



Literature and Religion as Intergenerational Narratives

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Abstract

The present review article raises the questions of whether the literature offers any sense and meaning for the contemporary age, what its potential is to take over the role of religion, and to what extent it can offer a moral and epistemological ground for humanity in the wake of posthumanism. To do this, the present review article first posits the problem, second provides a review of significant scholars, and lastly discusses them from a contemporary lens. This study reviews how these parallel matrices of meaning-making bring together levels of narrative, ritual, and representation through myth, religion, and literature, and discusses how narrative, as a metaphor, accounts for their impact as resonant myths. Accordingly, the present study questions whether literature can function as a substitute for religion. Apart from discourse levels, these narratives provide an epistemological and ethical ground for humanity. Hence, this study will pursue insights into how certain theoretical views can be revisited from a contemporary perspective.

Keywords: Myth, religion, literature, narrative, genre, discourse

Emerging disputes regarding ecocriticism and queer theology address religion as narrative as a unique pathway to understanding ‘affect’ and ‘ritual’ and call for reconsidering “narrative faith” or “religion as discourse”. Religion and literature pave the way for grand narratives that represent common narrative foundations, and both “function as symbolic systems of meaning-making”, which helps construct ideology and identity. In fact, they intersect exclusively on epistemological grounds and share parallel narrative discourses. Literature employs (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1973, p. 90), it produces emotional effect, ethical value and epistemological judgment as religious discourse already aims. The art of interpretation and critical studies helps disclose the effect, convey these moral teachings, and reflect cosmic order. What once Hippo (354–430) articulated as moral

strategies of scriptures, well apply to literature: through history (*historyia*), which narrates things that were done; allegory (*allegoria*), which interprets these things figuratively; analogy (*analogia*), which demonstrates the harmony of the Old and New Testaments; and etiology (*aetiologia*), which presents the causes of things that are said and done (*De Genesi ad litteram*).

Since secular and positivist sciences are grounded in the concrete and the empirical, they simply consider the concrete phenomenon of religion as such or religious discourse:

“...while an incredible amount of data, phenomena, human experiences, and expressions may be characterized as religious by one criterion or another in one culture or another, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created by the scholar’s imaginative acts of comparison and generalization for the scholar’s analytic purposes. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy” (Smith, 1988, pp. 231–44).

However, the contemporary crisis of humanism and human agency reverses the shift. Myth, religion, and literature, as intergeneric human narratives, do not decline the divine but redefine it. Such an approach does not differentiate between religious and literary discourse, regardless of the immediate involvement of the divine. Myth, religion, and literature share the metaphysical and transcendental realms, and literature holds a new mission.

Myths and religious narratives have long been taken up by literature, where human aspirations have emerged and been explored. “The relationship of literature to religion extends back to the beginnings of human history, to the time when individuals, or more likely groups, first attempted to explain the significance of their experiences by narrating them in forms that we now call myths” (Smith & William, 1995, p. 661). Religion has been a powerful cultural force that has guided and shaped almost the entire Western tradition. The reason for this is that no other obsession as deeply emotional and ideological as religion can function without expressive representation (Yu, 2009, pp. 1-23). The moral, historical, spiritual, or transcendental codes have been questioned and deciphered as well as reproduced in the course. Throughout history, myth, religion, and literature, whether in the form of narratives or other discursive genres, have served as a powerful vehicle of meaning-making, shaping human consciousness, communal memory, and systems of belief. These domains rely on symbolic representation, narrative structure, and interpretive engagement. There remains a compelling need to explore how myth, religion, and literature operate as parallel symbolic systems, constructing shared codes, enforcing ethical frameworks, and sustaining communal identities through story, ritual, and performance. Drawing on theoretical insights from Aristotle to Arnold, from Geertz to Barthes, from Frye to Eliade, this review argues that myth, religion, and literature produce converging narratives. These domains are prone to generating moral lessons, meaningful worlds, and cosmic realms as they roam the systems of signs and the symbolic order of narrative. Geertz’s “Religion as cultural system”, Barthes’ “Myth as second-order sign system”, Ricoeur’s “narrative identity and interpretation”, or Eagleton’s “literature as ideology and belief” suggest that these narratives (myth, religion, and literature) function as discursive structures that shape social imagination through representation, belief, and interpretation.

