Otherworld Journeys

Motifs F0–F199

There are generally three otherworlds to which heroes in myth, legend, and folktale journey: the upper world (F10), the lower world (F80), and the earthly paradise (F111), although these are not always clearly distinguished from one another, and as Thompson remarks, sometimes the direction in which the journey to the otherworld is made is very vaguely indicated (1977, 147). But the vagueness only adds to the sense of wonder in a journey to a world beyond the quotidian one; indeed, these journeys are classified under Chapter F, "Marvels."

THE UPPER WORLD

The nature of the upper world varies. It may be conceptualized as heaven (A661, "Heaven. A blissful upper world"), or it may be a place of peril or unhappiness, such as the star-world (F15, "Visit to star-world"), the land of the moon (F16, "Visit to land of moon"), or the land of the sun (F17, "Visit to land of the sun"). These worlds are accessed by ladder (F52), tree (F54), plant (F54.2), or a sky-window (F56). Transportation to or from the upper world can be by a cloud (F61.1), a feather (F61.2), smoke (F61.3.1), or by being carried by a bird (F62), a deity (F63), heavenly maidens (F63.1), or an angel (F63.2).

An example of a journey to an upper world is contained in "The Star Husband Tale," one of the most prevalent tales in North America. There are several versions, and in all of them a girl travels to the star-world (F15, "Visit to star-world") and usually marries a star (Thompson 1966, 126–130). In some versions, this upper world is reached by climbing a tree (F54, "Tree to upper
world”). While the girl lives in the upper world, often there is a taboo against digging (CS23, “Digging tabu”), and when she ignores it and digs, the girl finds that she is able to see down to her home on earth. She then plans to escape, with varying degrees of success. Sometimes escape is possible by being lowered down in a big basket (F51, “Sky rope”).

In the English folk tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” (AT 328A, AT 555, AT 852), Jack plants some beans that grow overnight into a gigantic beanstalk, which he climbs to the upper world (F54.2, “Plant grows to sky”). He comes to a giant’s castle where his adventures continue for three days. When the giant chases him, Jack descends the beanstalk and cuts it down, and the giant falls to earth and is killed.

There are also folktales in which the upper world is clearly the Christian Heaven, for example, The Smith and the Devil (AT 330), The Tailor in Heaven (AT 800), and Master Pfrim (AT 801). These stories originated in the jestbooks of the Renaissance and were taken over by storytellers (Thompson 1977, 149).

THE LOWER WORLD

Access to the lower world can be through a door or gate (F91), a pit, hole, spring, or cavern (F92), a mountain (F92.4), cave (F92.6), well (F93.0.2.1), or path (F95). Sometimes a person is swallowed up by the earth and taken to the lower world (F92.2). In folktales the lower world tends to be a nebulous place vaguely under the earth and inhabited by unusual denizens, but it will not be a frightful place of death.

An example of this kind of otherworld is found in the well-known tale type, AT 480, The Spinners by the Well. In the version collected by the Grimms, “Frau Holle,”

the despised younger daughter sits spinning by a well and loses her shuttle in the water. Being scolded by her mother, she jumps into the well to recover it. She loses her senses and awakes in the lower world. In reply to various appeals, she milks a cow, shakes an apple tree, takes bread out of an oven, and the like. At last she takes service with a witch, and she is so industrious that she pleases the witch. (Thompson 1977, 125)

The girl eventually returns home with a reward and her sister jumps into the well to claim hers, but being unkind and haughty, she refuses to do any work and is punished.

A tale told by the Chaga of Africa also has the motif of entering the underworld through water. A girl and her brother are tending a field to keep monkeys away. They leave briefly to get a drink at a pool and the monkeys come and eat everything. The girl, in despair of her parents’ anger, jumps into the pool. She sinks down until she comes to the underworld, where she finds an old woman living in a hut, with whom she lives and works for a long time, but eventually she wishes to return home. The old woman grants permission and asks a mysterious question: whether the girl would prefer the hot or the cold. The girl chooses the cold, digs her arms and legs into a cold pot, and instantly her limbs are covered with gold bangles. The story diverges from the pattern of AT 480 at this point, since her brother does not also go to the underworld upon her return. The story does, however, include jealousy of her riches by neighbors, but in typical fairy-tale fashion the girl finds a husband and lives happily ever after (Parrinder 1967, 64–65).

The Chaga also have a story about a little girl who goes out to cut grass, steps in a quagmire, and sinks down to a lower world, singing “The spirits have taken me.” Attempts to retrieve her are unsuccessful, but after a time a tree grows up from the spot where she disappeared, until it reaches the sky (F54, “Tree to upper world”). Some boys climb the tree, saying that they are going to the world above. They too are never seen again, but the tree remains, and the people call it Mdi Musum, the story-tree (Scheuβ 2000, 2).

The Land of the Dead

Vivid descriptions of the underworld as the land of the dead, which is forbidden to mortals, are found in the myths, legends, and epics of many different cultures (F81, “Descent to the lower world of death”). The motif of the descent to the lower world of the dead evolved quite early into a vehicle for philosophical and theological speculation.

In its basic form, the descent to the underworld serves merely as a means of describing an exotic world not known directly by the living, or as a test of the hero’s mettle. Used in more complex fashion, the hero’s descent is a means of gaining knowledge or power and represents anxiety about death and what might happen after life. Many journeys to the underworld are either an actual or a symbolic death of the hero, who usually returns to his people.

The related motif of a journey to the land of the dead to rescue a beloved or important person addresses even more clearly anxiety about death and the desire to conquer or overcome death’s awesome power. “A test of strength between love and death is at the base of the legends and myths in which one left behind in this world follows the beloved or relative to the land of no return” (Siikala 1987, 303). The myth of Orpheus, who journeys to the underworld to rescue his wife Eurydice and bring her back to life, epitomizes this motif (F81.1, “Orpheus. Journey to land of dead to bring back person from the dead”). After gaining permission to leave the underworld with Eurydice,
Orpheus ultimately fails in his mission because he disobeys the injunction of the god of the underworld, Hades, not to look back at her as they make their way to the upper world. The story is extremely widespread in folklore around the world and has been used in elite literature as well. Other examples of rescue from the underworld in Greek myth are Dionysus rescuing his mother, Semele, and Herakles rescuing Theseus and Ascalaphus during his twelfth labor, which is to seize Cerberus, bring him up to Eurytheus, and then return him to the underworld. Unlike the case of Orpheus, these rescues are successful, as is the one recounted in a Chinese tale called "Husband and Wife in This Life and in the Life to Come," in which a man goes on a journey in search of his dead wife. Stopping at an inn to inquire the way to the land of the dead, the husband is told to wait for his wife at the well. After some time, he does indeed see her shade approach. In time they are able to flee the underworld, and, after his wife is reincarnated as the baby daughter of a couple in whose house they stop, he is able to be reunited with her again on earth (Eberhard 1965, 31–33). In Maori tales, heroes are successful in rescuing their loved ones by deceiving the guardians of the underworld and escaping (Sikala 1987, 303).

The oldest recorded example of F81.1 is probably contained in the Sumerian texts relating to Inanna (she is Ishtar in later Babylonian texts). Although she is queen of heaven and earth, Inanna becomes jealous of her sister Ereshkigal’s role as queen of the dead and the underworld (Wolkstein and Kramer 1983, 61). Dressed in her sovereign finery, she sets out on “the road from which no traveler returns” (55) and makes her way to Ereshkigal’s palace. Forced to surrender her garments in seven stages, Inanna places herself unwittingly in the power of the angered Ereshkigal and is turned into “a piece of rotting meat . . . hung from a hook on the wall” (60). When the great gods intervene, Ereshkigal is forced to relent, with the proviso that Inanna must find a substitute to take her place among the dead, and she returns to the upper world accompanied by demons who will take the substitute back to the underworld. After she pleads with the demons not to take several of her associates, she notices that Dumuzi, her consort, is not properly dressed for mourning, and she angrily instructs the demons to take him. After some farcical shape-shifting in which he escapes several times, Dumuzi is finally struck dead by the demons and whisked off to the underworld (71–84). Becoming remorseful, Inanna laments her decision, and a bargain is finally struck in which Dumuzi will spend half of each year in the underworld with Ereshkigal and half with Inanna on earth (85–89).

