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Peircean Patterns of the Christ Story and the Analogous Manifestations in Popular Narrative

Jessica Young

Of all the ways to retell a story, an analogy is perhaps the most beautiful and memorable. There are aspects of a well-known story which, when retold in creative analogy, become new discoveries. Behind all the details of a story, details that can be altered in an analogy, lies a pattern. This pattern stays the same whether in the straight telling of a story or in an analogous telling of the story. The story of Jesus Christ is not only the greatest story ever told but probably the one most often retold by analogy.

When I was in the eighth grade, The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1966) was required reading for my literature class. During class discussion, my teacher began expounding on the nature of the Christ Story depicted in the book. It bothered me that the only evidence given was coincidence or various symbols, but there was no pattern to necessarily match the analogy to. And so began my quest for the underlying pattern of the Christ Story.

BACKGROUND

Peircean Pattern

It was not until I began studying the philosophies of Charles Sanders Peirce that I found a semiotic pattern that began to prove itself in many different analyses. Peircean patterns are based on triads and truth relationships. There are three corners and three sides, each having a specific relationship to one another. The upper left corner of the inverted equilateral triangle is defined as representing “firstness,” the apex (bottom) corner is “secondness,” and the upper right corner is “thirdness.” Just as the mixing of two primary colors produces a secondary color (yet still distinctive in its own right), the sides of the triangle are defined as combinations of the two corners on the ends. For example, the side between firstness and secondness is representative of a secondary category labeled “firstness of secondness.” The remaining sides are defined in the same manner (see figure 1).

This is not merely a diagram in which to insert random or even progressive elements. Just as the sides and angles in geometry have

Figure 1. Peircian Pattern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firstness 1-1</th>
<th>Fitness of Thirdness 1-3</th>
<th>Thirdness 3-3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>3-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstness of Secondness 1-2

Secondness

DLLS 2000
Figure 2. Peircian Categories

![Peircian Categories Diagram]

Potential  Law  Resolve

Identity  Test

Reality, Conflict

Peircian Categories

The pattern doesn’t operate by simply filling these categories and trying to establish geometrical and logical relationships. Each of the categories, according to Peirce, has a particular semiotic significance. This is to say that each category is representative of a specific idea, and it is actually these ideas that form the categories and the resulting geometric relationships (see figure 2).

The idea behind firstness is that of potential. It is a primary starting place on the diagram and represents everything that is the initial. Anything of chaos, birth, sensation, or beginning should be placed here. Secondness is reality. It is the category of conflict, that which stands between what one could be and what one is to become. It is also the idea of the physical world. Thirdness is defined by resolve. It is the goal, the evolutionary end, the fulfillment of the truth represented in the triad diagram. These are the basic ideas behind the three basic categories.

The secondary ideas, or those which fall on the sides, are not only progressive from corner to corner counterclockwise but are both conglomerates of the two end corners and inverses of the opposite corner. Firstness of secondness is a category of identity between potential, where all things are possible, and reality, where things are being proved and actual. Identity is the place of discovery and defining the bounds and bases. It is inverse to resolve, where everything has been proven, and the identity is confirmed. Firstness of thirdness is the category of law or pattern. Law is a combination of what is possible and what should be. It is inverse to reality and
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Figure 4. Narrative Cycle

sacrifice (phrase)

conflict law-pattern

event law-pattern

event

... law-pattern

resolution (sacrifice-head)

character closure


therefore has very little to do with the application of the law. The relationship between firstness of thirdness and secondness is very much the same as that between theory and application. Secondness of thirdness is the idea of test or sacrifice. It falls between the conflict or reality of the situation and the resolved outcome. It is inverse to the idea of potential. That which was possible is being proved in secondness of thirdness.

It should be noted that this is an evolutionary diagram and therefore will not continue to cycle with the same nodes. It initially begins with potential and cycles through to resolve and then begins again using law as the node of firstness because it has already been established by the existence of resolve. This pattern then repeats itself again and again, coming exponentially closer to complete resolve (this is shown by the smaller triangle inside figure 2).

