

When Nature Beings or Spirits Engage with Humans

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ABSTRACT: Folk stories about humans falling in love with nature spirits and beings might help us to understand fresh ways of bridging the divide between the human and the nonhuman in nature. Viewing this idea from the standpoint of Ecolore, the question is, how can our contemplation of such stories help us to improve human relations with the natural world?

KEYWORDS: Ecolore; Mythology; Mermaid; Selkie

Part 1: Bridging Divergent Worlds

The divergence of worlds and cultures involved in folkloric and fictional encounters between individuals who literally originate in different worlds, is a particular chronotopic motif in stories.¹ It might involve, for example, a person from Earth and either a being or nature spirit

¹ Structural analysis of folklore proceeds through the analysis of motifs, which have been arranged into catalogues for easy reference. Chronotopes, first described by Bakhtin as 'the organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel', and as 'the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (Bakhtin 1994, 187), have been linked with motifs in literary analysis, and therefore may be applied in Folkloric research. Because a chronotope identifies and expresses the essence and ambience of a world, it has become a feature of speculative fiction criticism. Bakhtin also wrote of chronotopes: 'it can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative' (187). Pam Morris has suggested that 'This is ultimately an ideological perception; a way of comprehending human life as materially and simultaneously present within a physical-geographical space and a specific point of historical time. Bakhtin names this unified time/space-determined perception, 'chronotopic'. (180) A chronotopic perception, and a 'chronotope' itself, resonates with visions such as that of H.G. Wells' time traveller who stands on a beach in the vastly distant future, watching the dying red sun of Earth as it is eclipsed in an eerie silence (Wells 2005, 84-85). When we speak of inter-realm and inter-species encounters, we are moving in a chronotopic realm. Elana Gomel (2010) and Tanja Kudrjavitseva (2012) have recently written on chronotopes in science fiction, noting and elaborating the concept's usefulness in analysing the genre. Between them they have identified a series of chronotopes that are often apparent in science fiction: those of the road, the threshold, the forest, the idyll or pastoral, time travel, the labyrinth, and also the futuristic, cyclical, deterministic, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic. A chronotopic motif is a motif that identifies and expresses the essence and ambience of a world; this occurs in *The Little Mermaid*, and in the other stories discussed in this essay, particularly in *Starman*. It is what gives these tales their haunting beauty, by capturing the essence of the Otherworld or the Otherworldly being.

from an Otherworld or an extraterrestrial world.² The motif of an Otherworld spirit or being falling in love with a human being would seem to represent the gulf that exists between a human and an individual of a completely different species. As a metaphor, such a story might be fruitfully applied to relations between humans and nonhuman nature.

The motif of the interspecies encounter involves a bridging mechanism, which usually calls for magic in mythic lore, since some kind of interface is needed, first to facilitate interspecies understanding and interaction, and second, to enable one species to exist in the environment or habitat of another. For example, in the world of Faerie, time passes at a different speed, and consuming the food or drink of the Otherworld can trap one in an alternate time-stream; it may be an inter-dimensional realm where time and space exist in different ways than in the mundane world.

In contrast, the use of this motif in a speculative fiction story would involve some kind of technology of a physical, telepathic or multi-dimensional kind. In science fiction or fantasy fiction, the problem might involve an unbreathable atmosphere, a temperature that is either too hot or too cold, excessively dangerous solar radiation, or a gravitational pull that is too light, too strong or unstable, to name a few possibilities. The presence of more than one sun in the sky, or a planetary orbit that is too close to the sun, (or a black hole), would be a further issue. Technology can easily deal with these types of problems, as simply as boarding a space-ship which is insulated against all of these conditions would in most cases be sufficient (except in the case of proximity to the black hole).

