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Subverting Myth through Parody: Self-Conscious Storytelling in Terry Pratchett's *Mort* and *Hogfather*

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Abstract

This paper examines Terry Pratchett's *Mort* (1987) and *Hogfather* (1996) and his unique approach in reframing and redefining myth through parody and metafiction. Through self-conscious storytelling in Discworld, Pratchett presents the series as comic inversion of myth rather than as a self-aware site of mythic renewal. Building on the concepts of parody as articulated by Linda Hutcheon and Bakhtin's dialogism, I contend that Pratchett's narratives uniquely center the storytelling within a moral and philosophical problem. In *Mort*, Death becomes the reflective and dual figure of metaphysical order and human weakness. This personification subversion invites a consideration of mortality as the continuity of a narrative. In *Hogfather*, mythic re-enactment of belief itself is the objective as a narrative satire, and festive irony reveals the enduring moral conscience of a communal imagination and consciousness in a cynical age. Pratchett did not deconstruct myth in his parody, instead he reactivated it. His reading reveals a postmodern self-aware parody, one that invites an affirmation of meaning, empathy, moral imagination, and, paradoxically, resurrection. His storytelling serves as a meta-myth- a belief in the narrative as a fundamental necessity for the existence of human life. The investigation of *Mort* and *Hogfather* through parody, irony and mythopoesis positions Pratchett as a reconciler of humor and belief, laughter and truth, a postmodern mythographer.

Keywords: Terry Pratchett, parody, myth, metafiction, irony



Introduction

In contemporary British fiction, the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett holds a distinctive place because it blends sharp satire with genuine philosophical depth. Among its forty-one novels, *Mort* (1987) and *Hogfather* (1996) stand out as companion pieces that explore death, belief, and storytelling itself. Beneath their humor, these novels offer a serious meditation on how myths shape cultural consciousness and how stories organize human meaning. Through parody and pastiche, Pratchett does not simply mock myth; he revitalizes it. Discworld becomes both a parody of myth and, at the same time, a myth about parody. Pratchett's method reflects Linda Hutcheon's idea of parody as "repetition with critical distance." He revisits familiar cultural narratives, such as the Grim Reaper in *Mort* or the Santa Claus figure in *Hogfather*, but reshapes them in ways that question their ideological foundations. Death in *Mort* is not just a comic inversion of a medieval archetype; he becomes reflective, even existential, embodying humanity's struggle with fate and moral responsibility. Similarly, *Hogfather* dismantles and reconstructs the Santa myth to examine why belief itself matters. In both cases, parody becomes what Hutcheon calls "complicit critique": it destabilizes tradition while renewing it.

The theoretical backdrop for this reading includes Roland Barthes' concept of myth as a "type of speech" that transforms historical constructs into seemingly eternal truths. Pratchett exposes this naturalization process, revealing myth as something made rather than given. Yet he does not discard it. Instead, he reclaims myth as a site of inquiry, dialogue, and moral reflection. His gods and archetypes are no longer distant authorities; they become characters who question, reason, and evolve. Fredric Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche also illuminates Pratchett's approach. Jameson laments the postmodern tendency toward "blank parody," a depthless recycling of styles. However, in Pratchett's work, parody and pastiche merge constructively. His intertextual play does not feel empty; it becomes what might be called ethical pastiche—an imaginative collage that respects myth's creative power while challenging its dogmatism. Discworld thus develops into a postmodern mythos, where parody itself takes on sacred dimensions as a story about how stories are made.

Pratchett's self-reflexive storytelling places him alongside writers like Salman Rushdie and Neil Gaiman, who use the fantastic to explore serious epistemological and moral questions. As Caroline Webb notes, Pratchett uses fantasy to critique realism while acknowledging fantasy's artifice. This dual awareness, believing and disbelieving at once is central to his mythopoetic vision. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, Pratchett's humor inverts the sacred and profane, but the laughter it produces is restorative rather than destructive. His narrators frequently remind readers of the act of storytelling itself, echoing Umberto Eco's concept of the "open work," where meaning emerges through



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collaboration between author and reader. Ultimately, this study argues that Pratchett should be seen not merely as a satirist but as a postmodern mythographer. His parody is not an attack on myth but a creative reimagining of it- an effort to reclaim myth for a skeptical age while preserving its ethical and imaginative power.