While many commentators regard the story of Dumuzi’s cyclical departure and return as a form of vegetation myth, the Sumerian texts offer no clear indication that the original audience would have viewed them as such. The natural cycle interpretation seems much better suited to the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, retold in a number of Greek and Latin texts, most notably the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and Claudian’s De raptu Proserpinae. The motif is F92.2.1, “Girl gathering flowers swallowed up by earth and taken to lower world.” Persephone’s underworld journey is, like Dumuzi’s, involuntary, since she is abducted by Hades. Demeter is a cereal goddess, and when she is in mourning for the loss of her daughter she halts fertility not only in the fields but also among humans and animals, something Inanna is unable or unwilling to do. Finally Zeus intercedes and Persephone is restored to Demeter for two-thirds of the year, upon which Demeter renews the crops and thereafter they die only during the period of each year when Persephone is in the underworld. It is known that this myth was connected with an ancient fertility ritual held every autumn in Eleusis, near Athens. Persephone epitomizes the descent to the lower world and the return, signifying the cyclical nature of life in the yearly rebirth of vegetation.

In the Babylonian epic Gilgamesh, derived from older Sumerian myth from the second millennium BCE, the hero undertakes a difficult journey after the death of his beloved comrade Enkidu, hoping to discover the secret of eternal life from his ancestor Utnapishtim, who dwells not in the underworld but in a blessed isle beyond the waters and the mountains. The ardousness of Gilgamesh’s journey to this otherworld is characteristic of the journey to the underworld, and there are some parallels with the latter, particularly the crossing of a body of water with the help of a boatman. Gilgamesh ultimately fails in his quest for immortality, returning with the knowledge that one cannot cheat death and that one must make the most of the life the fates have decreed. He has also worked through his grief, so his emotional and intellectual equilibrium are both restored (Foster 2001, 72–95). Gilgamesh’s journey is described in more detail below in the section on the earthly paradise.

One of the most elaborate examples of the F81 motif is found in the great Quiche Mayan epic Popol Vuh. The heroes, a pair of twins named Hunahpu and Xbalanque, not only restore their father and uncle Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu (also twins) from death, but assert the control of the living over the dead. Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu had annoyed the death gods by constantly playing ball on a court that was the entrance to Xibalba, the underworld. The death gods lured them into the world below and sacrificed them. Eventually the next generation, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, take up handball and in their turn arouse the ire of the death gods. Summoned like their father and uncle to Xibalba, the twins deal much more cleverly with the underworld lords and learn their names (C432.1, “Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him”). After many trials, the young twins gain control of Xibalba and resurrect the remains of their father and uncle, who are then raised into the heavens to become the sun and the moon (Taube 1993, 56–62).
One of the best-known examples of the journey to the underworld is found in book 11 of the Odyssey of Homer. The ostensible reason for Odysseus’s visit to Hades is to consult the prophet Teiresias about the rest of the journey home, but since Circe pretty much tells Odysseus beforehand what he will learn from the seer, the episode serves mainly to underline the hero’s extraordinary qualities. (The phantom-shade of Heracles actually makes this point when he asks Odysseus what he will do to top this exploit.) While in the underworld, Odysseus’s interviews with the shades of his mother, Anticlea, Agamemnon, and Achilles connect the narrative with the broader Trojan legend. Odysseus tells the grieving shade of Achilles, the great hero of the Trojan War, that their comrades have honored him as a god, and that even in death he has great authority over the dead. Achilles replies “O Shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man . . . than be a king over all the perished dead.” (Lattimore 1975, 180). In the Finnish Kalevala, the culture hero Vainamoinen is one of several who make the arduous three-week journey to the dark territory of Tuonela, the Finno-Ugric nether world, but the only one who returns unharmed. The purpose of his journey is to learn the magic verbal formula that will allow him to complete the ship that will take him on his mysterious final journey. While he wisely refuses to drink the worm-infested beer offered him by Tuonela, queen of the dead, he does fall asleep. The son of Tuoni, king of the dead, then entrap him in an iron net, but Vainamoinen takes on the form of a serpent and makes his escape, having learned what he needs (Guiraud 1977, 305–306).

Werner notes that there are many stories throughout Bantu Africa of hunters pursuing animals into a burrow or hole that leads them to the abode of the dead (F92, “Pit entrance to lower world. Entrance through pit, hole, spring, or cavern”) (Werner 1925, 184).

Fairyland as Land of the Dead

There are some striking similarities between fairyland and the land of the dead. For example, the eating and drinking tabu applies to both places (C211.1., “Tabu: eating in fairyland”; C211.2., “Tabu: eating in lower world”), and Lewis Spence (1946) has argued that fairyland may in fact be a metaphor for the land of the dead since it is often located underground (F211, “Fairyland under a hollow knoll [prehistoric burial mound, hill, s’d’]). Some of the same rituals and prohibitions govern relations between mortals and fairies and mortals and the dead. For example, both fairies and the dead vanish or retreat at dawn; both groups lure mortals to them and both may be placated in the same way with gifts or offerings. Similarly, both fairyland and the world of the dead are marked by distorted time or timelessness (Silver 1999, 41–42). In the Scottish ballad Tam Lin, the mortal Tam Lin is abducted by the Queen of Fairies. Although he describes fairyland as “a pleasant place,” he says that every seven years the fairies make a sacrifice to hell, and he fears he will be the one sacrificed. He therefore enlists the aid of a mortal lover to pull him down from his horse when he rides in the fairy procession at midnight on Halloween and to hold him fast through various transformations until the spell he is under is broken and he can return to the everyday world.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The concept of an earthly paradise as a pleasant place, or locus amoenus (Curtius 1953, 192, 195)—sometimes a forest or valley but most often a garden—long predates Christianity and is found in virtually all mythologies and religions. It is also prominent in secular adventure or love tales and in the letters and diaries of explorers centuries later than Columbus, who was only one of many seeking a shorter route to the Indies, sometimes a half-conscious synonym for paradise. Even today there are individuals and groups who believe there is an earthly paradise. Current travel advertising exploits the desires and superstitions of skeptical customers by using terms like “tropical paradise.”

The definition, location, and topography of the earthly paradise have been subjects of debate for more than three millennia. Delumeau maintains that the word paradise, when used alone, originally “almost always meant the earthly paradise. For nearly three millennia, first the Jews and then Christians, with only a few exceptions, did not doubt the historical character of the story in Genesis about the wonderful garden that God caused to appear in Eden” (1995, 3). Religious texts, epics, romances, vision literature, apocalypses, and travel literature all describe journeys to an earthly paradise. The Old Testament, however, does not describe a journey to the earthly paradise; instead, Adam is placed there by God at Creation. The earthly paradise, a garden made at Creation as a residence and responsibility for Adam and Eve, is mentioned in Ezekiel 28 as having been lost through disobedience. Thus, the first biblical passages about the earthly paradise focus on man’s loss of it.