The differences that exist in folk stories, legends and myths can be more easily resolved if a set of rules is followed. In the speculative fiction story, advanced technology might be employed to ameliorate the differences between species and worlds. In the folk or fairy tale, magic would be the more appropriate element. The fantasy story is likely to use a mixture of magic and technology, while the SF story will focus on technology and scientific logic. In most cases, logic of some kind will win out. In any of these types of story, there might at times be the need for a *deus ex machina*.³

If we should seek to interpret this idea in terms of Earth and our ordinary world, we would find the motif of difference is one we can apply with ease. We might enquire, what is it on Earth that we feel is different from us? Please note that this thought experiment does not involve human differences such as nations or cultures, and neither does it include skin

2 An example of a love story between a human and an extraterrestrial is the film *Starman*, (1984). Directed by John Carpenter, written by Bruce A. Evans and Raynold Gideon, with Dean Reisner an uncredited writer, it stars Jeff Bridges and Karen Allen.

3 This is a way of resolving problems when the protagonist and other characters are not able to save themselves. A god, an angel or a hero, or some coincidental event, or amazing technological device arrives to save the day.

colour, wealth, social class, gender, size, age, philosophy or religion. What else is there on Earth that we do not consider to be the same as, or equal, to ourselves? If we examine the motifs and use of interfaces that appear to be intended to connect worlds of divergent realities, or which enable inhabitants of one world to exist in an equivalent way in another, our solutions so far have included magic, technology, logic, and scientific invention. These are the strategies used to help humans to relate to nonhuman but human-like species, and vice versa, in speculative fiction, and in folk, myth and legendary lore. We can now apply some of these ideas to a series of folkloric and mythological tales, involving: 1) a mermaid and a prince; 2) a fairy maiden and a knight-at-arms; 3) a selkie maiden and a fisherman, and 4) the god of the Underworld and a goddess from Olympus. After this, we will venture to add: 5) a human woman and an extraterrestrial man.

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Part 2: Mermaids, Selkies, Gods and Fairies: on Love inspired by unearthly Beauty, and Interspecies Contracts between Humans and Nonhuman Beings.

The texts we will engage with here are 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', a poem by John Keats, 'The Selkie', a traditional Celtic tale, 'The Little Mermaid' by Hans Christian Andersen, the mythological story of Hades' abduction of Persephone, and the motion picture *Starman*.

One key point or theme that is found in Keats' poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', the story of 'The Selkie', and Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', is the inadvisability of conducting interspecies romances. It is hard for humans to resist the unearthly beauty of the Faery folk, whom we might also characterise as nature spirits, and also for the Faery to resist the comeliness of their beloved humans, even though they cannot linger long in one another's realms. It is hard for these beings to conduct a relationship with humans due to their species' physical differences. A second key point is the difficulty in accommodating differences in the worlds from which both human and nonhuman beings originate, which need adjustments that are sometimes only temporary. The element that overcomes in these three cases is love, a quality that is approached differently in each text, and one that involves compassion, empathy and a need for ethical values.

As Keats' poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' begins, his 'knight-at-arms' is suffering and near death:

I see a lily on thy brow,
 with anguish moist and fever-dew,
 And on thy cheeks a fading rose
 Fast withereth too⁴

for he lies in the frozen winter waste, where 'the sedge has withered from the lake' and 'no birds sing'. Now that winter has stripped the land of the romantic assets of warmth, vegetation and birdsong, which might have partly contributed to the knight's enchantment by the faery, and the faery herself has left him, the knight lies under an enchantment he is unable to lift.

There are two points to mention here: He has fallen in love with her beauty, and given himself over to her care; she has taken him to her grotto, and fed him 'roots of relish sweet, and honey wild, and manna-dew', which has altered his life cycle, because it is faery-food. It is well-known that to step into the realm of faery, and to eat of its food, is to doom oneself to a life that proceeds henceforth on a different track than that experienced by other humans. Evidently, the beauty and the love have overcome all possible obstacles, for the faery says, 'in language strange', 'I love thee true'. The knight has entered into an illusory world,⁵ unaware that his beloved would leave him there to die. The knowledge that to enter the faery realm or eat of its food is to invite an unchangeable alteration in one's life represents the human side of this particular contract with the faery. The faery side is evidently that the contract is impermanent, as the faery cannot abide long in the human world, and the faery realm's time is known to pass at a different rate than in the human world. Humans are seen as ephemeral beings whose lives are over quickly, while the faerie-kind are long lived, coming as they do from a different realm. If we wanted to imagine a contract that might assist individuals involved in such encounters, it might specify the weaknesses of each individual, and supply the necessary interfaces that would enable the pair to dwell together peaceably. Such a covenant would be one way to resolve the issues of difference that in this case have led to a broken heart and mind, and the beautiful young knight's lingering death on the shores of a frozen, deserted lake, enmeshed in the enchantment's illusion. Our suggestion of contractual logic might seem to detract from the romance of the story, but it would at least enable both individuals to survive and perhaps to make some kind of a home together, even if temporary. As a metaphor, this poem evokes many possible interpretations. The otherworldly encounter of a human with a beautiful

