

An American Mythology : Why *Star Wars* Still Matters

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Though the new prequels have been widely contrasted unfavourably with the original trilogy, the entire *Star Wars* universe remains a **cultural institution of immense proportions**. Its impact on Hollywood alone has been incalculable. It's impossible to imagine *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Matrix*, or *The Lord of the Rings* without *Star Wars*. In fact, Lucas's bitterest critics charge *Star Wars* with nothing less than 'ruining' Hollywood by turning it from the gritty and sophisticated era of the 60s-70s towards **youthful fantasy, spectacle, and romanticism**.

In my opinion, Lucas and Spielberg saved Hollywood from the decadence of the *sex, drugs and rock'n'roll generation* and brought back old-fashioned *good vs. evil* storytelling back to Theaters after the gap of the 70s. Artistically, the **flaws and limitations** of the *Star Wars* films are inescapable : the original trilogy is goofy, indifferently acted, poorly thought out in some respects, with not infrequently inconsistent ideas verging on self-contradiction, and the prequels brought a host of new problems, adding more fuel to the fire. Yet, despite these pitfalls, Lucas's universe has had an **impact on entire generations** utterly out of all proportion to its **formidable qualities as spectacle or excitement**. The Force, Jedi knights and lightsabers, Darth Vader, Obi-Wan, Princess Leia, Yoda, the Death Star hold a place in the collective imagination of countless Americans and movie-goers worldwide that can only be described as mythic.

1 – *Star Wars* : a new Myth

Star Wars is **the quintessential American mythology**, an American take on King Arthur, Tolkien, and the samurai / *wuxia* epics of the East, dressed in the space-opera trappings of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon and festooned with a variety of nostalgic Hollywood influences — serial-adventure swashbuckling, WWII movie dogfights, movie-Nazi villains, and Western saloon shootouts.

The *Americana* of cowboys and Indians, is also, in its own way, an art form generally set ‘long ago’ and ‘far, far away’ near or beyond the borders of fairyland. Like the stories of Arthurian Logres, or of the classical Greco-Roman gods and heroes, the lore of the Old West is the accumulation of **innumerable stories told and retold innumerable times** and in innumerable ways by innumerable voices. In this respect, *Star Wars* is a pop counterpart to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* — an essentially original work of epic *mythopoeia*, one with many sources and inspirations to be sure, but shaped by one storyteller.

Of course it goes without saying that as mythopoeia *Star Wars* doesn’t hold a candle to *The Lord of the Rings*. This is true for several reasons; but the main reason, indisputably, is the **sheer disparity between the artistic, imaginative, spiritual, and intellectual resources of the two creators, as well as their respective ambitions**. It’s also fair to note that Lucas had a movie to make, while Tolkien had a series of texts to work on. Tolkien also had the luxury of redacting and refining his story to a greater degree than Lucas has managed to contrive, despite his best efforts in the theatrical special editions and the latest DVD versions.

Tolkien was an Oxford scholar of languages and literature, a man intimately familiar with **Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythological texts** in the original languages, who wanted to create a mythology for England and the English. Tolkien discounted the *Arthuriana* as real mythology, on the grounds of its historical and especially religious entanglements with the real world. He was also a devout Roman Catholic.

Lucas, by contrast, is a filmmaker of decidedly uneven talent and some passing familiarity with mythic archetypes absorbed from all over the world ; a religious indifferentist who made *Star Wars* films as popcorn movies for children and yet gave them this incredible power, despite their flaws, to reach the child within us even today through its mythic qualities.