Although the distinctions between celestial and terrestrial paradies have become increasingly confused during four thousand years of tradition, the earthly paradise is not heaven, but another world, reachable by either mystical or mysterious physical means. The mystic modes are primarily prophetic or ecstatic visions or dream visions. The physical modes allow deserving people in an appropriately receptive state of soul (whether that state is induced by penitential or ecstatic feelings, psychological or spiritual need, prayer, or meditation) to fly, walk, ride, or sail to paradise while they are still alive.
The Ubiquitous Garden

The original word for paradise is the Persian apiri-Daeza, which means a walled orchard or garden (Delumeau 1995, 4). Kramer writes that the very idea of a paradise, a garden of the gods, is likely of Sumerian origin:

The Sumerian paradise is located... in Dilmun. It is in this same Dilmun where later, the Babylonians, the Semitic people who conquered the Sumerians, located their "land of the living," the home of their immortals. And there is good indication that the Biblical paradise, too, which is described as a garden planted eastward in Eden, from whose waters flow the four world rivers including the Tigris and Euphrates, may have been originally identical with Dilmun, the Sumerian paradise-land. (Kramer 1961, 102)

The journey of Gilgamesh, described above, may be the first recorded account of a journey to the earthly paradise. Gilgamesh undertakes a quest to find Utnapishtim, the only man who ever gained immortality. Gilgamesh travels into the mountains that guard the rising and setting of the sun and must walk through a dark tunnel under a mountain and cross "the waters of death" to reach Dilmun. Dilmun has traits that typify many earthly paradises. It is a garden filled with fruits and jewels where nothing ages or dies. It is an island at the confluence of two rivers. The Sumerian tale of Enki and Ninhursag calls Dilmun a land or island east of Sumer and describes it as "pure and bright" ("Paradise" 1973, 13.81). The Eden of Genesis is also a garden from which four rivers flow, and it is rich with plants and animals. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are present only in Genesis. The paradise God describes to Ezekiel (28:13 ff.) as one now lost to man is called Eden, "the garden of God." Perched on "the mountain of the lord," this garden is filled with the precious stones later repeated in Revelation as those adorning the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Greek models of paradise originate in Hesiod’s Works and Days (seventh century BCE) in the description of the golden age of Chronos. When the golden age was lost, only Arcadia remained as a beautiful, bucolic place. Arcadia endured in European literature through the Renaissance.

The loss of paradise is a common motif in myth and literature (A1331, "Paradise lost"), as is nostalgia for the lost paradise. Daemmrich writes, "Delumeau (153–66) connects the 'nostalgia for the lost paradise' to the abandonment of the search for the original earthly paradise during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, precisely the time of the rise of scientific inquiry" (Daemmrich 1997, 210).

In Greek and Roman culture, the physical site of paradise on earth was usually called either the Plains or Fields of Elysium or the Isles of the Blessed. Sometimes it was located in the mythic land of the Hyperboreans, which lay beyond Boreas, the North Wind. The Zoroastrian paradise is one of the multiple worlds typical of the metaphysical topography of the religion. Common to all of these paradises is luxuriant growth, prosperity and plenty, a harmonious coexistence between man and beast, as well as perpetual youth, spring, and fruitfulness.

Christian Visions of the Earthly Paradise

Two periods are probably richer in accounts of journeys to the earthly paradise than any others. The first is the period between the third century BCE and the second century CE. This was a time of turmoil, when such Old and New Testament visions as those of Enoch, Elijah, Baruch, the Apocalypses of Peter and Paul (caught up in body and/or soul into the third heaven), and the Apocalypse itself (Delumeau 1995, 23–25) were written. The second period is the twelfth century (Haas 1999, 455), when such influential visions as Tundale’s Vision and mystical journeys as Saint Brendan’s Voyage describe two modes of transport to the earthly paradise. While asleep, Tundale is led to seven otherworlds (Haas 1999, 456) by an angel. Saint Brendan’s Voyage, one of the Irish journeys that belong to the seafaring tradition, may actually have been written first as early as the sixth century, but was reproduced and varied many times in the twelfth. It recounts the story of a group of monks who sail to the land of the Saints (Haas 1999, 460).

“Nonfiction” Accounts

Several types of accounts or stories about the earthly paradise supported popular belief in it. One is the literature about Alexander. In the imperial Roman tradition of apotheosis, he took a journey to paradise in one fourth-century work. Another example was the famous twelfth-century hoax of the letter from a so-called Prester John, who claimed to be a Christian king in a paradisiacal land in Asia and summoned all Christians to come to his nation, a religious, political, and agricultural paradise on earth. Yet a third example was the encyclopedic tradition of geography found in much revered and reproduced sources like Isidore of Seville’s seventh-century Etymologiae and Vincent of Beauvais’s thirteenth-century Speculum maius. Finally, there was a body of travel literature, ranging from the accounts of Marco Polo to those of Sir John Mandeville, which located paradisiacal lands in the East, or in the Tigris and Euphrates area, or even, in the case of Irish folk tradition, in the west where the fairies lived. A belief in the reality of the earthly paradise was further bolstered by its appearance on medieval maps, where it sometimes appeared not too far from the center of the world map, Jerusalem.
Sometimes, the traveler arrives at the earthly paradise without any physical means of locomotion, as in the fourteenth-century English dream vision poem, Pearl. The narrator, mourning for a lost "child," falls asleep on her tomb and awakens to find himself confronting her in the form of a pearl maiden who appears on crystal cliffs separated from him by a jewel-strewn river. The writer seems to have been influenced by the most important dream vision in literature, Dante’s Divine Comedy, written less than a century earlier. The vision motif (Patch 1950, 81 ft.) found in Tandale’s and others’ visions is prevalent throughout the Middle Ages. However, the forms it takes become more varied as it ages. It is the format not only of such religious visions as St. Patrick’s Purgatory, but also of secular, consolatory visions like Chaucer’s Book of the Duchess and of love visions like The Romance of the Rose, in which the earthly paradise is a courtly love garden. The earthly paradise becomes a topos in many garden works and is even used ironically, as in Chaucer’s “The Merchant’s Tale.” The earthly paradise is one of the major forerunners of the utopian tradition, at its zenith in the sixteenth century when Thomas More’s Utopia gives its name to numerous ideal societies.

The nineteenth century, with its revolutionary industrial growth and its political, social, and scientific innovation, was a time for imagining social and economic paradies, of which William Morris’s The Earthly Paradise and H.G. Wells’s Modern Utopia were but two.

Earthly paradies continue to thrive in such current forms as accounts of near-death experiences, science fictions located on other planets, and spiritual or psychological searches for paradisial states of being. Whereas the travelers to the earthly paradise once walked, rode, sailed, or flew to these regions beyond their accustomed lands, they now fly in planes or space vehicles, to meditate, to cogitate, or even to inject themselves into the terrestrial paradies of the twenty-first century.

OTHER OTHERWORLDS

Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) begins with Alice following the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole (F92, “Pit entrance to the lower world”). Alice emerges in Wonderland, a world where absurdity and surrealism govern. “Other world inside the body of the person” (F133.66) was introduced as a new motif by El-Shamy, and it is found in medieval lore, especially in the writings of François Rabelais. “Submarine other world,” F133, is illustrated by Hans Christian Andersen’s famous tale “The Little Mermaid.” The novel Journey to the Center of the Earth by Jules Verne (1871) is an example of an otherworld journey in the modern science fiction mode (F15, “Journey inside the earth”). L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1899) includes a description of the otherworld to which Dorothy journeys from Kansas that reads very much like a description of an earthly paradise: “The cyclone had set the house down . . . in the midst of a country of marvelous beauty. There were lovely patches of green sward all about, with stately trees bearing rich and luscious fruits. Banks of gorgeous flowers were on every hand, and birds with rare and brilliant plumage sang and fluttered in the trees and bushes. A little way off was a small brook, rising and sparkling along between green banks” (Baum 1903, 20).

A brief medieval English lyric, despite naming a specific place, gives the impression of being an invitation to an otherworld.

I am of Ireland,
And of the holy land
Of Ireland.
Gode sire, preye I thee,
For of Seint Charitee
Come and daunce with me
In Ireland.

Speirs remarks:

The dancer from across the sea—from a sacred or magical other country—is still perhaps essentially a fairy or other world visitant (or a human impersonator of such a character) in the performed dance. . . . This particular song, chiefly by means of its rhythms and repetitions of sound, suggests to the reader a trance-like or rapt condition in the dancer whose song it is; consequently, a supernaturally compelling or appealing power seems to emanate from the dancer. (Speirs 1957, 60)

Since life can be conceptualized as a journey, it is not surprising that journeys, including those to otherworlds, should be common in folklore and literature.

