

Myths, the iconic, and natural kinds: a literary perspective

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Abstract. What is the relationship between myths and the iconic? This paper analyzes a dialogue from an R.K. Narayan novel which suggests a criterion for belonging to a natural kind in the world of myth, a criterion which makes reference to the iconic.

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Some people, some events, some styles we say are iconic. To the average perceiver, they make a strong impression, they stick in the memory easily, they have a clear identity. What is the relationship between myth and the iconic? In this paper, I wish to examine some dialogue from R.K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* (which, a concession to Shashi Tharoor, does indeed feel like a translation, on purpose I think). For the dialogue suggests a perspective on the question.

Here is the dialogue, presented using the conventions of plays (1990 [1938]: 36).

SAVITRI: I told you to be careful and yet, you ass—

RANGA: Oh, madam, only its trunk is broken.

SAVITRI: What is left of an elephant when its trunk is gone?

RANGA: It looks like a buffalo now. Why not have it in the show as a buffalo, madam?

SAVITRI: Fool, stop your jokes.

KAMALA: He doesn't care a bit!

RANGA: Little madam, I know now how buffaloes are made.

KAMALA: How?

RANGA: By breaking off the trunks of elephants.

The dialogue suggests that in the world of myth, the following criterion obtains:

(Iconic criterion) Something is a creature of natural kind E if and only if it has the most iconic feature of creatures of natural kind E.

If it loses that feature, then the most iconic feature that remains determines which kind it belongs to. But I don't see why there cannot be myths which violate the criterion.

References

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