As Erich Auerbach suggested, Greek myth and thought, Hebrew epic and wisdom, and Christian symbolism and piety, the 2,500-year-old ‘drama of European literature’ are the extensions of myths and archetypes, evolving into religious traditions with various modes of expression, and their cultural impact remains largely incomplete; we must consider their

literary heritage in both canonical and non-canonical writings. At the very least, as interpreted by a group of theorists and empirical researchers who seek to explain the emergence and evolution of religion through natural (Darwinian) and various social (Spencerian, Durkheimian, and Marxist) forms of selection, religion, like myths and literature, exists through language: “Indeed, if a religion involving an articulated supernatural realm in which powers and beings announce and/or impose moral rules upon humans is to develop, spoken language among early humans will be necessary. Without such a conception of a supernatural realm, religion could not fully come into being” (Turner et al., 2018, p. 142). In other words, language possesses the capacity to uncover the functioning of human thought, and since this process most clearly reveals the cultural dimension of human nature, myths, religion, and literature are inherently and essentially human and naturally manifest themselves through language. Tennyson and Ericson advance this point further by stating that the earliest forms of writing in the languages known to us, such as the Hebrew Bible, the orally derived sacred “texts” of South Asia (from the Vedas to the Bhagavadgītā), the Eddas, ancient Greek and Scandinavian myths and legends, as well as runic inscriptions and funerary inscriptions, are “almost always religious” (Tennyson & Ericson, 1975, p. 9). Alongside reasoning and toolmaking, which enable human survival, religious and literary capacities are accepted as definitive aspects of human life.

Aristotle was the first to use the Greek word *mythos*, meaning speech or narrative, particularly to denote the plot of an action or the arrangement of events. However, much earlier, in Plato’s time, a debate had already begun regarding the truth or value of mythological events. This groundbreaking discussion of myths and texts shaped under their shadow persisted until the Enlightenment. With Giambattista Vico’s conceptualization of myth as “poetic metaphysics” in *The New Science*, a new understanding of myth emerged, enabling a radically new perspective on the relationship between myth and literature. Vico’s metaphysical view of myth as provides a new perspective. He discusses myth as “metaphysical poetics”, which presume the reliability of myth as a source of knowledge, drawing both on literature and religion. Literary compositions that reproduce a mythic narrative regarding its original framework. Critics examining literary works reproducing myths also require the knowledge of conventional forms and contiguous elements of adaptations reflecting the author’s fidelity and deviation at the same time. Secondly, and therefore, these underlying mythical elements disclose the meanings and interpretations of allusions, themes, imagery, names, motifs, symbolic figures, or inherited narratives and events.

Northrop Frye provides complementary perspectives on the infusion of myths into literature. Frye employs the term “displacement” to characterise these adaptations, a concept that shares resemblances with Eliade’s idea of literary “camouflage.” He argues that myth and naturalism represent opposite poles in the arrangement of narrative design. As Frye suggests, Romanticism bonds myth and naturalism, “moving myth in a human direction” (Frye, 2006, p. 126). Within this framework, the recurrence of universal archetypes is thought to be grounded in the collective unconscious. The archetypes such as rebirth, apocalypse, the hero’s quest, eternal return, and the lost paradise offered by Frazer and Murray’s anthropological findings, that align with insights into Jungian psychology. These structural patterns operate on an unconsciously fuelled and consciously developed domains of literary compositions that require astute scrutiny of proliferated patterns.

