespan, it is a fresh-faced form, at least compared with the fantastical tale, which comprises some of the earliest extant works.

In the Greek, the word logos, which has many meanings, including truth, logic, and mathematics, one of its meanings is story or tale. The stories told, were of value which they are synonymous with truth, not necessarily a literal truth, though a psychological and cosmic one. This often-involved tales of men going to the underworld; the transformation of one thing into another, such as in Ovid’s metamorphoses; the waking up from a sleep upon the finding of love. In modernity, the worth of such tales seem undervalued, modern education played a big part in undermining the study of literature, where now it is viewed as being a way of teaching children about oppressed people, and bringing about social progress. Most television shows seemed obsessed with this wokeness, where the value of art can be measured pragmatically, in numbers of lives it improved.

If one looks at the history of literature, literature seems to be quoting other literature, particularly myths and fairy-tales, and it often uses these as being the outline of their work. Milton’s work constantly references a variety of works from classical antiquity both Christian and pagan. When one compares this to our day and age, there isn’t this obsessive quoting of some of the realist protagonists of literature by modern poets. Even some artists who write in the form of prose realism notice its inferiority to some of the more ancient forms. Saul Bellow in his Nobel Prize speech: *No one who has spent years in the writing of novels can be unaware of this. The novel can’t be compared to the epic, or to the monuments of poetic drama. But it is the best we can do just now. It is a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter.*

This reverence for realism, may have nothing to do with literature or the history of taste whatsoever, but rather a scientific materialist worldview, that was interested in the physical world, and quite curiously denied other aspects of existence. With a desire to know more about the world as it is, it seems as if the cult of realism was born. In a mistrust of supernaturalism, the imagination. The artist then was free to carry on his work in much the same way as the scientist did his, looking at the world and describing what was seen. Literature then turned into a glorified echo chamber, reflecting the world of the public back to them, giving them scenes and language common to experience. This was perhaps worse than this, seeing as it multiplied a world that was dull and drab back to the reader, like a mirror reflecting an ugly countenance.

The value that literature has had on society seems to be a pejorative one, likening the religion and politics which is not one’s tastes, to some of the earliest, surviving and most enduring, universal works of literature. Perhaps this mistrust of the fairy tale comes from an implied assumption of the fairy tale containing an idealised reality, one of wish-fulfillment. Although this isn’t necessarily the case with Fairy tales, as many had dark themes and endings. Perhaps where the idea of fairy-tales being concerned with make-believe and painless worlds come from the interpretations of many of these stories, where the stories were altered, so as to not upset the expectations of the audiences, true to William Dean Howells belief “What the American public wants in the theater is a tragedy with a happy ending.”

For instance, Disney’s ‘The Little Mermaid’, deviates from the story written by Hans Christian Andersen. In it, after Ariel does a deal with Ursula, to give her human legs in exchange for her voice. Ariel tries to win the heart of Eric, the person whom she saved, and after many twists in the tale, it ends with them becoming married.

This deviates away from the original story, when a witch sells her potion that gives her legs in exchange for her voice. She lets her know that taking the potion will be agonising, and when she walks it will feel treading on glass. One side of the bargain is that once she becomes human there is no going back. She takes the potion, and after getting to know the prince, she finds out that he is arranged to marry a princess from a neighbouring kingdom, he is against this, believing he can only marry the girl who saved him. He learns that the girl who saved him is the girl who he is arranged to marry. After all she did, she is rejected by the prince. The Little Mermaid's sisters come to the surface of the ocean and hand her a knife that they got from the witch, in exchange for their hair. They tell her, if she kills the prince with the dagger, she will be reunited with her family, and will once again be a mermaid. She feels she can’t do this, and throws herself in the ocean where she becomes foam, and realises she has turned into a spirit. She is given the chance to be an immortal soul by doing good deeds for humans for 300 years.

This story deviates from the simplistic Disney-fied version, where the heroine of the story achieves her intentions of marrying the prince, where they then live happily ever after. All of the horrific elements of the story that provide it with depth and meaning are stripped from it, leaving a palatable tale, showing a false representation of reality. One of the reasons that fairy-tales have value, is that can show a particular law as it relates to life, this is law that one thing can’t be gained, without losing another. There is a kind of balance to the world. As in this tale, the little mermaid can’t become human without it being painful, and without losing her voice. This law, can be seen throughout the tale, as when her sister’s give away their hair, for the knife in order to kill the Prince, that will make her a mermaid once again.

In her pursuit of love, she was taking a risk, and this risk didn’t necessarily pay-off. In the pursuit of love, as the little mermaid found out, there is always the risk of rejection, through loyalties that aren’t necessarily shared, one is always made vulnerable in the pursuit of love. The original Hans Christian Andersen version, captures truths about love, that are universal in nature. That in love you are putting your life on the line, it is as if you’re willing to give up everything in your life in order for love, for the little mermaid, she gives up her family, the ability to be a mermaid, and when she is rejected in favour of someone else, she throws herself in the sea, thus killing herself. The person who one is in love with, becomes like a sun one orbits, the source from which your life is dependent. The original fairytale captures this reality in a way that the Disney version, in an attempt to play to the crowd, loses. The meaning of stories, may not be clear, it takes a critical ability, one not necessarily nurtured in the modern education system, perhaps on the false Marxist assumption that free thinking is a bourgeoise tool to maintain the status quo.