What are these much-derided mythic qualities ? Many critics charge *Star Wars* with such artistic liabilities as **stereotypical characters and situations, lack of psychological depth**, and an **unnuanced, moralizing vision of good versus evil**. What such critics seem not to understand is how the conventions of mythology work. Its characters and situations aren’t so much *stereotypical* as *archetypal* — consciously so in the case of *Star Wars*, thanks to the mythic and archetypal patterns and structures Lucas absorbed from **Joseph Campbell’s** influential treatise *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

2 – Archetypes and good vs. evil in *Star Wars*

Stereotypes and archetypes *seem* similar — but the chords they strike are very different :

- **Stereotypes** work by exploiting **popular cultural prejudices and assumptions**. For example, James Cameron's *Titanic*, the all-time U.S. box-office champion, struck a popular chord with audiences in part by exploiting stereotyped notions of the rich as snobbish, repressed twits, of the poor as life-loving free spirits, of passionate love as transcending moral or social rules, *etc.*
- **Archetypes**, by contrast, work by **connecting with basic categories**. Archetypal figures in the *Star Wars* movies include the hero (Luke Skywalker), the wise old man (Ben Kenobi), the call to adventure and initial refusal of the call (Luke resists Ben's invitation to come with him and learn to be a Jedi knight), the crisis (the heroes are swallowed by the fearsome Death Star space station), and so on...

In fairytales and myths, the **struggle of good and evil stands out in sharper relief** than in realistic drama, which must reflect in some way the **awkward contradictions, grey areas and mixed motives**. This is what some critics object to : *Is this the view of conflict we want to raise our children with ? Don't we want them to have a more nuanced, critical view of the world ? How many wars in the real world resemble Lucas's all-white Rebel Alliance versus the all-black Evil Empire ?*

In my point of view, there is at least one : the **War of Heaven and Hell**. And this one *does* break out from time to time, with reasonable clarity, in earthly conflicts of one sort or another. And in such battles there is no middle ground, nor place for shades of grey. Certainly we want our children to learn to recognize **nuances** and the legitimacy of honest disagreement. Of course we want them to be **critical thinkers**, to question their own leaders, to consider sympathetically the other side in conflicts, and so forth...

On the other hand, we also want them to recognize that there is in this world **sheer good and sheer evil**, and for bringing this reality alive to the mind and imagination, there's no substitute for *mythopoeia*. And, in today's world, for bringing mythopoeia alive to children, there are few films like *Star Wars*. Without question, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* is superior *mythopoeia* — but it's also less kid-friendly.

Star Wars's credentials as mythopoeia aren't undisputed. In a scathing essay, Steven Hart argues that *Star Wars* is pure pulp sci-fi, and that any claims of creating a new myth are merely **pretentious self-promotion on Lucas's part**. Once again, Hart has a point. Lucas *is* a bumptious gasbag whose utterances need to be taken with. But there *is* still something in the **patterns and motives** of *Star Wars* that makes it worthy of being called 'myth'.

3 – Heroes and Transformations in *Star Wars*

Among other **mythic patterns** is the **crisis motif**, which overeager commentators have found everywhere from the *Millennium Falcon's* detour into the gullet of the space slug in *The Empire Strikes Back* to the flight into the trash compactor in *A New Hope*. Personally I don't think that either of these really count, since the significance of the crisis motif depends on some kind of **important transition or transformation**, a death-and-rebirth experience, like Jonah in the belly of the whale, or Christ in the sepulchre. After all, it's not as if the escape from the trash compactor were marked by some leap in Luke's abilities in the Force, or as if the journey into the space slug changed Han and Leia's relationship somehow.

However, if you put the crisis not in the trash compactor but in the **Death Star** itself, the pattern applies. A strikingly similar example of the same pattern, in fact, can be found in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in the journey of the fellowship through the **Mines of Moria**. Both here and in the Death Star, the heroes are obliged to descend with great trepidation into the bowels of an enemy-occupied stronghold and ultimately battle their way out, fleeing enemies who pursue them to their final destination. Most crucially, in both cases the heroes escape only after the wizard-mentor archetype **sacrifices himself in battle with an icon of evil, giving the others the opportunity to escape**. There's even a pit in the Death Star near where Obi-Wan falls, echoing the chasm where Gandalf falls — a strong suggestion that Lucas was influenced here consciously or not by *LOTR*, which had a huge cult following in the 1960s.