4 Keats, J., 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in *English Romantic Poetry Volume Two*, Bloom, Harold, Ed., (New York, Doubleday, 1963), pp. 458-460.

5 The knight's illusory world appears to be based on a viewpoint and perception he is caught up in, as if in a bubble reality, which has come about as a result of the faery's enchantment. It is a metaphor for living life through a viewpoint, instead of directly. But why do so, when we can learn to live through a clearer perception of reality just as it is, without need of enchantments, which can prevent one from living life more intuitively.

being of another species, unrequited love, a lingering illness, and the list might go on to include even a vampiric romance. But now we move on to briefly examine the case of the Selkie.

In traditional tales of 'the Selkie', which is a Scottish word for 'seal', the man has captured a beautiful maiden who had emerged from her selkie-skin in order to swim and wander on the sand in the form of a woman; instead of experiencing freedom, however, she has lost it. The fisherman will have hidden her selkie-skin, so that he can keep her in his life. In this case, there is a contract between the two, which is as simple as: if a human has possession of a selkie-skin, the owner of the skin cannot return to life in the sea. The Selkie maiden can only escape if, one day, her husband should leave her alone long enough for her to locate her skin, or perhaps for her children to return her skin to her. However, the contract here might be such that for a Selkie to leave the selkie-skin on the sand would put him or her at risk of having it taken by a human, a means by which the Selkie can be tricked into marriage, leading a female Selkie to childbearing. It is, admittedly, challenging to find a partner when one lives on an isolated island. Equally, the desire to walk freely upon the sand is a powerful motivator. However, in the traditional version, the Selkie maiden grieves for her lost home in the waves, and awaits the time when her husband will be absent and she can retrieve the concealed skin and depart for her watery home where she may already have had Selkie children of her own. She will later return from time to time to swim just off the beach where she can observe her human children. The Selkie misses her own home and family, for she has been detained on land through trickery, and borne children she will have to leave behind, because the land is no place for a Selkie.

In the tale of Hans Christian Andersen, the Little Mermaid has fallen in love with a beautiful young Prince, whom she has rescued from a shipwreck and taken to a nearby shore, where he has awakened to look on the face of a human girl, not realising he has been saved by a mermaid. Feeling grief-stricken and unable to live without the Prince, the mermaid undergoes a perilous magical procedure so she can live and walk on land with him as a human woman, rather than continue her life in the sea without him.⁶ The mermaid has had to purchase from an old sea-witch the potion that would transform her tail into legs, so that she would be able to live on land, where she longs to be. Unfortunately, the price of the potion is her tongue, removed by the sea-witch. She must entrust herself to

6 This magical transformation the little mermaid undergoes appears to be a metaphor for the great changes that are wrought in oneself through love and altruism, as well as through the desire to grow spiritually; it indicates that the mermaid longs to gain a soul. The princess whom the prince loves has received her education in a monastery, and when in Andersen's tale the mermaid turns to foam, her spirit arises to join the daughters of the air, where she can help humans who are suffering. While the commercialised forms of the story consider marriage to the Prince her highest calling, the original version does not. Salvation is to be gained by exercising empathy, compassion and care.

humans without being able to speak on her own behalf. Although the Prince finds her and develops feelings for her, these are, sadly, more like those felt toward a sister or friend. It transpires that the Prince already loves a human princess, and the mermaid is helpless to avoid the dissolution of her form upon the marriage of her Prince. We will return to this tale in Part 3.