These archetypes encompass themes like rebirth, apocalypse, the hero’s journey, eternal return, and the lost paradise. This method, rooted in the research of Cambridge anthropologists like Frazer and Murray, gained prominence through Jungian psychology and

was subsequently advanced by Maud Bodkin and Frye. The issue of whether authors consciously create such structural patterns in their texts is not a primary focus for critics like Bodkin, Campbell, and Frye. Criticism, on the other hand, emphasises the coherence and significance of these patterns within the text. Opponents of this approach argue that the hypothesis in question is based on the connection between Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the idea of archetypes, a foundation they consider to be quite unreliable.

According to opponents of this approach, however, the hypothesis in question is grounded in the relationship between Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the concept of archetypes, a foundation they regard as far from reliable.

While Eliade states that myths are traces of ancient cultures and that they transform over time, he refers to this process as degeneration. Myths may degenerate by becoming an epic legend, a ballad, or a novel, or they may continue to exist in smaller forms such as "superstitions," traditions, or nostalgias; in this process, they lose neither their structure nor their meaning. The sufferings and journeys embedded in plots continue, for example, through similar characters such as Don Quixote, Ulysses, Aeneas, Hamlet, and Faust, in narratives that recount the obstacles encountered by the epic or dramatic hero before reaching the goal. These stages and sufferings that constitute the foundation of epic, drama, or the novel can easily be associated with the ritual sufferings and obstacles that lead to salvation. In order to further clarify the degeneration of myths, Eliade initially observes that the conflict between detective and criminal in detective fiction recalls, in earlier stories, the struggle between good and evil spirits or between a dragon and Prince Charming, as well as various similar examples inherited from previous generations. Such examples demonstrate that "slight variations in the plot are explained by displacement, orientation, and differences in popular sensibility, but the theme does not change" (ibid., 368). The idea that the "theme" remains unchanged beneath numerous different literary manifestations whose "slight variations" reflect their changing temporal and spatial contexts is consistent with Eliade's caution elsewhere against attempts to reconstruct the history of Western Indian documents and techniques solely on the basis of marked innovations, developments, and changes over time. From the Indian perspective, "the historical context of a 'revelation' is of only limited importance; the 'appearance' or 'disappearance' of a formula of salvation on the historical plane tells us nothing about its 'origin,'" because "various 'historical moments'[which are at the same time moments of cosmic manifestation][do not create doctrines; they merely produce appropriate formulations for the timeless message" (Eliade, 1969b., p. 154). Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos, that is, their tone, character, and quality of life, their moral and aesthetic style, and their mood, and their worldview, that is, the picture they hold of how things really are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. Religious symbols establish a fundamental congruence between a particular style of life and a particular (often implicit) metaphysics and, in doing so, support each of them with the borrowed authority of the other. Hence, Eliade interprets literary creation as a "means of knowledge" of other worlds parallel to the everyday world and perceives a "structural analogy" between religious phenomena and literature: "Any religious phenomenon is a hierophany, that is, a manifestation of the sacred[a dialectical process that transforms a worldly object or action into something sacred, that is, significant, meaningful, and paradigmatic... In the same way, in the case of literary works, meaningful and exemplary human values are concealed within concrete, historical, and therefore fragmentary characters and events" (Eliade, 1988, p. 176).

The intergeneric relationship between myth, religion, and literature became more visible and sophisticated in the early nineteenth century, as the Romantic movement drew increased

attention to the artist's personality and, subsequently, to the distinctive qualities of the artist's work, replacing the traditional concern with the work's importance and message. Even then, however, moral elements and motivations did not disappear from literature; on the contrary, since Romantics in Germany and Britain tended to use art to "naturalize the supernatural and humanize the divine," the concept of *Kunstreligion* (art-religion, meaning art as religion) came to the fore (Abrams, 1973, p. 68).