The loss of the mentor is a key turning point in the hero's journey : King Arthur is similarly deprived of Merlin at some point in various versions of his story, changing the hero by leaving him to **rely on his own resources** in a new way. In *Star Wars* this transition is both enhanced and softened by the fact that Luke is immediately aware of Obi-Wan's disembodied presence and hears him inside : '*Run, Luke, run !*' — elevating Luke to a new level of awareness in the ways of the Force.

Ironically, while Obi-Wan prophesies just before being struck down by Darth Vader that he will ‘*become more powerful than you can possibly imagine*’, it’s Gandalf who really does become more powerful as a result of his fall, while Lucas was never able to invest the spectral Kenobi with greater power or wisdom than he had in life — a disparity that seems to be rooted directly in the two men’s religious views. Tolkien’s story draws on his belief in the **resurrection of the dead** and especially the resurrection of Christ, while Lucas’s ultimately reflects only a **vague spirituality of the survival of the soul**.

The Death Star experience also changes Luke by giving him the opportunity to **take an important first step on his journey to hero status**, i.e., the **rescue of the maiden**. At the same time, the dynamics of the rescue of the maiden motif are obviously affected by the fact that the maiden here is no helpless *damsel in distress*, but a take-charge Rebel leader.

Other examples in *Star Wars* of this pattern of descent into and embattled escape from hostile territory accompanied by a **significant character transition** include the following :

1. The Wampa ice creature’s cave in *Empire Strikes Back*, where Luke’s escape *does* involve a leap of his abilities in the Force
2. The evil tree on Yoda’s swamp planet in *Empire Strikes Back*, where Luke is confronted by his own failure and the spectre of some dark mystery involving Darth Vader
3. Luke’s rescue mission into the bowels of Jabba’s palace in *Return of the Jedi*, and in particular his descent into the Rancor dungeon and last-minute escape from the Sarlacc, throughout which Luke is transformed from apprentice upstart to proven warrior-hero
4. Luke’s journey into the second Death Star in *Return of the Jedi*, where he faces and overcomes his greatest challenge and finally achieves the rank of Jedi knight
5. The entrance into the Coliseum on Geonosis in *Attack of the Clones*, where threat of imminent death leads Amidala to confess her love for Anakin
6. The opening sequence in *Revenge of the Sith*, in which Anakin fights his way into an enemy ship and winds up taking an important step in his journey to the dark side

The mythology of *Star Wars* has many elements : the Jedi knights, with their preternatural powers in the tradition of the high-flying *wuxia* warriors of Chinese fiction and cinema ; their evil counterparts, the Sith or Darth Lords, who always come in twos ; recurring motifs such as the climactic duel over a bottomless pit into which the vanquished combatant usually falls. Of these, none is better known than the *Force*, locus of mystery and meaning in the Jedi universe.

4 – About the Force

a) The Nature of the Force

Here, too, it is possible to discern **Campbell's influence**. Campbell himself seems to have been a sort of **pantheist or monist**, who believed that the '*ultimate mystery*' was **impersonal energy** rather than a personal God. As appropriated by Lucas, the '*Force*' seems to be more **ambiguous and pervasive** than Campbell's idea of impersonal energy :

- In *A New Hope* the Force is described as an '**energy field**' generated by living things and binding the galaxy together, which partially '*controls your actions*' but also '*obeys your commands*.'
- In *The Phantom Menace*, on the other hand, the Force seems to have a more personal quality : Jedi knight Qui-Gon speaks repeatedly of the '**living Force**' and even of the '*will of the Force*', which resonates more with theism.

b) The Two Sides of the Force

That the Force has a 'good side' and a 'dark side' is well known. And while we're told in *The Empire Strikes Back* that the dark side isn't stronger, it's not clear that the good side is stronger either, allowing for the possibility of a **yin-yang balance of good and evil**. Yet a number of factors suggest that good and evil aren't really on an equal footing after all. For example, there is the overall series' moral outlook, including the **climactic triumph of good over evil in the daring redemptive twist** at the end of *Return of the Jedi*.

