

Understanding Gormenghast: Interrogating the Lost Mythopoeia

ABSTRACT

The Gormenghast/Titus Groan novels by Mervyn Peake (1911-1968) have long eluded classification by critics and readers alike. They have also failed to garner the widespread popularity enjoyed by fantasy works by older contemporaries such as Tolkien or C.S. Lewis. This thesis tries to ascertain the reasons for both. Instead of trying to justify any one narrative genre as the right fit for Peake's magnum opus, I try to examine why the trilogy seems to resist any single formulaic interpretation and why its effect upon the readers is so deeply unsettling. This is primarily a Jungian reading, based on Jung's many writings on the collective unconscious, consciousness and the Self. Examining Peake's childhood influences and the archetypal patterns, mythological symbols and fairytale devices used by him, I attempt to discover the reason behind the strangeness of Gormenghast, to 'understand' the world of Titus Groan, and to interrogate the lost meaning of the Groan ritual and what it says of Peake's vision of the modern world and of human life. The thesis argues that the illness of Gormenghast is the split between its consciousness and unconscious, between its Logos and Eros, between the masculine and feminine principles. By interrogating the forgotten mythopoeia of Gormenghast, we arrive at an understanding of Peake's vision of the modern world. Viewed from this perspective, Titus Groan's journey from his medieval castle home to a technocratic City becomes the journey of Western civilization attempting to shake off its medieval slough to embrace the scientific advancement of the twentieth century. But the malaise that plagues Gormenghast continues to plague the City because superficial

progress cannot make up for the overwhelming lack of purpose that defines both places. The disparate locales thus become representational sites of a collective consciousness disconnected from its own unconscious. As a modern hero, Titus Groan must thus walk the lonely path to selfhood in order to rediscover the purpose of life.