Narrative Pattern

The Peircean pattern holds very solidly for narrative pattern. The firstness category is the event background, the point where the elements of the story become important enough to be a story. Something of potential, of endless possibilities, is introduced and the narrative is begun. (From this point on, the secondary categories on the triad will be written as 1-2, 1-3, 2-3.) Next, the characters are introduced and their identities

Figure 5. The Christ Story, Basic Pattern

Birth

Prophesy

Resurrection and resolve

Growing knowledge of who he is

Sacrifice

Conflict

Directly involving who he is
Figure 6. The Christ Story, Pattern A

Mary is told of the child she will have: Luke 1:31-32

BIRTH

DEATH

Jesus Christ makes the atoning sacrifice for all mankind: John 19:30

Luke 1:31-32—“And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. And he shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest.”

John 10:30—“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.”

established. This is the 1-2 node on the diagram. It involves the narrowing of potential through the reality of the narrative’s universe, and the characters become clear through this narrowing (see figure 3). The conflict of the narrative fits at secondness. This is the opposition of the story, the “good verses evil” that is necessary for there to be any story to tell. This is the most critical part of the narrative pattern. Without conflict of some type, there is nothing important to tell. 1-3 is manifest in the narrative pattern by being the law or pattern that must be followed or fulfilled. It is directly related to the actual events and the conflict. Most often, law is evidenced by some foretelling, prophecy, or anomaly that directly concerns the opposition and reality of the story. The 2-3 node is the sacrifice or test of the narrative. This is the point where the characters prove themselves, the “do or die” (and sometimes both) of the story. The potential of all involved elements is actively proved. Narrative pattern and Peircean pattern hinge on this event. Without it, there can be no resolution to the conflict of the story. The battles must be fought, the prices must be paid, and the choices must be made in order to reach the goal or resolve. The finale of the narrative pattern is the denouement or outcome. This is thirdness and the goal of the evolutionary pattern. Character closure is a part of this category.

Just as the pattern is not necessarily finalized at the resolve, so it is in the narrative. Some things are resolved, and then the new firstness node becomes the law or pattern to be followed. Because of this, the pattern for narrative can cycle several times through tests and minor resolves and patterns until the finale (see figure 4).

THE CHRIST STORY

Basic Pattern

The narrative pattern is found in all complete narrative. However, there are specific types of narrative, and the Christ story is one of these types. It, too, follows a Peircean triad (see figure 5). From his birth (1) to the growing knowledge of who he is (1-2), to the conflict surrounding his entire existence (2), which was prophesied (1-3), to his atoning sacrifice (2-3), to his resurrection and ascension (3), this particular narrative pattern is expanded even further when the text from which it is drawn is examined.

Pattern A

The three corner-side relationships are distinctive from one another and will be discussed as such. The firstness-
secondness of thirdness axis (see figure 6) shows the relationship between the birth of Christ and the death of Christ. Firstness is potential, and the birth of Christ that of the greatest potential. In Luke 1:31–32, an angel tells Mary, “And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. And he shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest.” This is immediately opposite the 2-3 node on the triad and therefore, the inverse of that node, Christ’s sacrifice and death. John 19:30 depicts this event: “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.”

Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to have entered into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” It is interesting that in this category of the pattern (thirdness), all other ideas are contained: the foretelling, the coming, the identity, the suffering, the sacrifice, and the final glory. This is further evidence for the evolutionary nature of the pattern.

