

Friend or Foe? – George Huxley’s Character in Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Wood*

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Abstract

George Huxley acts as the starting point of everything in and around Ryhope Wood in Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Wood*. Living next to Ryhope Wood in Herefordshire the psychologist Huxley and his assistant Edward Wynne-Jones were attracted to the wood and its mystery draws them stronger and stronger. Huxley embarked into exploring Ryhope Wood out of curiosity, a strong hunger for scientific knowledge and a deep devotion toward mystery until he completely lost himself in the process and eventually died. As a catalyst of the events taking place in and around the wood Huxley becomes an ambiguous character. For the first he is clearly defined as an evil force even by his own sons but is he really that bad? Are all his drives cruel and selfish? The questions are hard to answer since Huxley is present in the novel only in his mythago form, the Urscumug, never as a flesh and blood human being. In my paper I focus on the multiple sides of George Huxley’s character and answer the ultimate question: Is George Huxley a friend or a foe?

Keywords: fantasy, mythago, memory, reality vs. imagination, quest.

George Huxley is the quasi protagonist of Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Wood*. Although he never appears as a living and breathing character in this novel, he still acts as the starting point of everything in and around Ryhope Wood. Inhabiting Oak Lodge next to Ryhope Wood in Herefordshire the psychologist Huxley and his assistant Edward Wynne-Jones were attracted to the wood and its mystery drew them stronger and stronger. Huxley embarked upon exploring Ryhope Wood out of curiosity, a strong hunger for scientific knowledge and a deep devotion toward mystery until he completely lost himself in the process and eventually died. As a catalyst of the events Huxley becomes an ambiguous character. For the first he is clearly defined as an evil force even by his own sons, but is he really that bad? Are all his drives cruel and selfish? The questions are hard to answer since Huxley is present in the novel only in his mythago form, the Urscumug, never as a flesh and blood human being. In what follows I present the multiple sides of George Huxley’s character and answer the ultimate question: Is George Huxley a friend or a foe?

The starting point of the Mythago cycle is the Huxley family: the father, George, the mother, Jennifer, and their two sons, Christian and Steven. The otherwise average family becomes distorted when the father and his assistant step on the dangerous road of discovering the nearby Ryhope wood. The results of their growing obsession are many and serious: dysfunctional family relations, lies, hostility, death. Huxley and Wynne-Jones dig so deep into the mythago world and the machinations of the wood that they even design and build a device to stimulate their minds in generating mythagos. Based on Jung’s collective unconscious theory Huxley conducts prolonged research in the wood which affects his entire life and leads to distancing himself from his family and from a certain moment he even loses contact with reality not being able to tell what is real and what is not. In his research the central aim is to find the Urscumug, the men-boar first hero from the earliest myth:

...but I am anxious to find the primary image. The Urscumug has formed in my mind in the clearest form I have ever seen him. Hints of the Twigling in shape, but he is much more ancient, far bigger...hard to see, always just out of focus. He is so old, this primary image, that he is fading from the human mind...I suspect that the legend of the Urscumug was powerful enough to carry through all the Neolithic and on into the second millennium B.C., perhaps even later...the Urscumug may pre-date even the Neolithic. (*Mythago Wood* 45)

George Huxley presents himself as a careless father and husband causing his family to tear apart and, although indirectly, he plays a major role in Jennifer's death, in Chris's turning into a mythago warrior himself and Steven's entrapment in Ryhope Wood. His perpetual absence from the early life of his sons turns him into a phantom rather than a real human being and this label does not get any better even after his death, when his sons are reunited as adults and embark upon discovering Ryhope in search of their own answers. Absent when alive, George Huxley becomes an even more constant presence after his death at age 50. He never managed to encounter the Urscumug himself since he was too old for the task: "I am too old!...but a younger mind could accomplish the task unaided" (*Mythago Wood* 46), the task being the creation of the very first form of the Urscumug. His sons do find him, or rather the Urscumug finds them more than once, in the course of *Mythago Wood*. As Chris explains to Steven, "he was a pioneer; his own interaction with the wood has made it easier for those who come after." (*Mythago Wood* 51) This does not mean that there is an equation mark between George Huxley and the Urscumug, but it must be admitted that the mythago hero bears a lot of resemblance to the scientist Huxley, which is not surprising, given the fact that mythagos are created and determined by the nearby human minds. So when analyzing the Urscumug and his behavior, we must take into consideration Huxley's psyche, his sorrows, pains and fears. We must add to the list the profound sense of guilt that the human Huxley might have felt because of his sons and we come up with a highly ambiguous character. From now on I regard Huxley and the Urscumug as aspects of one single character, so accepting the Urscumug as the alter ego of George Huxley results in two possible readings of his behavior.