The archetypal metaphors involved in these three stories set out some of the inconsistencies that exist between the human species and the world of nature spirits, who are also depicted as living beings who come from an unearthly culture, whether it is Faerie or an Undersea world. The stories show us that love and beauty are difficult to resist; this point is most important, because it is the necessary ingredient, as without the qualities of beauty and love the situation itself would not exist. The second point is that such interspecies relationships should be understood as temporary, since they can be life-threatening to one or both of the partners. In the case of the Selkie it is the man who falls in love with the Sea-woman, and tricks her into marrying him. In the case of the *Little Mermaid*, the Sea-woman first sees the man and loves him, and suffers so badly from loss once she returns home, that she can no longer live in her own world; she transforms herself in order to meet him in his own realm, and in this particular example, it is his lack of love for her that leads to the end of her dreams. In 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' the knight falls under the spell of the Faery's unearthly beauty, and cannot live without her. The subsequent eating of the faery food traps him in the region of the winter lake where he now lies dying. This story is also a metaphor for the consumptive illness that was such a sad influence in Keats' life, and which might also be interpreted in a variety of contexts applicable to other individuals.

These stories have in common a motif of an earthly man and a woman who is either of Faerie or of the Sea, whose species can live on land for a time, though not for long, not without terrible sacrifice on the part of one or both. In order to bring the two species to a closer equality, some kind of logical contract would, as we have suggested, improve matters.

The conditions of the two worlds in a logical contract would need to be clearly spelled out rather than glossed over. Although the conditions are known to those who read these kinds of stories, not everyone might know that the human who eats food in the Otherworld, as Persephone does during her time in Hades, must in some way become a native of that Other realm. In Persephone's case, the agreement is clearly known to the Olympian gods of her home. If the goddess eats only one seed of the pomegranate she will have to spend a certain part of each year in Hades. This case is not unlike that of the Selkie, where the fisherman traps her by taking her selkie-skin, for Hades, whom Hesiod also names Aidoneus,⁷

⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, Trans. West, M.L. (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 30.

seeks to trap Persephone by repeatedly offering her food.⁸ In both cases, the man or god has gained a wife who will bear him children, but who will not be able to remain in the world as a lifelong partner.

In the same Greek story, Demeter becomes so engrossed in seeking her lost daughter, and then so full of grief when she discovers Persephone has not only been taken by Hades, but that Zeus, as the girl's father, has given his permission for the marriage, that she gives up caring for the agricultural life of the human world, and refuses to tend to the balance of the human ecosystems. She takes up a post as nurse in 'a kingly household near Eleusis'.⁹ It is clear that a contract has been made between Zeus and Hades, but that Demeter and Persephone have not been either included or informed. As a result, the state of balance between the worlds has been altered, and Demeter, an Earth goddess,¹⁰ has 'cursed the Earth to bear no fruit, either for man or for the gods, for a full year', until at last Zeus causes Persephone to be released.¹¹ The contract that is worked out between the gods to resolve this situation is for Persephone to spend a set part of each year in Hades, and to be free to return to Olympus for the remainder. Some popular sources give this period as six months, while others give a third of the year, or four months.¹² It is on this dramatic event that the rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries are based, which are evidently regarded in Ancient Greece as an agreement between the Greek nature goddesses and human beings. The details of the rites, ceremonies and beliefs of the Eleusinian Mysteries were kept secret, and only became known to initiates of the religion, which not only persisted throughout Classical Greece, but continued to be celebrated in the region for millennia.¹³

Of our four stories, only two will result in the birth of live children for the father who has tricked the Otherworldly woman into marrying him, while the other two Nature Spirits or Beings have come upon a beautiful young man but found themselves unable to remain in his earthly world. The knight is a romantic figure who loves truly, while the Prince is a romantic figure who cannot love the mermaid because he already loves a human woman.

We will give brief consideration to one final text, the motion picture *Starman*, because it is an instance of the use of folkloric and mythological

8 Persephone is also given the name of Kore, for 'maiden'. Her story symbolises the return of spring and the growth of corn, which makes it an agricultural myth. *The Oxford Dictionary* (Online version).

9 Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, 1987, pp. 184-185.

10 Demeter, as an Earth goddess, is the daughter and successor of Rhea, who herself succeeded Gaea, a Titan. Tripp, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, London: Collins, 1988, pp. 194, 248.