Literature became not about understanding what the artist was trying to say, and uncover the meaning of texts, but rather showing how certain works of literature express the reader’s own political ideology.

Perhaps where primitive, older works of literature have had their largest influence is in psychology. Many myths from ancient Greece in particular have become a part of the nomenclature of everyday speech. Narcissism is a way of explaining someone who is vain, who has an unhealthy love of himself, as in the tale that was told by Ovid. The Oedipal Complex, was derived from the plays by Sophocles, about Oedipus, a man who kills his Father and unwittingly marries his Mother. In depth psychology, although there was an attempt to understand the meaning that was under many stories, the meaning of which was lost on, or undervalued by the public at large, though classics of literature became part and parcel of psycho-babble.

In Freud, the stories, that were an attempt to explain an eternal, unwavering human nature, became pathologised. They were seen as being complaints which people were afflicted, and they couldn’t change. This probably went against the intentions of the people who wrote such works, and in the 20th century, literature was being read in a completely novel way, with of course the rise of psychotherapy. The influence of literature, and myth in particular, began to be seen as a key which tried to uncover the self. Although this view of mythology expressing the neurotic elements of human beings, did much to explain the presence of primitive stories in cultures. They were there to prove psychological disorders, complexes of the mind, and madness. Rather than explaining the value of literature, the reason why certain stories became canonical due to the truth in which they conveyed, their true meaning was to be found in explaining a neurosis that was common, in varying degrees, to all human beings.

I’m not sure if one could say that this added or subtracted from the study of literature, in many respects it did what a lot of modern scholarship did, which was an attempt to debunk certain cultural relics, by trying to uncover why such works of literature have been fascinating to so many people. In Jungian psychology, the recurrent stories cropped up through what he defined as being the collective unconscious. These stories are seen in cross-cultural mythology, where supposedly recurrent patterns occur. These views seem to come out of the invention of the 19th century of Anthropology, when a scientific approach was given to the study of literature. This born out of the belief that only the natural world exists, and thus one’s beliefs, customs and culture are manifestations of the mind, then one culture couldn’t be inherently better than any others. In the 19th and 20th century James George Frazier wrote a series of books entitled ‘The Golden Bough’, in which he attempted to conduct a comparative study of mythology, to show the similarities of all primitive religions. The book in its day caused controversy, likening Christ to one amongst many other figures of world religions. It is accurate to say that out of this study of comparative mythology, the basis of depth psychology, and an understanding of the unconscious mind was formed. In Jung, if there could be said to be similarities in stories throughout culture, then they must be coming from the same source. Seeing as there are recurrent dreams, then there are recurrent myths. He said that these stories arise from a collective unconscious as distinct from the Freudian personal unconscious.

I have often doubted if this is so, as it seems to create a reductionist and simplified view to the artistic process. In the belief that all stories come from an unconscious, therefore it implies that the more a story resembles the formless incoherence of sleep, then the more authentic it is as a story. There are many flaws with this methodology one of them being that there is no distinction between folk-art and fine-art. In primitive art, there tends to be a characteristic roughness to its appearance, and fine-art tends to veer towards being more stylized and refined. Another flaw to this is if all stories are manifestations of the collective unconscious are equally valid, then there are no distinctions to be made amongst stories, no value-judgements. It gives literature a democratising effect, albeit in the worst way. The more popular a work became, the more it was seen as representing timeless truths. Harry Potter was popular because it was good, and presumably other works sold poorly because they were bad. Sometimes good works sell well, and sometimes they don’t, the sales of a work says nothing about its quality. Although this became assumed, although no one applied this standard to other forms of entertainment, no one said of Jerry Springer Show, or Love Island, that its popularity was down to the truth it conveyed. Perhaps all of this attests to the lack of worth that the public gave to stories and to value of literature, where its criticism succumbed to a kind a populism that they wouldn’t give to day-time television.

With words such as fairy-tale and mythology used as attacks against one’s political enemies, the pathologising of the Greek canon by Freud, and equating of popularity with truth, it’s fair to say that there is an indifference to literature, and fairy-tales. One can say that we live in something of a philistine age, where most are of the belief that stories add nothing to the life of the reader. That their life will be the same if they never read anything. Although I think one of the values of art, is it that can provide consolation, articulating thoughts, and showing the reader their experience. It can also instruct and teach people about the world, reality, human nature, and natural law.