"Literature", with numerous descriptive, functional, and normative sets of proposals, as the carrier of human morals, represents humans as such with desires and weaknesses. It cannot be restricted to a mere secular "body of writing" (Adrian, 1996, p. 8). In the mid-twentieth century, Ezra Pound defined literature in aesthetic terms as "language charged with meaning. Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound, 1960, p. 28). Wellek and Austin Warren proposed that the term be restricted to "the art of literature, that is, imaginative literature," and that "the distinctive feature be 'fictionality,' 'invention,' or 'imagination'" (1975, pp. 22, 26). A crucial turning point in this process was the publication of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), an extraordinary and multifaceted study of the traditions of European realism. Although reservations about various aspects of *Mimesis* have grown over time, the work remains of fundamental importance for charting a path of reintegration with the opening chapters that notably compare Old Testament narrative and Homeric epic, and the analysis of the Gospels' elevated "figural" discourse. This turns biblical critics into literary critics, unearthing unprecedented connections across the entire Western literary tradition. This aligns with Auerbach's demonstration that the conventional, overly simplistic opposition between Hebraism and Hellenism was untenable. He highlights the stylistic and narrative features of biblical texts as vital to Europe's cultural heritage since ancient Greece, acknowledging the Bible as part of the literary and cultural tradition for its moral, epistemological, and aesthetic gestures.

Deriving his theory from T. S. Eliot, Frye characterized literature in the 1950s as an autonomous "order of words" (Frye, 2022, p. 18). Eliade similarly interprets literary creation as a "means of knowledge" of other worlds parallel to the everyday world and perceives a "structural analogy" between religious phenomena and literature: "Any religious phenomenon is a hierophany, that is, a manifestation of the sacred, a dialectical process that transforms a profane object or action into something sacred, that is, significant, meaningful, and paradigmatic... In the same way, in literary works, meaningful and exemplary human values are concealed within concrete, historical, and therefore fragmentary characters and events" (Eliade, 1988, p. 176).

"The relationship of literature to religion extends back to the beginnings of human history, to the time when individuals, or more likely groups, first attempted to explain the significance of their experiences by narrating them in forms that we now call myths" (Smith/Green 1995, 661). In the West, the idea that literature was "the handmaiden of religion" was taken for granted from antiquity until the end of the Middle Ages; famously, Boccaccio, in his biography of Dante written between 1351 and 1355, equated poetry and theology and commented on Petrarch's statement: "Theology is nothing other than a part of God's poetry" (Boccaccio, 2002, p. 52). Even then, however, religious elements and motivations did not disappear from literature; on the contrary, since Romantics in Germany and Britain tended to use art to "naturalize the supernatural and humanize the divine," the concept of *Kunstreligion* (art-religion, meaning art as religion) came to the fore (Abrams, 1973, p. 68).

The Romantic period, the late nineteenth century, and art in the twentieth century under the influence of modernism, through their emphasis on artistic originality, individuality, and uniqueness, produced consequences such as the nineteenth-century frenzy of *art for art's sake* and, by the mid-twentieth century, American New Criticism. This latter approach to literature exalted the “aesthetic or pleasing aspect” of the text at the expense of the “useful or instructive” and excluded interest in the “ideas, beliefs, or systems of thought that may lie behind literature or that literature may even be designed to reinforce or express” [...] “the critical position that the religious dimension of literature is insignificant was an understandable extension of the doctrine that a work of art has its own distinctive structure and harmony and is not a piece of propaganda either against or in favour of a particular intellectual position” (Tennyson & Ericson, 1975, pp. 14-15). Beginning with Schlegel and Schelling and continuing with other German Romantics as well as their English and American counterparts, such as Coleridge and Emerson, myth, like poetry, was regarded as a form of truth, constituting an additional instrument alongside reason, logic, or science, and representing an all-encompassing vision of the world through which experience could be grasped. This Romantic conception of myth influenced many, if not most, of the ideas expressed over the past century regarding the relationship between myth and literature. In the early twentieth century, the writings of the anthropologist James Frazer, particularly *The Golden Bough*, along with the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, played a significant role in the revival of interest in myth among literary artists and critics in the mid-twentieth century. This interest, grounded in the Romantic view, primarily emphasizes myth as both literary content and literary form. Far removed from Aristotle’s conception of myth, this emphasis found philosophical support in the mythical-symbolic writings of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer, and was articulated most comprehensively by Hermann Broch, who effectively reversed Aristotle’s understanding of the relationship between myth and *logos*.