There's also the way the characters use the language of '*the Force*' without qualification to refer specifically to the good side, whereas if you mean the dark side you have to specify. No one says '*Use the good side of the Force*' or '*May the good side of the Force be with you*' ; it's taken for granted. In fact, the very phrase '*the good side*' is hardly ever used, and '*the good side of the Force*' not at all that I can think of ; whereas '*the dark side*' and '*the dark side of the Force*' are used all the time. '*The good side*' isn't needed, because '*the Force*' without qualification *means* the good side.

c) Balance or Triumph

- The *Return of the Jedi* — as the whole of the Trilogy — established Luke Skywalker as the only hope for the *triumph of good over evil* by **destroying the evil of the Sith** — which suggested the **primacy of good over evil**, in keeping with Judeo-Christian teaching.
- On the contrary, the Prequels add a wrinkle to this previous conception by establishing Anakin Skywalker as a messianic ‘*chosen one*’ destined to ‘**bring balance to the Force.**’ *The Revenge of the Sith* now makes unambiguously clear that this whole combat is about establishing an **equality of good and evil**, thus re-defining the Force as a pervasive *yin-yang* coexistence and interpenetration of good and evil.

In a 1999 interview with Bill Moyers, Lucas suggested that the Force is not meant to resonate with any specific religious outlook, but to **awaken the sense of the transcendent** : ‘*It’s designed primarily to make people think about the mystery. (...) Is there a God...? What does God feel like ? How do we relate to God ?*’ In a nutshell, Lucas says : ‘*Ultimately the Force is the larger mystery of the universe*’ and to ‘*use the Force*’ is to take a ‘*leap of faith.*’

5 – Postmodern Transcendence and Morality in *Star Wars*

Like the subsequent *Matrix* trilogy, the *Star Wars* films include both Eastern and Western influences, and have been expounded and explored from a wide variety of perspectives, including Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, New Age, and many more. The *Matrix* films, though, fused Zen and Christian themes into a postmodern narrative lacking any real sense of transcendence or moral vision. *Star Wars*, by contrast, offers a more traditional moral universe with **real transcendence and good versus evil**.

Unfortunately, the new prequels, especially Episodes I and II, have in general **failed to live up to the standards of the original trilogy**. Despite some staggering achievements in world-building and *bravura* action sequences, the **heart of the original films has been lacking**. The humour and charm that made Luke, Leia, and Han such fun has been basically missing among Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Anakin Skywalker, and Padmé. The more George Lucas elaborates Anakin Skywalker’s history, the less the bits and pieces we already know seem to fit...

Most seriously, the mythological and archetypal inspirations that had made the original trilogy so resonant are missing in Episodes I and II. The original trilogy was about **good and evil, heroism and villainy, discipline and passion, temptation and redemption**. By contrast, Episodes I and II are largely about **political intrigue and debates, adolescent rebellion and tepid puppy love**. The straightforward adventure plotting of the original trilogy was replaced by abstruse political machinations over trade route taxation and Republic Separatism.

Where the original trilogy revolved around **Jungian archetypes**, the prequels are distinctly **Freudian, even Oedipal**; Anakin is a tragic figure destined to kill his (surrogate) father, Obi-Wan, and marry his (surrogate) mother, Padmé.

- The original trilogy *subverted* Freudian theory. *The Return of the Jedi* is fundamentally the story of a son who **refuses** to fight and destroy his father — in fact, who **sacrifices himself and suffers in order to save his father**. Also, the hero Luke has no mother-figure and doesn't end up married
- In the prequels, by contrast, the **Freudian and Oedipal patterns** are clear and overt. There are obvious psycho-analytic overtones in the way people are always bringing up Anakin's mother. '*Your feelings dwell on your mother,*' says a Jedi Council member in *The Phantom Menace* who actually looks like an alien Freud, with a white beard and a curiously wrought head that seems at once philosophical and phallic. Certainly the meaningful inflection on *mother*, with an upward lilt on the first syllable, is no accident.
- Nor is it inadvertent that Padmé is **markedly older than Anakin**, or that he loses his mother as a child shortly after meeting her. Nor that he repeatedly says in *Episode II — Attack of the Clones* that Obi-Wan is '*like a father to me*' or '*the closest thing I have to a father*' — a father that he resents with all the violence of adolescence.