Pattern C

The final pattern of the Christ story is that of the firstness of thirdness—
Figure 8. The Christ Story, Pattern C

Isaiah 53:4—"Surly he hath borne out griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet, we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."
Matthew 26:39—"And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."

secondness axis (see figure 8). As was mentioned before, this is best understood as that relationship between theory and actual application. The 1-3 node is the prophesy of the life of Christ and all that would come. Isaiah 53:4 says, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet, we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." The inverse of prophesy is the realization of it, and Matthew 26:39 states, "He went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." Christ fulfilled the prophecies that every prophet ever wrote concerning him. The fulfilling of these given patterns came through great opposition both in himself and in the universe around him (fulfilling of 1-3 patterns through secondness opposition).

There is in all things a pattern that is part of our universe. It has symmetry, elegance, and grace—those qualities you find always in that which the true artist captures. You can find it in the turning of the seasons, in the way the sand trails along a ridge, in the branch clusters of the creosote bush or the pattern of its leaves. We try to copy these patterns in our lives and our society, seeking the rhythms, the dances, the forms that comfort. Yet, it is possible to see peril in the finding of the ultimate perfection. It is clear that the ultimate pattern contains its own fixity. In such perfection, all things move toward death.

—From "The Collected Sayings of Maud'Dib" by the Princess Irulan (Herbert, Dune, 1965, 380)

Now that the patterns of narrative and the Christ story have been established, the question becomes one of establishing the existence of an analogy by confirming the patterns. As Frank Herbert writes in Dune (1965), these patterns are copied in our lives and society, including our narrative. The peril in finding the ultimate perfection (or what we find when we locate the perfect pattern) is that it is fixed (as the categories are fixed), and "all things move toward death," or there must be a progression in the pattern toward a sacrifice or death of some type. This is the truth of the Christ-story analogy. It must follow the established pattern and lead toward a death.

There are two types of analogy. One is exact analogy, where there is a one-to-
one correlation between the actual Christ story and the narrative presenting the analogy. In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the analogy is exact. The pattern is followed (see figure 9) with Aslan as the Christ figure. His coming was prophesied as was the end of winter (1-3). He came to Narnia (1), and as his presence was made known, his power grew (1-2). When Edmund was to lose his life (conflict—2), Aslan makes a deal with the witch to take his place and be sacrificed on the stone table (2-3). His resurrection and destruction of evil are the resolve (3) of the narrative. It is evident that the Christ-story pattern exists, but the evidence for the exact analogy is in the specific terms. There is a witch who is equivalent to a Satan figure; winter represents the death of the world before the saving sacrifice; the stone table represents the cross—the sacrifice made for the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. It is by these things and more that the analogy becomes exact. Exact analogies of the Christ story are the easiest to identify due to all the other elements present along with the pattern. However, if there are elements present that seem symbolic and similar to those of the Christ story, but the pattern is not present, it is a false analogy.

The second type is loose analogy. The pattern is present just as it is in an exact analogy, but the other easily identifying elements are missing. This allows for greater creativity in the narrative itself and can bring out details and possibility in the truth of the Christ story that may not have been clear in the straight telling.

I examined three such analogies for this paper. First was J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (see figure 10). This is a children’s book that has recently been on the international best-seller list. When the story is examined and the Christ story identified, reasons for this are understood. As Herbert wrote, “We try to copy these patterns seeking . . . the forms that comfort.” No small wonder that a children’s book has gained such popularity. Our society seeks this particular pattern even if it is unrecognized and unconscious.

About a young boy who comes to discover that he is a wizard and how his life changes with this knowledge, *Harry Potter* contains all the parts of the triad. He has a telltale scar that allows people

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**Figure 9. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christ figure: Aslan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End of Winter fortold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurrection and destruction of Winter and the Witch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal with Witch: Aslan’s life for Edmund’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power is showing and growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming to Narnia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1) and grows in power as he discovers what he can do (1-2). He must save another’s life because he is the only one who can (conflict—2) and he sacrifices himself (2-3) to do so. Just when he thinks he has died, he awakens three days later to find he has defeated the evil and saved the life he set out to save (resolve—3). Even in loose analogies, there can be symbolic elements beyond those of the pattern. Many have “three” in the time before the “resurrection.”