However, it is now thought that the close relationship between literature and religion can only be recaptured by the deliberate selection of a critical perspective grounded in the critic’s own ethos and beliefs (Knight&Lee, 2009, p. 65). To the extent that criticism consciously abandons defining and limiting itself solely as secular and allows space for an opening that also embraces the religious and spiritual dimension, literary criticism may escape the impasse into which it has entered.

In the modern period, the moment at which literature ceased to be the “handmaiden” of religion and began to function as one of its secular or heterodox complements [or at times its rival] marks the beginning of the modern study of the religion–literature relationship (Smith/Green 1995, 662–63). This moment can be located in Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (1725, *The New Science*), in which imagination was defined as a general faculty of the human mind, and poetry and truth were identified as two distinct kinds. By the end of the same century, the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) praised poets as the most representative writers of any nation and poetry as the language that best expressed their humanity. In this way, thinkers and writers such as David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, G. W. F. Hegel, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge each, in their own manner, paved the way for defining the realm of sense and sensibility [what came to be called the “aesthetic”] [which they placed philosophically at the centre of the human spiritual condition.

For Coleridge, the Bible is not solely a religious text, but also a significant literary work whose artistic and cultural value can be appreciated. In *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, in “Letter VI,” he argues that the Bible should be read alongside other great literary works such as those of Shakespeare and Milton. He believes that reading the Bible in this way serves as an antidote to “bibliolatry,” or excessive reverence for the Bible (Coburn,

1995, p. 1164). The individual who played the most significant role in assuming power for literature was Matthew Arnold (1888). In his essay “The Study of Poetry” (1880), Arnold expressed regret that the authority of universally accepted religion was beginning to wane; nevertheless, he argued that literature could serve as an alternative to religion’s declining authority in the modern world. At the same time, in a context in which the foundations of science and philosophy appeared unstable and therefore untrustworthy, Arnold ultimately promoted literature, especially poetry, with its “high destinies”, as the most valuable substitute “to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us” (Arnold, 1903, pp. 3-4). Arnold believed that literature, particularly poetry, could help us understand human experiences and emotions in depth and therefore play an important role in modern society. Through this initial account of the origins and development of the modern religion and literature relationship, Arnold also paved the way for subsequent, more disciplined scholarly investigations. Matthew Arnold, one of the leading poets and cultural critics of the Victorian period, regarded poetry as an alternative to religion, while at the same time characterizing the language of the Bible as “literary” and “poetic,” and therefore worthy of admiration. According to Arnold, “the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.” Arnold’s argument that literature serves society in favour of establishing a moral frame of order makes it a substitute for religion. Considering the challenges of scientific advancement and revolutionary philosophical ideas that undermine the authority of traditional religious belief, Arnold reflected on the moral and spiritual rehabilitation of society, assigning an essential role to literature, particularly to the major works of poetry to provide moral guidance, ethical mythological function.