11 Campbell, *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

12 Tripp, *Op. Cit.*, p. 463.

13 The Mysteries of Eleusis are thought to be older than the Olympian religion. The story is retold briefly in Book V of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which is available on Internet Classics at: classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.5.fifth.html

motifs to inject a romantic inspiration into a science fiction narrative.¹⁴ The Starman is a Visitor to Earth, and although he represents a nonhuman extraterrestrial culture, he decides to emulate the form of human protagonist Jenny's deceased husband, which makes the whole encounter a bitter-sweet experience for both. Much of the action in the film involves avoiding arrest by police and government officials, for the Visitor's extraterrestrial origin, had somehow been detected.¹⁵ In this story, Jenny cannot go to the Visitor's world because it is hostile to humans. However, before he leaves, after having avoided capture by the human authorities, he gives Jenny the gift of a child, who will be born able to live in Earth's environment but retaining all the qualities of its father. The themes of love and beauty, and the chronotopic perception of modern human culture as seen from the viewpoint of the Visitor, are powerful elements in the film. The story shows us the potential closeness an interspecies relationship might attain, as well as the possibility it might be conducted in the 'real' world, rather than requiring a magical context. However, the film's motifs are clearly mythic/folkloric in origin, and brought into the science fictional context.

All of these interspecies relationships serve as metaphors for the way humans relate to nonhuman nature. The sudden onset of great love for the interspecies or inter-realm being (such as that of Persephone of Olympus and Hades of the Underworld) demonstrates how great a part Beauty plays in relations between humans and our world. The Love of the Beautiful is a metaphor for the opening of the heart in the presence of the Beauty of Life, and this experience would generally be available to humans in the course of their contemplative interactions with Nature. However, this is not so for all, simply because so many areas of the world are over-populated and provided with insufficient clean air, food and water to enable a stable and sustainable maintenance of healthy and well-provisioned populations.

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Part 3: Some Notes on Mermaids and other Women of the Sea

Mermaids might be looked at in our historical context in several ways. First, as they appear to be connected with the Celtic tale of the Selkie, a folk legend told in the British Isles as part of northern Europe's seal-lore.

14 It should be noted that the first name given to this genre was the Scientific Romance, which involved the adventure-time chronotope. See Footnote 1.

15 The Visitor brings a deer, slaughtered by hunters, back to life, using alien technology of small healing spheres. He treats the deer and other Earth creatures with respect, speaking to them and thereby indicating that he regards them as potentially sentient, suggesting that humans are not the only sentient species on Earth, and that life is sacred.

The term 'Selkie' comes from 'selch', a variant of 'seal'.¹⁶ A. Asbjørn Jøn's discussion of this body of northern lore notes that the selkie is said to be 'a combination of human and seal'.¹⁷ Second, mermaids seem to be related to the Sirens of Homeric fame, which are encountered by Odysseus during his return from Troy to Ithaca, when he asks his shipmates to tie him to the mast, so he may listen to the siren-song without being driven mad at the sound. Third, the mermaid resembles a type of Oceanid in Greek tradition, one of a species of sea nymphs born of the union of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. Fourth, mermaids are developed in a cultural context in Andersen's fairytale, 'The Little Mermaid', in which they are styled as daughters of the King of the Sea, sometimes identified as King Neptune,¹⁸ depicted with a trident in his hand. Most of these possibilities have been engaged with by A. Asbjørn Jøn, in which he provides details that point to a Norse connection. As he notes, we can see the Nordic connection in some of the Northern names for mermaids: Danish '*maremind*' and German, '*meerfrau*'.¹⁹ We might also consider the Celtic motif of the 'children of Lir', who was an Irish king and ruler of the sea.²⁰ Finally, we have the linking of the mermaid with the Dugong, 'a sea cow' of the family 'dugongidae',²¹ which sailors on long voyages have taken for mermaids.²² This raises the question of other sea creatures, including whales, dolphins, porpoises, sea lions and, again, seals, all of which are sea species that are friendly and helpful toward human beings.