*Figure 10. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

_Dune_, by Frank Herbert, also uses the “three” symbol. Paul Maud’Dib is the Christ figure (see figure 11), and he takes the Water of Life as a sacrifice for his people (2-3). Because he awakens three weeks later (3), he is the “Kwisatz Haderach” (Herbert’s term for Messiah). Just as with the Christ-

story pattern, he was prophesied about (1-3), and there was something particular about his birth. A boy was born instead of a girl to his mother when she was told to have a girl (apparently, they can choose what to have). This is another symbol found in the Christ story. The Messiah had to be a man. This is Herbert’s way of both representing the firstness of the pattern and adding extra poignancy to the semiotic. Paul discovers his identity through dreams and tests that occur throughout the story (1-2) and is finally ready to face the conflict of the slavery of his people (2).

There are elements of the pattern that seem to be the most critical to the analogy: the potential of the Christ figure to actually make the sacrifice; the conflict,
Figure 12. The Matrix

Christ figure: Neo

Hacker, chooses to see the “real world”

The oracle

Resurrection, sees the code

Faster, just knows things

Sacrifice: stays to fight, not run

Man vs. Machine (Alternative Freedom vs. Slavery)

although directly involving the identity of the Christ figure, must be about the freedom of another individual or group of individuals; the resurrection of the Christ figure in some very definitive sense. Without any one of these elements, the pattern breaks down, and there is no Christ-story analogy.

The third narrative was the film *The Matrix*, written and directed by the Wachowski brothers. It was an absolute box office phenomenon during 1999, and no one could really say why beyond the special effects. It is possibly due to the Christ-story analogy present. Neo is the Christ figure (see figure 12). It is interest-

Figure 13. The Hobbit

Christ Figure: Bilbo Baggins??

Tookish blood and possibility

Thirteenth warrior prophesy

But>>> ??

There is no sacrifice of his life for another’s: Thorin does

There is no resolve to a resurrection.

This is not a Christ Story. It appears to be an analogy to Beowulf. Merely following narrative pattern and having Good triumph over Evil doesn’t make a Christ Story. It is in the patterns.
symbols have been shown to do. And as before, a story consisting of only similar elements to the Christ Story is not an analogy. The pattern must be shown for the analogy to exist.

THE FALSE ANALOGY

Returning to *The Hobbit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, the narrative is tested in the same way as the other stories. The teacher asserted that Bilbo Baggins was the Christ figure (see figure 13). There was prophecy about him being the thirteenth warrior (1-3?). This has potential on two levels. It could be the same as there being prophecy about Christ, and the number thirteen was a symbolic benefit (twelve disciples and Christ); but as the patterns demand, there was no conflict directly involving Mr. Baggins and the saving of another’s life through sacrifice to fulfill this prophecy. Secondly, the identity of Mr. Baggins did not lead him to a resurrection (1-2 : 3). The sacrifice in the story was made by the leader of the dwarves, Thorin, against a beast that was oppressing his people. There was no resurrection there either. Because all the categories did not progress and culminate at a resolve of a resurrection, there is no Christ-story analogy. This appears instead to be an analogy of the epic Beowulf. Although this is an excellent example of early narrative, merely following narrative pattern and having good triumph over evil will not fulfill the Christ-story pattern. And as was stated before, having symbolically similar elements but not following the pattern will not make a Christ story either.

CONCLUSION

The Peircean pattern is a triadic diagram devised to analyze and define truth. Narrative pattern fits this triad neatly, and further, the Christ story is beautifully expounded by it. Identifying an analogy of the Christ story can there-

fore be done by matching the pattern of the narrative in question to the pattern of the Christ story. If all aspects of the narrative fit the pattern, the analogy exists. It is more a matter of relation than simply filling a slot, however. These methods and the resulting findings are amazing and eye-opening experiences that can lead to a greater understanding of not only the Christ story but of truth.

REFERENCES