Influenced by the description of the Urscumug that Huxley himself provided in his diary and by another description of his outlook (the man-boar male mythago is a representation of the first hero from earliest myth; generated purposely by George Huxley; twice the height of a human and is a malevolent and ancient variation on the *woodwose*), the reader easily slips into regarding him as an evil force, threatening with sudden and fatal attacks. During the younger son, Steven's, journey through the mysterious forest, the Urscumug appears more than once scaring the two wanderers to death. Not only his appearance but also the noises accompanying his presence have a sinister effect, managing to deceive even the most careful reader; both characters and readers of the novel form a false image of the Urscumug-Huxley. Still, his carelessness regarding his sons adds to the hostile nature of the mythago monster, creating a pattern similar to that of Kronos who gained power by killing his father Uranos and then in order to prevent his children from doing so ate all of them. Like Kronos, the Urscumug-Huxley also fears that his children might take over his authoritative position, so he keeps his diaries secret, lies

about mythago appearances, disappears from home for prolonged periods, avoids any interaction with his family whatsoever.

Surprisingly the end of the novel subverts this interpretation of the Urscumug since he escorts the dying Guinn to Lavondyss to be healed and later to return as predicted in the myth. This act sheds light on Huxley's human character, his love for his sons surfaces and a series of Urscumug appearances turn into ambiguity. Viewing the Urscumug-Huxley from this new perspective, every encounter with him, both direct and indirect, presents a second, equally justified reading. Rereading the scenes of Urscumug encounters, we notice that these occurred in dangerous situations, which were dangerous not due to the presence of the monster. So a new interpretation presents itself: the Urscumug is not a hostile foe but a guardian for Steve and Harry Keeton, his companion. And we must not forget the other brother, Chris Huxley. He was more strongly affected by the father's absence and later on obsessed with his experiments and observations related to the wood than Steven. Christian becomes the full heir of his father, and entering the wood to stay, he gradually transforms, becoming one of its most powerful presences. He can be viewed as a counterpart of the Urscumug, the Outlander that Chris becomes in his role of the cruel mythago warrior, somebody that Steven must be protected against, precisely *by* the Urscumug. In the crucial moment when Chris, already a savage warlord, attacks Steven and attempts to kill him by hanging, the Urscumug is there to *shake life back* into him. This scene too reveals its true meaning for the second reading. In a way, the Urscumug-Huxley recognizes a lot of himself in what Christian came to be, and by so doing he suddenly realizes with dismay what he himself used to be, how he treated his family and how he burnt all connections with the outer world when he gave in to the forest and its cruel intentions. Consequently, in Christian he recognizes himself so he tries to protect his only family member left against the mythago world. At the end of the novel Steven is still not conscious about the fact that the Urscumug is his enemy or his friend. It is not until the last two and a half pages that the discernment strikes him, and possibly us; the Urscumug is George Huxley, the father long lost in multiple senses. Although a father kills one of his sons to protect the other, this recognition gives to the otherwise sad ending a tone of hope: although the story of the Urscumug, and that of Huxley ends there, when he crosses to Lavondyss, apparently Christian dies and Steven is left alone in the hostile mythago universe; there is still the promise of a happy ending. The Urscumug-Huxley vanishes but with a fulfilled dream: he found and entered Lavondyss – a kind of a paradise, heaven, the other world, King Arthur's Avalon or Tolkien's Valinor. Before leaving, together with the wounded Guinn, he also leaves a pale hope to which Steven can hold on in his years to come:

It must have stood there for a minute or more...when nothing happened I looked up. The Urscumug...still held the Fenlender's body...He was going to take her (Guiwenneth) from me...the Urscumug stretched out his left hand to me...and then I realized what it wanted. I stood up and reached out to the hand, which enclosed mine totally....The look on his face was not a scowl of hate, but a soft sympathy...he had helped me...not hindered...he had rediscovered compassion....he did something wonderful, something that was to give me courage and hope for the long years to come...while I waited with the Neolithic peoples of the nearby village... (315-17)

By analyzing Huxley's behavior, the encounters with the Urscumug and the events taking place in connection to Christian, Steven and their father, I arrived at the conclusion that, although the Urscumug is seemingly an evil character, it is not enough to look at him in an isolated way. His interactions with the two brothers may seem hostile at first, but a closer inspection proves that the Urscumug embodies basically everything that Huxley failed to be as father and husband. So the answer to my initial question is definitely this: the Urscumug-Huxley is without doubt a friend and not a foe.

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