The word 'mermaid' from Middle English, literally means 'maid of the mere', where 'maid' refers to 'an unmarried girl' or 'young woman', and 'mere' means 'lake' in Danish and 'sea' in German, 'from a shared Indo-European root shared by Russian 'more' and Latin 'mare'.²³ A. Asbjørn Jøn has suggested that mermaids may have 'some (limited) magical abilities',²⁴ which he lists as 'using their feminine wiles and sweet songs to lure ships

16 *The Oxford Dictionary* entry on 'Selkie', a mythical creature that resembles a seal in the water but assumes human form on dry land (Online version).

17 A. Asbjørn Jøn, 'Dugongs, Mermaids, Seals and Selkies', *Australian Folklore*, 13, 1998, p.97.

18 Neptune is the Latin name for the Greek god Poseidon, God of the Sea, and known in Homer as 'Earth-Shaker'.

19 A. Asbjørn Jøn discusses Northern lore in connection with Dugong and Mermaid lore in: 'Dugongs, Mermaids, Seals and Selkies', *Australian Folklore*, 13, 1998, pp.94-98.

20 An equivalent Welsh god is named Llyr, although the tales of each King's offspring differs considerably. Dixon-Kennedy, *Celtic Myth and Legend*, 1996, pp.194, 198.

21 *The Oxford English Dictionary* entry on 'dugong' (Online version).

22 A. Asbjørn Jøn has written two papers on the relationship between Mermaids and Dugongs. Both are listed in the references.

23 *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 'Mermaid' entry, 3rd Ed., Ed. by Angus Stevenson, OUP, Online, (Apple Mac version).

24 A. Asbjørn Jøn, 'Dugongs, Mermaids, Seals and Selkies', *Australian Folklore*, 13, 1998, p. 95.

onto rocks'.²⁵ With this in mind, Andersen²⁶ has not made the little mermaid princess in his fairy story typical, although her older sisters are recorded as linking hands and singing sweetly to the sailors on ships that are in danger of sinking. Their purpose is said to be to help reduce the sailors' fear. Here, Andersen has inverted the usual behaviour for his young heroine, for he shows her to be full of compassion, even though, as a mermaid, she is unable to cry tears. When she first rises to the surface on her fifteenth birthday, she sees the young prince, and falls in love with him at once. When his ship sinks, she does not sing to him but rather rescues him. Her grandmother shares with her the knowledge that merfolk do not have immortal souls, and their bodies will turn to foam after they die; the Sea-witch informs her that only by having a human man profess his undying love for her, a love that is greater than family love and so great that when he marries her his soul will flow over her, can she gain an immortal soul.²⁷

Versions of this motif are found in a range of Otherworldly tales, including those where an angel or god falls in love with a human being. Often the motif is reversed in the type of story we are discussing, where the young human falls in love with the unearthly beauty of the mermaid, faery, selkie, angel or god. In such tales, individuals making a contract to remain in the world of their beloved usually pay a great price. Sometimes they lose their immortality, as when an angel falls in love with a human woman.²⁸ Andersen's Little Mermaid loses her tongue, and can no longer sing or speak. The loss of an essential quality in these tales may seem a crude type of contract, but it serves as a warning of the danger of venturing into a less safe and hospitable world. It also hints that interspecies relationships are unwise. Should interspecies relationships occur in the future, the tales warn, it would be wise to create more sophisticated and egalitarian contracts.

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²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 95.

²⁶ Andersen, Hans C., 1837, 'The Little Mermaid', Trans. John Irons, University of Southern Denmark, (2014). Accessed on 28/1/17. <http://andersen.sdu.dk/moocfiles/littlemermaid.pdf>

²⁷ Andersen, *Ibid*.

²⁸ An example of this is the film *City of Angels*, 1998, Directed by Brad Silberling, starring Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan, in which Seth becomes mortal after falling in love with Dr Maggie Rice, who later dies, leaving Seth stranded in the human world. Production Company: Regency Enterprises, Atlas Entertainment, distributed by Warner Bros.

Part 4: Reconnecting with Nature by reflecting on Metaphors and Contracts

This discussion has brought us back to our original question: How can our contemplation of such stories help us to improve human relations with the natural world?

