

WHEN THE WORLD ENDS

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DESTRUCTION MYTHS BY KAMTOYA OKEKE

INTRODUCTION

Some of the earliest human writing grapples with the question of time and death. What does it mean? How does it happen? Why? These eschatological questions are the domain of destruction myths, which address them in narratives driven by large-scale destruction of the physical (and immaterial) world.

This project aims to answer the question: What is the literary function of destruction as a genre of mythology, and can ancient destruction myths have modern day relevance?

APPROACH

This project utilises close reading and comparative interpretation of four ancient myths.

- Revelations (The Bible, c. 96CE)
- Ragnarok (Poetic Edda, c. 1270CE; Prose Edda, c. 1230CE)
- Naimittika Pralaya (Bhagavata Purana, c. 400-1000CE)
- Five Suns (Codex Chimalpopoca, c. 1400CE)

These texts were selected because they (1) present complete narratives, (2) depict total destruction, (3) represent different cultures, times, and geographies, and (4) are accessible in English translations. Specific translations were chosen for their scholarly usage, accuracy, and readability to focus on their literary qualities over spiritual or religious aspects. Dates are approximate estimates of composition, but all texts originate in older oral traditions.

FRAMEWORK

"Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong," and represent a "system and cultural transformation." (Todorov 197, 200)

Todorov's idea that literature is, in part, a product of its environment, capable of change and interpretation is essential to this project's lens. Using Modern Genre Theory, a larger framework which views genre as a dynamic reflection of the author's choices and a reader's interpretation. This dual aspect informs this project's choice of close reading to make definitive statements about destruction as a form of genre, and draw modern day connections from ancient mythology.