John P. Brennan and Jane Garry (upper and lower worlds); Judith Neaman (earthly paradise); Honde A. Birkalan (otherworlds)

See also: Choice of Roads.

REFERENCES


Faries and Elves

Motifs F200–F399

Although there are creatures in world folklore and literature that are similar to those known in English as fairies, fairies are uniquely European, prominent in the cultures of Western Europe, especially in Celtic areas such as Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, and Brittany. In Germany and Scandinavia they are known as elves, nisses, neks, kobolds, and nixies. A few commentators identify the peris of Persian mythology and folklore with the fairies—mainly on the basis of false etymology (peri = feerie)—but they are not truly analogous. Originally beautiful female spirits, perceived as evil and held responsible for eclipses, droughts, and crop failures, peris later metamorphosed into benvolent figures whose special function was to guide human souls to paradise (Jones 1995, 345). In Islam and in pre-Islamic Arabia we find the jinn, supernatural beings but again not really like the fairies; for one thing, they are often invisible, formed from “smokeless fire.” Thompson classifies Indian bongas (F201) under fairies, stating that they are “roughly equivalent to fairies. Generally malevolent, but often not.” Eberhard’s 1965 collection of Chinese folktales includes several tales containing creatures that he calls fairies.

The word fairy or, more directly, fay is from late Latin fata or fatae, earlier fatum, meaning “fate.” The thirteen fairies who stood beside the cradle of the Sleeping Beauty in the “fairy tale” of that name are a direct link to their ancient foremothers, the Fates, who stood beside the cradle of Meleager in Greek mythology. These female beings were as powerful as the gods in presiding over human destiny.

In the European Middle Ages, the word fairy signified enchantment and the land where enchanted beings dwelt in addition to the inhabitants of this
land (Leach 1949 1, 363). They were thought to live alongside mortals, often in subterranean dwellings (F210, “Fairyland”; F211, Fairyland under a hollow knoll (mound, hill, sìd). A nineteenth-century commentator, Thomas Keightley, categorized fairies as “distinct from men and from the higher orders of divinities” (1850, 3). But whether they are called fays, fées (French), fairies, “the little people,” “the good folk,” or “the hidden people,” they have certain traits in common. They are generally invisible; they have the power of “glamour” with which they enchant or hypnotize; they are ordinarily smaller than humans, ranging from four feet to a few inches tall. They may be helpful and benign, destructive and malevolent, or merely capricious and mischievous. Though they are thought to excel humans in power, knowledge, and longevity, they are not immortal.

Fairies range from the beautiful and godlike Tuatha De Danann of the Irish to the naked, long-nosed, crude, and hairy little creatures known as boggarts. Nevertheless, there is some consensus about fairy types and traits. The elfin peoples are often divided into two general categories, those that belong to a group, race, or nation (what K.M. Briggs calls “trooping fairies”) and those that essentially dwell alone, “solitary” fairies (Briggs 1977, 131). Aristocratic groups and kingdoms appear to derive from Celtic sources, while the more common, homey dwarfs and household fairies seem to be part of England’s Germanic heritage. However, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian elves and dwarfs must also be included among the trooping fairies alongside the Scottish “Seelic” and “Unseelic Courts,” the Welsh Tylwyth Teg, and the Irish Sidhe or Tuatha De Danann. This last group, “the people of the hill” or “the children of the goddess Dana,” are widely celebrated in epic and legend. Ruled over by a queen more often than by a king, the social organization of these groups is hierarchical and strikingly similar to folk-fantasies of human royal courts. This fairyland is often depicted as a world without change, decay, illness, or aging. Here, one fairy day may be a hundred mortal years, and these fairies spend their days in lavish feasting, music, song, and dance, often luring mortals to join them. Fairies possess jewels and silken robes, fine horses, dogs and even cattle, and their life is one of ease and pleasure.

Fairies give birth and, although long-lived, die, but they are not blessed with either fertility or ease in childbirth—which may explain their thefts of mortal infants and their need for human nurses and midwives. They ride out in elegant processions called “Fairy Rades” (rides), though their purpose is less noble than their appearance, for they come to abduct human children. In general, they “seem” beautiful, but their appearance may be fraudulent—an effect of their power of “glamour” or illusion.

Individual or solitary fairies are very different. They include the “household familiar” varieties, including brownies, boggarts, Pucks, lobs, and hobs.
who drinks human blood, to the small, grotesque brownies—hairy, naked, and ugly but essentially helpful.

Fairy character is best described as capricious and amoral. Fairies love and reward cleanliness and order, yet have no qualms about stealing from human beings. They are known to take the “goodness” or essence out of milk and other foods; they steal the peas from the pods and take human possessions as well. Yet they are generous too and will reward mortals who aid them. They are passionate about protecting their privacy and severely punish those who spy on them or visit uninvited, but they are also capable of great hospitality. They are often wanly and highly sexual in nature; they take mortal lovers at whim and, in the case of the Hliamnon-shee (fairy mistress) of Ireland, literally destroy them with amorous attention. Capable of great kindness and goodness, they must be treated with politeness, respect, and, above all, with caution. At their worst, they are capable of powerful evil; they can paralyze with elf-shot or fairy-stroke and quite easily cause human suffering and death. Many of their actions, however, fall between these categories; fairies are mischievous, like the Cornish pixies who can playfully or dangerously lead travelers astray. They can be utterly capricious; in one frequently repeated tale, they remove the hump from one poor hunchback and place it on another human being.

Much of the folklore about fairies deals with their role as kidnappers (F320, “Fairies carry people away to fairyland”; F321, “Fairy steals child from cradle”). Other frequently told tales deal with the love between humans and fairies, usually in the form of the mortal man’s passion for and marriage to a fairy-bride. These stories generally follow the same pattern: a man captures, falls in love with, and weds a beautiful fairy. He is prohibited from certain actions; striking her with iron, mentioning her name, or seeing her at certain times. When he breaks the tabu, she leaves him and he either loses her for good or succeeds in regaining her after many tests and trials. There are also tales of mortals visiting the fairy world and of fairies appearing in the mortal world to ask for and receive human aid. Such tales, some still half-believed, may suggest the human need to think that we are not entirely alone on earth.

There have been numerous ideas on the origin of fairies. As early as the Middle Ages these elfin creatures were seen as fallen angels. A minority argued that the fairies were devils, but most believers suggested that they were those undecided angels who lacked the strength to either stand with God or fall with Satan. Some fell into the sea, becoming the mer-creatures of the waters; some fell into the caverns of the earth and became goblins, kobolds, and other evil beings; some fell into woods and forests, becoming elves, pixies, and the like. Another similar idea made them the children of Adam and Eve whose existence the couple denied to God, or even the pre-Adamite inhabitants of earth. In short, this “religious view” depicted the elfin peoples as morally indeterminate, not good enough for heaven or bad enough for hell, but constituting a second race inhabiting this world.

Equally common was the idea that fairies were a special category of the dead, either those who had died before their appointed time or those who had died unbaptized. Some thought them the spirits of extinct races, of the ancient Druids, of those drowned in the biblical flood, and, generally, of the pagans who had died before Christ’s dispensation. A more modern occultist explanation makes them the souls of the recent dead, locked in a transitional phase between lives, awaiting reincarnation or transportation to the astral plane. Lewis Spence in British Fairy Origins (1946) makes a good case for the belief in fairies stemming from a cult of the dead. Their small size may be correlated with the traditional depiction of the soul as smaller than the person from whom it issues; the dwellings of fairies and those of the dead (within barrows, hills, or other subterranean realms) are similar; the same stories are told of both groups, and many place persons believed dead in fairyland, coexisting with the fairies. Interestingly, the same rituals and prohibitions govern relations with fairies and the dead; both are night-creatures who must vanish or retreat at daybreak; both groups lure mortals to them and both may be placated in the same way with gifts or offerings. Similarly, both fairyland and the world of the dead are marked by distorted time or timelessness; in each, mortals are forbidden to taste food or drink (C211.1, “Tabu: eating in fairyland”) (Silver 1999, 41-42).