The speculative tales we have engaged with here all deal with interactions between humans and other worldly beings. The stories usually feature two worlds, Earth and an Otherworld, or another realm or planet. In such cases, rules can be helpful in enabling peaceful and mutually beneficial interspecies interactions, of the kind that maintain an egalitarian status for both sides. This is an important consideration, as it relates metaphorically to events like the intermarriage of nations and tribes, for example, between the Vikings and the English during the time of Norse activity in the British Isles.²⁹ The metaphors of interspecies communication and experience in these tales from ancient human lore, can be applied to our species' general disengagement from our own natural world, which we often treat as if it is an Other world. Further, it is suggested that a temporary adaptation of 'interfaces' might allow us to gradually grow accustomed to being closer to Nature; however, there must be an eventual reversal, because, it must be stressed, an interface is a tool, and only a temporary bridge employed to encourage change, not a means of living in the same world with Nature.³⁰

The idea of using interfaces to enable interspecies relationships works well when the Other world has conditions that are hostile to the human organism or mind. We have seen that a spaceship would provide sufficient protection for most interplanetary conditions, that is, those conditions with which we already know how to deal, from our own experience. The interface, however, is a technique that has not worked on Earth for enabling human beings to engage directly with nonhuman nature, for it most often leads us to interact with Nature and with one another by means of technological devices and mechanisms. We know this intimately from our culture's current over-use of computing and digital devices. Example 1: We watch the sunset on a television, computer or phone screen, when the sun is setting right outside our window or door, and we could be outside, experiencing that event directly by taking just a few steps. Example 2: We are talking to a friend on a mobile phone or computer screen, rather than meeting that friend in person to connect directly and experience companionship, which is an experience of the whole self. It is true that there are times when a technological interface might be useful and is even necessary, such as when engaging with dangerous creatures and

29 These Viking raids occurred during the 8th and 9th centuries of the current era, eventually resulting in the integration of many Norsemen into the British population.

30 The 'interface' was dealt with at length in Hawkins' doctoral thesis on Ecological Speculative Fiction, for details of which, see the Reference list.

toxic or hostile environments, however, the greater part of Nature is not inherently hostile toward humans.

Extracts from a poem from Keats were cited earlier in this piece.³¹ The following quotation from another of the Romantic poets, an excerpt from Lord Byron's poem 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', (Canto Four, Stanzas 178-186) demonstrates a deep aesthetic experience in which the Speaker of the poem experiences nature directly:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,

From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.³²

This verse, interestingly, demonstrates how one can experience a deep and blissful sense of unity with the Universe, when entering Nature with a contemplative state of mind. If we take a final look into the research of A. Asbjørn Jøn as he writes on Mermaids, Dugongs and their connections with indigenous cultures in reference to the Kanak people in a Pacific context, we might find some other possibilities coming into our minds regarding our own interactions with the natural world:

Post-colonial thinking reinforces the need to include substantive indigenous voice within the representations of place, identity and culture. Key lore elements, such as the mythicization and sacred interpretation of significant fauna, contribute keenly to understandings of place, identity and culture in societies across the globe.³³

We might add to this that a further variety of 'Post-colonial' thinking might now be required, that is, one that begins to regard Earth not as territory to be colonised but rather as a planetary ecosphere in which we can learn to dwell in a more balanced state of companionship with all life forms. The

³¹ Keats, J., 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in *English Romantic Poetry Volume Two*, Bloom, Harold, Ed., (New York, Doubleday, 1963), pp. 458-460.

³² George Gordon, Lord Byron, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', Project Gutenberg E-Book, pp. 96-97.

³³ Jøn, A. Asbjørn, Lyndon Fraser and C. Michael Hall, 'Dugongs - the last remaining Mermaids: Beast lore (Eco-lore), Post-colonialism and maritime Cultural Tourism in New Caledonia', *Australian Folklore*, 32 (2017), p. 193, in which part of the material is cited from an earlier article A. Asbjørn Jøn, 'The Whale Road: Transitioning from Spiritual Links, to Whaling, to Whale Watching in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Australian Folklore*, 29 (2014), 87-116.

tales we have engaged with are well-laden with metaphors and symbols that resonate at many levels, and only a small analysis has been undertaken here. The motifs and chronotopes of folklore, legend and myth, as well as those which can be located in fictional texts, particularly in speculative fiction, give us all tools to help in bringing the world into a more natural balance so that we can live more direct, open-hearted lives.

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Sumerian carving of a merman.