People have often told me that I should get into politics. I can’t ever see myself doing this, modern politics tends to frustrate me. I tried to figure out why this is, and the best I can tell is because people don’t understand certain aspects of the world, a world that is articulated in fairy-tale. Perhaps fairy-tales have been told to children, because they have this instructive quality. In politics, particularly liberal politics, there is a desire to change the world, to make it better than the one they have. Many radical policies, have achieved change, though as much as they have made life better in one sense, they have made it worst in quite another. Much liberal policy having what is defined as being unintended consequences. Many liberals, have these cosmopolitan, open-borders policies, but they can’t for the life of them, understand why wages have stagnated, it is difficult for the young to find work, and why it is impossible for people to own property. Or Why there are high concentrations of wealth amongst an increasingly small amount of people. Well that is the cost of having unrestricted mass-immigration. In the varying retellings of the story of Faust (actually based on an historical person), in order for him to have unlimited power and knowledge, he must sell his soul. That one cannot receive something without relinquishing another, in every gain there’s a balancing loss.

Most people with a wish to change the world, are unaware of this reality, that they can change the world to make it a better place and then are dumbfounded to find out, that the world they are living in is unrecognisable. They perhaps don’t realise that they are responsible for the injustice that they are railing about. That many social problems have been created by people wishing to do good, with ideals of how they wish the world to be.

This can also be seen in the Feminist agenda, where many people have interpreted history as men oppressing women. The reason why women were expected to stay in the house, rather than go out and compete with their husbands in the job market was because men were seen as being more privileged than them. There has been a push to get more and more women into education, and in the workforce, although this had an effect, and the more educated women became, the less men they found eligible to marry. Seeing as women have a tendency to marry up or across in terms of social worth, they were seen as being inferior. When a woman gets a promotion, the more likely she is to initiate divorce. All of these factors, led to less and less marriages, and below replacement level birthrates. Just like in the fairy-tale, when the little mermaid wishes become human, she can’t have the privilege of being a human, of having legs, without the pain walking on shattered legs whenever she walks. Very few people in the media, wish to acknowledge that an advance in one area, has caused a regress in quite another. There is thus a failure to acknowledge this reality, that things have changed against the wishes of those who favoured the change. Perhaps in terms of feminism, societies were structured in the way they were, was because it helped fulfill a social contract, to raise families, so a society changes and replicates itself throughout generations. In the fable ‘The Scorpion and the Frog’, a scorpion asks the frog if can he transport him across the river. The frog being hesitant over this, as the scorpion may sting him. The scorpion says that it is not in his best interests to sting him, seeing as it will make the both of them. The frog agrees to take the scorpion across the river. Midway through the journey the scorpion stings the frog. The frog asks “why did you sting me?,” and the scorpion replies that “It is my nature.”

The feminist project, which attempts to make women the same as men, albeit under the notion of equality, doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge that there are differences in gender, that men and women are not fundamentally the same. This perhaps is rooted in a Marxist denial of nature, believing that human beings were as malleable as gold, that everything that manifested itself across the sexes was social determined. Women were no more nurturing than men, and men were no stoic than women. Although I think that in societies such as we are living in, we are reaping the fruits of feminism, the flowers of freedom. If men and women were the same, indistinguishable aside the outward dressing, then men would only wish to date women that are their social betters, and would initiate divorce proceedings when they are promoted, but there is no evidence that this is a trait amongst men. Phyllis Schlafly said that "Feminism is doomed to failure because it is based on an attempt to repeal and restructure human nature."

Strangely enough, the study of literature has an importance in Marxist philosophy. Literature is seen as either being works which are subversive to the status quo, or works that represent it, - being attempts to continue on bourgeoise values. To the Marxist, literature is not written by individuals with an attempt at conveying truth, but rather the work is nothing more than a mouthpiece for the writer’s social class, and the ideology of the author. If literature is seen as being a social institution, and all people are molded by institutions, then literature is a tool in which the consciousness of man can alter. This perhaps shows the transformation, the overhaul of institutions of the west, including the study of literature. In University the study of literature has transformed into an almost exclusively a Marxist affair, it is seen as a way of shaping minds of students, of molding the way they look at the world, in relation to their own political proclivities. Classics of literary achievement such as Shakespeare and Dickens have been thrown out, for the 5th rate work of avowed revolutionaries such as Brecht. It also shows that this thinking, this desire to put out as many books by as many diverse groups of people of possible, has spilled over into publishing. If books written are nothing but representations of the race/ gender/ sexual orientation of the author, and people are a product of institutions of a society, then a world in which there are a variety of writers who are different, would be paramount in the creation of a fairer, more equal world. There are open calls by publishers for books written by Transgenders, and other minorities. Though with this as being the only criteria in which to judge the worth of a book, one can’t be surprised that the quality of writing of the average book published in this day and age is of the quality that would make Dan Brown blush. Although if one believes in the questionable assumption that works of writers of the past attained their position for no other reason than their social class, then why would they have to learn how to develop their craft? This reversion into a state of semi-literacy, is ironically at a time when higher education is open to more and more people. Although in letting in so many people there probably needed to be a dip in quality.

All great literature, from the folkloric to the epic, is an attempt to represent human nature, or the nature of the world. If a society, such as the one we are currently living in, begins to deny there is such a thing as nature, then what will be the fate of literature? Its value will wane in the collective mind of a society. Perhaps it will be hurled as a term of abuse, something glibly thrown about to one’s political opponents, to worldviews of those who you don’t subscribe.