Another premise, now less frequently maintained, holds that fairies are diminished forms or “trickled-down” versions of the ancient British, Celtic, and classical gods and goddesses. Gods and heroes, reduced in stature and importance as new faiths are substituted for belief in them, became the elfin tribes. Thus Queen Medb, a female hero of Irish epic, becomes Queen Mab of fairyland. Another view derives fairies from the nature spirits worshiped by humans in the early stages of civilization when “animism” prevailed, so that a local water-spirit would later be anthropomorphized into an undine or mermaid.

Some of the most interesting theories are euhemeristic, that is, speculations that myths and folk beliefs stem from actual historical persons and events. In this view, fairies derive from folk memories of earlier or aboriginal inhabitants of a given country. David MacRitchie popularized this idea in The Testimony of Tradition (1890), a book in which he argued for the existence of the fairies as memories of a small, primitive, pre-Celtic race forced into caves and mounds as well as into nocturnal habits, thefts, and rapid flight by their Celtic conquerors.

Modern spiritualists, theosophists, and Rosicrucians have added to the number and variety of origin theories by suggesting that fairies are the elementals
of Paracelsus and seventeenth-century alchemists and magicians. The latter groups had argued that each element was ruled by a resident spirit: sylphs were made of air, gnomes of earth, salamanders of fire, and undines or nymphs of water. Mystics and occultists conflated the elementalis with the fairies of folklore and believed them influential in séances, poltergeist occurrences, and other psychic phenomena. After Darwin, some believers argued that fairies were simply life-forms existing on another branch of the tree of evolution; though invisible to humans, they were fellow occupants of earth. Supporters of this theory, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose book *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922) widely publicized photographs of elfin creatures, thought them little nature-spirits whose special function was to fertilize and tend plants and flowers.

**FAIRIES IN LITERATURE**

Beginning with an ancient Anglo-Saxon charm against elf-shot, fairies have been chronicled in literature. They appear in Arthurian romance and in other medieval works, including *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Huon of Bordeaux*. Some of these stories made their way into ballads and may be found in a number of the English and Scottish ballads in E.J. Child's collection, especially "King Orfeo," "The Elfin Knight," "Tam Lin," "The Wee Wee Man," "Thomas Rhymer, Thomas of Erceldoune," and "The Queen of Elfin's Nourice." In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (late fourteenth century), the Wife of Bath, recounting a tale set in the time of King Arthur, remarks that, at that time, "Al was this land fulful of fayere. / The elf-queue, with hir joly comaignye, / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mowe." She goes on to acknowledge that "I speke of manye hundred yeres ago" and that because of the prevalence of Christianity, the elves and fairies have gone away. Nevertheless, "true" accounts of their actions may be found in the chronicles and histories of Ralph of Coggeshall, Gervase of Tilbury, and Walter Map, as well as in the later account of The Secret Common-wealth of Elves, Fains, and Fairies (1691), by the Reverend Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle (Briggs 1967). They appear in several of Shakespeare's plays, most notably in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Tempest*. Fairies are revivified in the poetry of the Romantics (especially in the work of John Keats) and in the paintings of the Victorian fairy-painters, including Richard Dadd, John Anster Fitzgerald, and Sir Joseph Noel Paton. The Victorians had a fascination with fairies arising from the nineteenth-century study of folklore, which especially attracted the Irish writers and folklorists of the Celtic revival, including William Butler Yeats, AE (George Russell), Patrick Kennedy, Lady Wilde, and Lady Gregory. In an 1898 article in the periodical *Nineteenth Century*, Yeats wrote that there is not a place outside of the large Irish towns "where they do not believe that the Fairies, the Tribes of the goddess Danu, are stealing their bodies and their souls" (Yeats 1976, 2:56). In Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* (1869), as Natasha and her brother are driving home after a day in the countryside, Natasha says that she has been thinking in the darkness that they might arrive not at their home, but in fairyland (Book 7, Part 7). This little fantasy is poignant because Natasha is on the brink of marriage, perhaps not quite ready to give up her childhood. She also adds, "I know that I shall never again be as happy and tranquil as I am now," and, indeed, her life, and the lives of all the people of Russia, are soon to be turned upside down by war.

The fairies survive in contemporary literature, playing roles in books by such figures as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Angela Carter, and Tanith Lee, and they live on in contemporary life in their newest transformation—as the huge-eyed, small gray creatures visiting from other worlds in their UFOs.

See also: Abductions.

**REFERENCES**


Water Spirits

Motif F420

Traditional cultures everywhere associate water with supernatural beings, and understandably so, given the necessity of water for all life; the ever-changing appearance of rivers, lakes, and oceans; obvious but rarely predictable connections between water and weather; and the inability of humans to exist more than a few minutes submerged, while other living beings thrive under water. Furthermore, wells and springs are entryways (although virtually impassible by humans) into underground realms and to whatever secrets they might contain. Veneration and fear are not unreasonable responses to this mysterious medium and its inhabitants.

Although early Christian leaders protested against their converts’ residual pagan beliefs, popular theology soon evolved to explain pre-Christian supernatural beings in Christian terms. Beowulf: essentially a heathen work, but with Christian trappings, provides a prominent example. In lines 102-114 we read that Grendel and other monsters and demons are “kinsmen of Cain.” Grendel’s principal domicile is, of course, beneath a mere, and Beowulf’s dramatic battle with Grendel’s even more ferocious mother takes place in this underwater realm.

Another popular explanation for the origin of fairy-like creatures derives from the biblical war in heaven. The following account from southeast Germany is typical of those found throughout Europe: “When God cast out the arrogant angels from heaven, they became the evil spirits that plague mankind... Those who fell onto the earth became goblins, imps, dwarfs, thumbling, alps, noon-and-evening-ghosts, and will-o’-the-wisps. Those who fell into the forests became the wood-spirits who live there... Finally, those who fell into the water became water spirits: water-men, mermaids, and nereidmen” (Köhler 1886, 99).

An even more poetic Christian rationalization of heathen beliefs concerning water spirits comes from Wales. According to legend, Saint Patrick, a transplanted Welshman, returned to Wales for a visit. While he was walking along Crumlyn Lake, some Welsh people began to abuse him for migrating to Erin. Not willing to let the insult go unpunished, Saint Patrick transformed his accusers into water creatures, the males into fish and the females into water fairies. To this day, Crumlyn Lake is inhabited by their offspring (Sikes [1880], ch. 3).

One of the oldest and best documented manifestations of water worship is the belief in magic or holy wells and springs (D926). Although a worldwide phenomenon, such sites are especially important in Ireland and in Celtic Britain. In many instances, linguistic, archaeological, folkloric, and documentary evidence combines to map out a provenance that includes heathen mythology, fairy-lore, Christian veneration, and neopagan mysticism. One such place is Clootie Well near the village of Munlochy in Scotland. It is said that this well was originally the home of a fairy, who expected the gift of a piece of cloth (clout) before allowing a mortal to drink of its magic water. Still today the bushes and trees surrounding the well are covered with pieces of cloth left behind by visitors who playfully or seriously continue to practice the ancient belief. Similar traditions are associated with healing wells and springs throughout the British Isles: the Chalice Well near Glastonbury, England (a mecca for latter-day mystics of all sorts), the Madron Holy Well in Cornwall, and Saint Brigid’s Well in Kildare Town, Ireland, to name but a few. Offerings of cloth, pins, and coins are commonplace. In fact, the practice of throwing coins into a fountain for good luck, obviously a survival of ancient well worship, is a worldwide phenomenon, showing no sign of abatement.