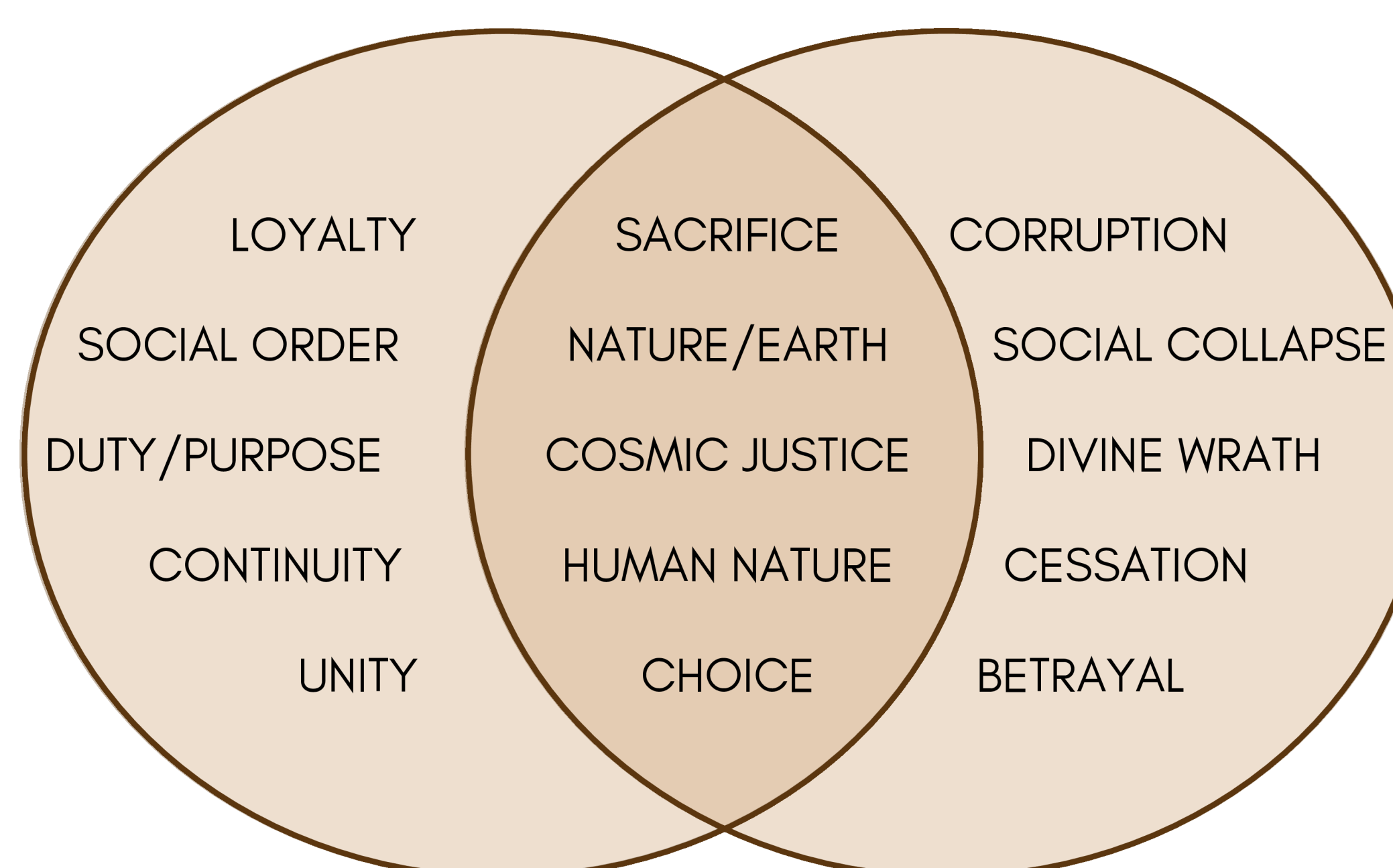
ANALYSIS

STRUCTURE

Even for myths with cultures that believe in a linear, rather than circular, progression of time, each of the four myths represent a cyclic view of destruction. Destruction myths, therefore, are set in a version of utopia, describe a slow regression of society, and then its destruction in order to return it to its original state or bring about a new, ideal world.



VALUES & FEARS



THEMES & MOTIFS

"Myths are not tested by whether they correspond to the real world; myths create the world we take as real." (Barr 21)

Sacrifice of a Salvation Figure:

- Heroes: Krishna, Jesus Christ, Tezcatlipoca
- The bodies of gods and other semi-divine figures are often the birthplace of new life; e.g. Ymir, Quetzalcoatl

Nature as a Destructive and Regenerative Force:

- Preludes to destruction (and recreation: floods, fires, earthquakes, extinguished sun)
- Trees: Yggdrasil, Tree of Life, Vishnu's lotus flower
- Human nature is often the cause of destruction; disruption of social order, decline into amoral actions

Dystopia as the Foundation and Consequence of Utopia:

- Foreshadowing cycles: Mahayuga, Nidhoggr,
- Serpents, symbolizing the necessary counterpart to goodness: Midgard-serpent, Sesa, Cipactli

CONCLUSION

1. Destruction is a form of salvation in these myths. They represent renewal and hope of a future beyond current issues and the perceived decline of society, morals, and existence.
2. This genre is created through tensions between the real world and the fantastical, and the divine and human. These texts are based in reality, and reflect the society and cultural anxieties of the time, some of which are still present today.
3. The four chosen texts present human values and fears that are, for the most part, universal not only to destruction myths, but to modern societies as well. These findings indicate that ancient eschatological texts can and do have relevance in the current day.

OUTLOOK

This project is ongoing and will expand on this preliminary analysis exploring the sociological implication and mythological patterns present in the current day. By investigating modern interpretations of myth, it is my hope to explain, more clearly, how ancient narratives, specifically destruction myths, continue to shape contemporary thought and culture. Additionally it would be particularly interesting to expand the primary sources to include myths from other regions, especially those that are less concrete (either as oral stories or fragmented works), in order to provide additional support for my claims.

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Sources in this poster include:

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