Thus in a way, in *Episode I and II*, the **Oedipus cycle replaced Good vs. Evil battles of the old Trilogy**. With *Revenge of the Sith* though, Lucas has finally again tapped into the **inspiration of the original trilogy** and created the mythic precursor that he first conceived decades ago. Where the original trilogy was about the rise of a hero, *Revenge of the Sith* is about the **fall of a tragic figure**, evil undermining good not only by direct attack but also by **seductive subversion...**

6 – Christian Allegories in *Star Wars* ?

The Revenge of the Sith opens with an extended action sequence climaxing with Anakin piloting a spaceship out of orbit for a crash-landing to the planet below, like **Lucifer falling from the Heavens**. By the finale, Anakin's descent into perdition is complete as he falls in battle with his mentor Obi-Wan on a volcano planet amid raging rivers of lava, a veritable lake of fire casting a **Hellish glow** over the combatants.

Anakin's climactic near-destruction in the lake of fire is the last and one of the most striking examples of **Lucas's dependence on Christian imagery**. Other examples include :

- *The Phantom Menace's* **overtly satanic Darth Maul** : he is horned, red-skinned, in black
- Anakin as a **virgin-born 'chosen one'** of prophecy destined to destroy evil
- *The Revenge of the Sith's* terrible **Order 66**, an echo of the number of the Beast from the Book of Revelation
- The redemptive suffering of the son, Luke Skywalker, at the climax of *Return of the Jedi*

Needless to say, *Star Wars* is **very far from Christian allegory**. If it generally avoids overt **yin-yang dualism or pantheism**, elements of Eastern religion are still very much in evidence. In *The Empire Strikes Back* Yoda famously endorses gnostic contempt for physicality and the body : '*Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter*' and in *Revenge of the Sith* Yoda articulates the Jedi ethic of detachment in a way that goes beyond Christian freedom from excessive attachment into **Buddhist impassiveness** : according to Yoda, our acceptance of death should be so complete that we shouldn't even mourn the dead.

Yet these Eastern strains are leavened, even contradicted, by the series' **humanistic and Christian tendencies**. Yoda may dismiss the body, yet the series embraces personal immortality, individual life after death rather than mere oneness with the Force. What's more, it affirms that the eschatological fate of the good and the bad is not the same : death for the evil Sith is simply destruction, but for the Jedi it is the doorway to new life.

Because of this **eschatological finality**, the **ubiquitous theme of temptation and moral choice** has an urgency in *Star Wars* that it can never have in Eastern religion. Temptation for Buddha would be a **stepping-stone on the inevitable path to enlightenment**. For Anakin and Luke, by contrast, temptation represents the **treacherous appeal of the road to destruction**. And, in the end, the series rejects Yoda's Zen-like doctrine of total detachment

by predicating the redemption of Darth Vader and the destruction of the Sith on **Luke's filial loyalty to his father** and **Vader's paternal bond to his son**.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, what the *Star Wars* films offer is not a coherent philosophy of life, morality, or spirituality. Rather, they offer rousing storytelling suffused by **themes of moral struggle and transcendence**. They aren't Christian, and not without their problems — any more than the classical Greco-Roman myths that generations of Christian children have grown up reading. Yet, like those classical myths, they give **imaginative shape to basic human insights**, and like the classical myths they have become a part of our cultural landscape.

If the adventures of Hercules and Odysseus can be enjoyed by Christians and shared with their children, those of Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi have a place as well. *Star Wars* is pop mythology — and it can be vastly preferable to no myth at all, and certainly to other, less wholesome mythologies as *The Matrix*. There is so much to enjoy and appreciate in these **stunningly mounted fantasies** of good and evil in a *galaxy far, far away*...