Not all gifts made to water deities are as benign as cloth, pins, and coins. Legends from around the world describe animal and human sacrifices for the protection of buildings, especially those adjacent to water (F420.5.2.5, “Water-spirits interfere with building bridges, dams”). Typically, the victims are mortared alive within the foundation of a building or bridge (S261). The following legend from Germany exemplifies the type. The spillway of a mill on the Haun River is damaged by high water and ice. A drunkard assures the miller that burying a child alive within the foundation will prevent further damage. This is done, and shortly afterward the drunkard drowns in the river, and the miller dies of grief. Since then the miller’s ghost has haunted the area, pushing one victim into the river each year (Wolf 1853, no. 218). This legend verifies the belief in foundation sacrifices while at the same time viliying those who practice them. However, the legend still implies that some
unnamed water spirit, even if it does not accept the sacrifice of an innocent child, nonetheless requires a victim on a regular basis. The belief that certain bodies of water demand one human death every year or so is widespread (F420.5.2.1.6, “Water-spirit claims a life every seven years”; F420.5.2.6.1, “Water-spirits take revenge if yearly tribute is not given”).

The inherent and obvious danger of water has led to supernatural explanations for mishaps of all types. Some such supernatural explanations are nothing more than bugbears, fictitious creatures invented by adults to frighten children into avoiding dangerous places. These traditions are usually local, so the intimidating creatures’ names and the descriptions of their misdeeds vary from region to region. Two such sinister beings, formerly promoted by parents in Yorkshire, England, are named Jenny Green-teeth and Peg-o’-the-Well (Parkinson 1888, 202–203).

Not all water monsters are fictions invented by protective parents. In addition to countless sea monsters observed by sailors, every region has its own apparitions domiciled in local rivers and lakes. A few examples must suffice. Water bulls (F420.1.3.4), fierce amphibious creatures that often caused the death of domestic cows, were reported on the Isle of Man and in Scotland and Norway well into the nineteenth century. The water kelpie (F420.1.3.3) was a horse-like creature in Scotland, feared for its propensity to lure a man to mount it, then carry him to his death in a river or lake. A similar creature, known as the njúlg, was known in the Shetland Islands.

Scotland is still home to a famous water apparition, the Loch Ness Monster, which is in many ways a rationalization of ancient mystical beasts. Its defenders, instead of relying on fairy mythology or medieval theology to explain its existence, base their beliefs on evolutionary biology. Although Loch Ness is today the world’s best-known searching ground for prehistoric monsters, several hundred additional lakes and rivers worldwide claim similar sightings. Lake Champlain is the best-known such site in North America. In Europe, monsters seen in Lake Seljordsvatnet, Norway, and Lake Storsjön, Sweden, are famous in their respective regions. Perhaps once feared, these leviathans are now actively promoted by tourism boards, and they have long since lost any threatening aspect.

Another sea creature once widely feared but now adored is the mermaid. The objects of countless sightings, mermaids, like their less familiar male counterparts mermen, are mysteriously attractive to members of the opposite sex, but the sighting of a mermaid usually augurs bad luck, which for seamen means a shipwreck. Child gives several versions of the ballad “The Mermaid” (Child 289), in which the sailors spy a mermaid on a rock “with a comb and a glass in her hand,” and shortly afterwards a storm comes up and sinks their ship (Child 1965, 5:148–152). Marriages between mermaids and land men (B81.2), like those between swan maidens and humans, are seldom happy. “The Mermaid Wife” from Shetland, a typical legend (Douglas 1901, 153–155; AT4080), is parallel to numerous swan maiden stories. An inhabitant of Unst, the northernmost of the Shetland Islands, one night sees a number of mermen and mermaids dancing on a sandy beach, with several sealskins lying nearby. Seeing them, they seize their skins, regain the form of seals, and disappear into the sea. The Shetlander succeeds in snatching up one skin, which belongs to a beautiful maiden. Unable to return to the sea, she remains with him and becomes his wife. He carefully hides her sealskin. The couple live together several years, and she bears him several children. One day, one of the children finds the hidden sealskin and shows it to his mother. She receives it with joy, embraces her children, then races to the seashore, pursued by her earthy husband. Donning the skin, she dives into the waves, saying as she disappears, “Farewell. I loved you very well when I resided upon earth, but I always loved my first husband much better.” Although identified in this legend as mermaids and mermen, these creatures who can alternate between seal and human form are called selkies or silkies elsewhere, especially in Ireland.

Female water creatures—whether called mermaids, nixies, nymphs, or sprites—often are seductively dangerous (F420.1.2.1, “Water-mermaids are of unusual beauty”). The same can be said of their male counterparts, although there are relatively few legends depicting seductions of mortal women by water-men. An example is a Shetland ballad called “The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry” (Child 113) about a creature who is “a man upon the land and a... a silkie in the sea” who begets a child upon a human woman (Child 1965, 2:494).

A typical legend of underwater seduction is “The Sea Nymph” from Sweden (Holberg 1893, 75–76). One night a number of fishermen see a woman’s wet hand reach in through the door of their hut. One of them, a newly married man from Kinmar, takes hold of the hand, only to be pulled out the door into the darkness. The next day his comrades search for him, but he has disappeared without a trace. After three years, his wife finally remarries. A mysterious stranger who resembles the bride’s missing husband appears at the wedding celebration. He tells how a sea nymph had dragged him into an underwater realm (F420.5.2.1.1, “Water-maiden enamors man and draws him under water”). There he had forgotten his life on earth until that very morning, when the nymph stated that there was to be a wedding in Kinmar. His memory returned, and he asked for permission to see the bridal procession. The nymph agreed, under the stipulation that he not enter the house. However, he could not resist, and here he is. Just as he completes his story, a tempest comes up, blowing half the roof off the house. The man immediately falls ill and dies three days later.
One of Europe’s best-known water sprites is Lorelei (also spelled Lore Lay), who haunts the base of a cliff on the Rhine River near the village of Bacharach. Her story is known both in folk legends and in ballads by Clemens Brentano, Heinrich Heine, and others. Lorelei, it is said, is a young woman who unintentionally causes men to fall in love with her. Suspecting her of witchcraft, a bishop summons her to his court. Weary of her destructive power over men, she begs for a death sentence. Instead, the bishop, moved by her beauty, pronounces her free of all guilt, then proposes that she dedicate herself to God. He calls three knights to accompany her to the convent. Their route takes them past a high cliff overlooking the Rhine. Standing at the edge of the precipice, Lorelei says, “See that boat on the Rhine. The boatman is my lover!” With no further warning, she jumps from the cliff into the Rhine. She still sits on a rock at a dangerous bend in the river, singing a seductive song and combing her golden hair (F420.5.3.1), thus luring incautious boatmen onto the rocks.

Another famous European water nymph is Undine (sometimes spelled Ondine), a being described and named by Paracelsus, the Swiss physician and alchemist. Although undines (the word can be both a personal name and a noun describing a type of spirit) have water as their natural home, they function on land and often marry, but they require utmost trust and fidelity from their husbands. Such spirits are featured in many European chapbooks written during the Reformation and Renaissance. The heroine is traditionally named Melusine or Melusina. The following account from the Harz Mountains of Germany is typical of many local and regional legends about this being.

A knight, lost in the woods, finally comes upon a castle inhabited by a beautiful young woman. She gives him food and shelter, and he falls in love with her. She accepts his proposal of marriage under the condition that every Friday she would be free to go out and do whatever she wants, and that he would not try to follow her. This he promises, and they marry, living happily together for a long time. One Friday a stranger comes and is given lodging. The lady of the house makes no appearance. The husband explains his wife’s weekly absence, whereupon the stranger says that nothing good can come from such behavior. This conversation so alarms the husband that he immediately sets out to find his wife. He finally discovers her in the cellar, half fish and half human, swimming in a small pond. Seeing her husband, she casts a sad glance at him and disappears. The husband dies soon afterward (F420.5.2.6.4, “Water-spirits avenge selves on mortal who fails to keep promise”). Now all that remains are the castle’s ruins and the story (Ey 1862, 173–176).