Contemporary humanities once again encounter the essentiality of literary works in reproducing ethical guidance in the form of narratives that help society stick to each other and promote moral development. Literature, with many underlying mythical, therefore religious, narratives with broader cultural underpinnings, is the steering force of society towards collective integration. Such moral and ethical guidance provided by great literary works, Arnold once suggested, should be highlighted by criticism and the humanities. Today, literature takes over the role of ethical guidance and epistemological premises, and at the turn of posthumanism, it should avail itself with a meaningful backdrop, if not spiritual at all, education towards moral improvement. Just like the works of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare, literature is situated at the core of the humanities, is not only a realm of representation but a domain of rituals to substitute religion. Legitimacy that does not come from a divine authority, but it fulfils emotional needs as a social praxis and function. The fact that literature plays a significant social role that helps fulfil moral and ethical functions highlights the importance of narratives, through myth and religion, on which literature operates. Although he does not explicitly reject religion, Arnold’s ideas suggest that literature can serve as an alternative by offering intellectual and emotional support at a time when faith in traditional religious institutions is in decline. A striking case for this phenomenon is modern and postmodern women writers’ feminist allegories, which incorporate “narratological mediation”, through which modern readers are invited to revisit “gender relations” or “ecological responsibility” as “narrative form itself becomes an ethical domain” (Aldemir, 2025, p. 412) to reconsider moral prospectus.

Mythological elements inherited from earlier cultures manifest in literary texts through frequent allusions, themes, images, names, motifs, symbolic characters, and inherited plots and scenes. Observing “the widespread distribution of similar myths,” figures such as Vico concluded that “if these common features cannot be explained by transmission from one culture to another, the alternative is that the human mind (or human experience as processed

by the mind) is structured in such a way that certain modes of thought and their associated narratives are produced by all human beings” (Harris, 1969, p. 247). Critics of myth and scholars of literary thematics who embraced this concept, often assuming it to be corroborated by Freud’s theories of the unconscious. Harris argues, “myths ultimately express fundamental human responses to life that cannot be expressed in any other way” (p. 248). The work of such scholars is devoted to tracing the ways in which mythical materials are taken up and adapted by literary artists, directly or through transformation, and consciously or unconsciously.

Characters such as Hamlet, Faust, Don Juan, Don Quixote, and Robinson Crusoe, each of which has acquired cult status in literature, and the narratives of writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, and Hermann Hesse have been regarded as “archetypes of humanity” even though they are not originally based on a ritual or on universal archetypal patterns and motifs. One of the principal criticisms directed at the concept of literary mythmaking is the belief that myths cannot be consciously created, deliberately accepted, or intentionally brought into being, because literature has already taken the place of religion and myth.

One of the principal criticisms of the concept of literary mythmaking is the belief that myths cannot be deliberately created, willingly accepted, or intentionally brought into existence, because literature has already replaced myth. Myth and literature appear as a single body nourished by the same roots. However, the notion that the process of formation is as much psychological as a literary theme reveals the limits of this theory for scholars who focus more strictly on textual analysis.

To conclude, intergeneric features of myths, religious discourses, and literature demonstrate that they share historically constructed moral teachings. From ancient myths and sacred narratives to Enlightenment critiques, Romantic reinterpretations, and modern theoretical debates, they have constantly shaped each other through a common ground in language, symbolism, narrative form, and interpretation. Hence, literature is not only a purely aesthetic realm of representation or a complete form of art, but also a field of human exploration, operating on the continuum of narratives that address essential questions of humanity or meaning-making domains, as was executed earlier by myth and religion.

A critical review of fundamental human issues such as origin and death, pain and suffering, good and evil, cosmos and chaos, self and identity, and individual and social consciousness demonstrates that constructive pillars of humanity and society are erected on narratives punctuated with myth, symbol, ritual, and hierophany, highlighting humans’ cultural and religious perseverance through civilisations. Drawing on the past critical experience from High Criticism to Auerbach’s figurative realism, we are at the threshold of a new narrative era. Rather than diminishing the significance of mythical and therefore religious markers through literature, we should come to acknowledge that literature will serve to carry the mission of “human-making”. This does not require reducing literature to theology or re-assigning it divine authority through writing, rewriting, and criticism; instead, it dismantles the tension between sacred and secular modes, since both are cultural constructs, and there is no purely profane realm of existence. Rather, literature and literary criticism should reclaim Arnold’s mission in the contemporary era and shoulder the burden of God and humanity.

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