Closely related to water-spirit legends are the countless tales of sunken bells that continue their ghostly tolling from beneath the water (F993, “Sunken bell sounds”). Told throughout Europe, these legends fall into two main categories. First are bells that were accidentally dropped into deep water while being transported—an example is the Kentsham bell that continues to toll off the coast of England (Burne 1884). Second, and more important, are bells associated with submerged towns (F725.2., “Submarine cities”). The most famous of these in Europe is the city of Ys, submerged beneath the Bay of Douarnenez in Brittany. The legend that its cathedral bells can still be heard from beneath the water inspired Claude Debussy’s “La Cathédrale engloutie” (The Sunken [or Engulfed] Cathedral).

Another musical piece prompted by sunken bells is the Welsh folksong “The Bells of Aberdovey,” popular since the eighteenth century. Aberdovey is the town closest to the legendary port of Gwyddno, now submerged in Cardigan Bay. Writing in 1907, W. Jenkyn Thomas claimed, “The nearest town to the submerged realm of Gwyddno is Aberdovey. If you stand on the beach there, you will sometimes hear in the long twilight evening chimes and peals of bells... The sounds come from the bells of one of Gwyddno’s drowned churches, and these are ‘The Bells of Aberdovey’ that the song speaks about” ([1907], 41).

An account combining fairy mythology with science fiction tells of an underwater city at Langness, off the coast of the Isle of Man. Here, not only submerged church bells but also the barking of dogs and the bleating of sheep can be heard. “More than two hundred years ago,” reported Sophia Morrison in 1911, a man descended to the underwater city in a diving bell. Through its windows he saw “great streets decorated with pillars of crystal glittering like diamonds, and beautiful buildings made of mother-of-pearl, with shells of every color set in it” (F420.2.1, “Water-spirits live in castles of crystal under water”). He also observed many handsome mermen and beautiful mermaids, but, fearing them, they quickly swam away. Back on dry land, the man longed to return to the “World-under-Sea” and stay there forever, and soon afterward he died of grief (182–185).

Sunken towns do not always stay submerged. Shannon City, beneath the estuary of Ireland’s Shannon River, appears above water every seven years (something like the mythical town of Gemelshausen in Germany that appears every hundred years, the model for the fictitious Brigadoon). However, any mortal who sees Shannon City above water will soon die (MacKillop 1998, 340).

In 2002 the present writer learned from a lifelong resident of Catchall, Cornwall, that nearby Mount’s Bay was formerly dry ground, and when the ocean rose, for reasons unknown to my informant, seven parishes were flooded. Fishermen, I was assured, from time to time still hear the ringing of the underwater bells.

D.L. Ashliman
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Extraordinary Sky and Weather Phenomena

Motif F790

Since the beginning of recorded history, human beings have gazed up at the sky to seek signs of what will happen next: good or bad weather, calamities, marvels, visions, and blessings. People have often associated celestial phenomena with religious beliefs and practices. In many religions, the sky is the home of a deity or deities and the place where people expect to go after their deaths. Sightings of extraterrestrial visitors have been documented by members of diverse cultures. Unidentified flying objects (UFOs), eclipses, comets, severe storms, and other unusual phenomena have found their place in both legends and elite literature, where they have tended to be viewed as determinants of future well-being and providers of important lessons.

During an interview at the Psychologische Gesellschaft in Basel in 1958, C.G. Jung said, "In our world miracles do not happen anymore, and we feel that something simply must happen which will provide an answer or show a way out. So now these UFOs are appearing in the skies" (F374, "Inhabitants of another planet (extra-terrestrial) visit earth") (Jung 1977: 390).

According to Jung, extraordinary apparitions in the sky are not intrinsically meaningful; however, people tend to project their hopes and expectations upon these phenomena. Hope for a savior and fear of "ships of death," which may bring or dispose of souls, are significant archetypal ideas. Jung speaks of the fear that an atomic war will take souls away from the earth; he also speculates about the meaning of UFOs in individual cases, stating that this meaning "depends on the circumstances, on a dream, or on the person concerned" (1977: 390–391).
In late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century folklore and popular movies, visions of unusual beings in the sky have been common. Since the 1950s there have been numerous legends of flying saucers or UFOs; one recurrent legend has insisted that the United States government is hiding evidence of alien invasion in Roswell, New Mexico. In the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), a beautiful, shimmering spaceship, reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals, inspires quasi-religious awe. Later movies, such as Men in Black (1997), take a more jocular view of aliens’ presence. The more serious fantasies of helpful and inspiring aliens support Jung’s contention that an extraterrestrial savior’s descent from the sky is an archetypal idea.

MYTHOLOGY

In Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Norse mythology, celestial phenomena are personified by male deities. Helios, the Greek sun god, rides across the sky in a fiery chariot. The Egyptian sun god, Ra, was the inspiration for a numerous myths. Worship of the sun was prominent in the belief systems of the Aztecs and the Mayans of Central America as well. Zeus and Jupiter, supreme gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons, wield three thunderbolts that symbolize sovereignty as well as chance, destiny, and providence. Thor, the Norse god of thunder, dazzles human beings with his destructive force.

In Native American mythology, personification of the sun generally makes the sun male; only the Cherokee, the Inuit, and the Yuchi see the sun as female (Stirling 1945, 387–400). A Jicarilla Apache story tells of Holy Boy’s theft of the sun as a small object from another deity, White Hactcin; the moon is stolen in the same way from Black Hactcin. Many Native American myths describe thunder as a male deity; for the Kato of California, Thunder is the creator of humankind. Among the Cherokee, thunder takes the form of twin boys, Wild Boy and Tame Boy, sons of Selu and Kanati (Corn Mother and Hunter), whose ball games in the sky cause thunderstorms. On the North Pacific coast and as far east as the Eastern Woodlands, thunderbirds produce thunder and lightning, wage war with snakes, and grant blessings.

The ancient Chinese deity P’an Ku creates the world through a series of dramatic weather phenomena. His breath makes the wind rise, his voice releases thunder, and his gaze brings flashes of lightning. Marie-Louise von Franz explains that P’an Ku, the “gigantic, symbolic human being who embraces and contains the whole cosmos,” is an expression of the Self archetype (Jung 1964, 200). P’an Ku demonstrates the power of the Self through his control of the weather, which markedly changes the appearance of the cosmos.

Solar mythology, a theory proposed by the German folklorist Max Muller, suggests that the sun, at the center of early people’s perception, significantly influenced myths and tales (1985). While this theory has little credence among folklorists today, it indicates the importance of celestial phenomena in storytelling patterns.

FOLKLORE

Early Irish folklore tells of many extraordinary creatures and objects in the sky. A flying dragon (B11.1.4.1) is commonly cited, as are death-bringing fire from heaven (F797), magic storms (D905), magic darkness (D908), and a magic mist caused by Druids (D902.1.1). Often the extraordinariness of a celestial event comes from the nature of the personage who caused it, not the nature of the event itself.

“Magic control of the elements” (D2140) is often attributed to magicians, saints, and witches in folklore of the Middle Ages in Great Britain and other parts of Western Europe. Saints can raise storms (D2141.0.9), often for benevolent purposes. For example, after his death on a warm day, Saint Frudobert makes the weather so cold and icy that mourners can walk across the ice to his funeral (D2145.1.1, “Local winter. Winter produced in one place while it is summer everywhere else”; Baring-Gould 1914). Witches are described in the Melius Maleficarum of 1486 as dangerous creatures who can “raise and stir up hailstorms and tempests, and cause lightning to blast both men and beasts” (Summers 1968, 139). Magicians and witches frequently get credit for controlling the wind (D2142.0.1, “Magician controls winds”).

The concept of evil forces manipulating the weather has persisted up to the present time. During the blizzard of 1994 in the northeastern United States, television evangelists speculated that evil was causing extreme weather, precipitating the arrival of the Day of Judgment. In the movie Storm of the Century (1999), based on Stephen King’s book by the same name, an evil supernatural figure is found to be responsible for a threatening, unusual amount of snow (D2143.6, “Magic control of snow”). Perhaps this inclination to blame others for unusual weather comes from the Jungian archetype of the Shadow: the dark side of the human psyche that enacts troublesome and antisocial impulses. The Shadow takes many forms, but its need to cause unrest remains constant.

PREDICTING WEATHER

The desire to predict difficult or favorable weather has produced a large corpus of customs and beliefs that sometimes appear in myths and folktales. Rain, vital for the growth of crops, is the subject of many predictions. Extraordinary behavior of heavenly bodies (P961) includes a solar halo, which,
A hag raises storm and destruction, displaying magic control of the elements (Motif D2140). From Olaus Magnus, Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus (1555).

according to Illinois folklore, may show that rain will come before night; a sun dog (parhelic halo) south of the sun means rain will come from the southwest, while a sun dog north of the sun means that rain will come from the northwest. After a solar eclipse, five full days of rain can be expected. A New York proverb states, “When there’s a ring around the moon, rain is coming soon”; another proverb explains, with reference to an upside-down Big Dipper, “If the stars are in a huddle, the world will be in a puddle” (Cutting 1952, 29–46).

Colors of the sky may indicate when rain is coming. One very popular proverb known to both farmers and mariners is “Red sky at night, sailors’ delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.” In New England, rain can be expected if the horizon has a greenish tint; a purple haze forecasts a return to fine weather. If clouds in the parallel bands make the pattern of a “mackerel sky,” rain may be predicted: “Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, three days wet and three days dry” (Botkin 1947, 630–635).

Sometimes the colors of the sky reveal greater calamities than a temporary absence of rain. At the beginning of the Irish potato famine in 1845, a “thick blue fog” covered the sky; farmers who had never seen such a fog before feared that a dreadful calamity was about to happen. Some farmers blamed the color of the sky on fairies, who, they thought, were “battling over the potatoes” (Bartolletti 2001, 9). Just as witches were blamed for many mishaps in medieval European folklore, the fairies were held accountable for the onset of the disastrous famine. A magic fog is also prominent in the Finnish Kalevala, as well as in the Arthurian cycle in Great Britain.

Sometimes people attempt to change the weather by performing certain rituals. A belief in India states that a certain man must laugh in order for it to rain (D2143.1.11. “Certain man must laugh in order for it to rain”). According to Buddhist mythology, a white elephant can make rain fall (D2143.1.13). From Irish mythology comes the belief that rain can be produced by striking a rock (D2143.1.7). Folk belief in Ireland, India, and Africa, among other places, explains drought by the presence of magic (D2143.2). In late nineteenth-century Nebraska, professional rainmakers fired explosions from balloons; they also prepared gunpowder explosions on high mountains. People in various regions of the United States have said that Fourth of July fireworks bring rainstorms. Conversely, some Americans have maintained the belief that “preparation for rain scatters it away” (Hyatt 1965, 32). Carrying an umbrella, for example, may be considered a good way to keep rain from falling at an inconvenient or perilous time. According to North Carolina folklore, rain or snow on a couple’s wedding day means that the groom will die first. A rainy wedding day may be worrisome, but some newlyweds have contended that rain has brought them good luck.

Folklore of the sea, derived from ancient mariners’ beliefs, emphasizes severe weather and wind patterns. Many customs and stories tell of buying the wind: throwing a coin or coins overboard to gain a favorable breeze (Dorson 1964). This ritual originates from human sacrifice to bring wind to a becalmed ship, as in Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in Greek tragedy. A narrative from Texas tells of a man who bought a dollar’s worth of wind because of greed. His boat turned over, and his wife and children drowned (Mullin 1978, 35–40).

In the Midwest and Southwest of the United States, narratives and folk beliefs about tornadoes are common. A popular liar’s tale tells of a man riding a tornado (X1004.2. “Lie: man rides cyclone”). A greenish sky is said to predict a tornado’s approach, as does the first clap of thunder after the last snow storm. Anyone who dares try to change a tornado’s direction can drive an ax into the top of a stump, pointing the ax handle in the direction the tornado should turn. Deflection may not be necessary if one believes that a tornado cannot strike a town between mountains and hills or in a valley (Hendricks 1980, 147).

The magnitude of a tornado’s destructive force has inspired popular movies, including The Wizard of Oz (1939) and Twister (1996). In Twister, the scientists who pursue and track tornadoes become folk heroes: the only individuals brave enough to deliberately place themselves in a tornado’s path. Following Joseph Campbell’s hero pattern, their “call to adventure” is the announcement that a tornado is on its way (Campbell 1949).
Lightning is another form of severe weather that people take pains to avoid. The proverb "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place" helps to explain why people may take shelter under burnt trees or logs. In Illinois, people may burn blessed palm leaves or throw an ax into a yard to deflect lightning; in Texas, they may cross their suspenders and cover mirrors. Sometimes lightning has the connotation of punishment (C984.5, "Disastrous lightning for breaking tabu"); for example, African-American folk belief states that lightning striking while a man is dying means the devil has come to fetch his soul. The phrase "May the Lord strike me dead!" takes on new meaning when a person is outdoors in a thunderstorm. Sometimes, however, lightning is viewed as a source of awe-inspiring power. In the movie Powder (1995), the hero who is struck by lightning gains extraordinary sensitivity and the ability to practice telekinesis. This innocent, pale-skinned hero resembles an angel (A285.0.1), but his association with fire and destruction makes him seem demonic as well.

LITERATURE

Shakespeare used vivid imagery of weather to reflect human affairs. In Hamlet, Horatio, musing on the significance of the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father, speaks of portents of disaster in the sky before Caesar's murder:

As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse. (1.1.117–120)

The three witches in Macbeth meet during thunder and lightning. When Macbeth addresses them later in the play, he asks them to tell him the truth:

Though you animate the winds and let them fight / Against the churches; though the yesty waves / Confound and swallow navigation up. (4.1.52–54)

Later, the weather grows ominous as a reflection of the unnatural murder that has occurred: Lennox says:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay, / Our chimneys were blown down. \ldots / Some say, the earth / Was feverous and did shake. (2.3.56–57, 62–63)

Ross says still later:

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp. (2.4.5–7)

The last excerpt is a fine literary example of motif P961.1.1.1, "Sun refuses to shine when murder is done."

Countless literary works have reflected people's fascination with catastrophic storms, the natural forces of chaos and destruction. In Louise Erdrich's Tales of Burning Love (1997), a woman freezes to death in an Easter blizzard and four other women, all of whom are ex-wives of the same man, spend the night together in a car during another massive snowstorm. In The Perfect Storm (1997) by Sebastian Junger, an unusually dangerous hurricane takes the lives of fishermen trying to get home.

In fantasy literature, severe weather often portends magic or dramatic transition. The four children in C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia (1950) do not discover Narnia until the weather becomes stormy. Similarly, a violent thunderstorm leads to Meg Murry's meeting with three witches in Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time (1973). In J.R.R. Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring (1955), thick fog causes the hobbits to be captured by barrow-wights (K1886.2, "Mists which lead astray"). And in Julia Sauer's Fog Magic (1986), a little girl can find a village from the past only when fog blankets the area. Extreme weather of all kinds serves as a catalyst for magic, but fog, which can change the appearance of an entire area, works especially well.

Mark Twain writes of a solar eclipse in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889). Knowing that an eclipse will occur, the hero from modern times is able to impress King Arthur and his courtiers, becoming a powerful seer in their eyes. In this case, the hero has no command of magic; his scientific knowledge becomes a sign of extraordinary skill. In this novel, as in many other folkloric and literary contexts, mastery of the sky denotes power of the highest order.

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REFERENCES


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