Literature Review

Since the 1970s, discussions of parody, pastiche, and myth have shaped how we understand postmodern literature. At the center of this debate is Linda Hutcheon's influential idea that parody is not mere mockery but "repetition with critical distance." For Hutcheon, parody both honors and questions what it imitates. It creates a productive tension: it acknowledges tradition while also exposing its assumptions. In later work, she argues that postmodern parody can even function politically, allowing writers to challenge dominant ideologies through ironic reworking. This framework helps illuminate Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels. In *Mort* and *Hogfather*, Pratchett does not destroy myth; he reanimates it. He treats myth as something alive- capable of ethical and philosophical reinvention. Fredric Jameson offers a more pessimistic view. In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he claims that postmodern culture has lost parody's critical sharpness, replacing it with "blank parody," or pastiche - a neutral imitation lacking depth or moral engagement. Where Hutcheon sees subversion, Jameson sees surface-level play. Pratchett's writing, however, complicates this binary. His novels blend playful intertextual borrowing with genuine ethical inquiry. The humor is self-aware, but it is never empty. As critic Alistair Swale observes, Pratchett's comic tone often conceals serious philosophical concerns. Rather than confirming Jameson's fears of depthlessness, Pratchett demonstrates how parody and pastiche can work together meaningfully. Understanding myth is equally essential to this conversation. Roland Barthes describes myth as a "type of speech" that transforms cultural constructions into seemingly natural truths. Myth, for Barthes, disguises ideology as inevitability. Pratchett dramatizes this process. In *Hogfather*, for example, when Death insists that humans need fantasy in order to be human, the novel shows that belief itself is a cultural act. Yet unlike Barthes, who largely demystifies myth, Pratchett preserves its imaginative power. He reveals myth as constructed, but also necessary.

Northrop Frye's work on archetypes and narrative cycles also anticipates Pratchett's method. Frye argues that myth underlies all literary forms such as comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony. In *Mort* and *Hogfather*, these genres blur together. The comic merges with the tragic, the heroic with the ordinary. Pratchett brings myth "into the world of experience," grounding it in human limitation and moral choice. Myth becomes not distant and sacred, but lived and ethical. Umberto Eco's ideas about the "open work" further clarify Pratchett's narrative strategy. Eco suggests that postmodern writers revisit the past with irony rather than



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innocence, inviting readers to participate in meaning-making. Pratchett does exactly this. His narrators interrupt, comment, and play with convention, reminding readers that stories are constructed. This self-awareness does not weaken belief; it transforms belief into a conscious cultural performance.

Although Pratchett enjoys enormous popularity, academic recognition has come more slowly. Early critics dismissed the *Discworld* novels as light parody. More recent scholars, however, recognize their philosophical depth. Andrew M. Butler emphasizes Pratchett's concern with the politics of storytelling- who shapes narrative meaning. Caroline Webb highlights the tension between fantasy as constructed artifice and fantasy as human necessity. Marion Rana describes Pratchett's humor as epistemological: it teaches readers to question how knowledge is formed through stories. Scholars such as Elizabeth Samuels and Tanya Krzywinska further argue that Pratchett re-enchants myth in secular form, turning religious narratives into adaptive systems for moral reasoning. Patrick Curry calls Pratchett's irony "compassionate," suggesting that it allows myth to survive even in an age of skepticism.

Despite this growing scholarship, important gaps remain. Few studies fully explore Pratchett's use of pastiche alongside parody, particularly in relation to myth theory. Parody is often examined for its satirical force, but its dialogic, mythic dimension is overlooked. Similarly, while critics note Pratchett's metafictional techniques, they rarely interpret self-conscious narration as a myth-making strategy in itself.

This study proposes a synthesis. By bringing together Hutcheon's theory of parody, Jameson's concept of pastiche, Barthes's myth criticism, Frye's archetypal theory, and Eco's narratology, we can better understand Pratchett's achievement. In *Mort* and *Hogfather*, parody offers critical distance, while pastiche enables creative participation in cultural mythologies. Together, they form what may be called meta-mythopoeia: myth-making that openly acknowledges its own construction. Rather than opposing parody and pastiche, Pratchett shows how they can collaborate-subverting myth while renewing it for a skeptical age.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodern narratology and myth criticism operate as the study's primary theoretical framework, particularly drawing from Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Roland Barthes, Northrop Frye, and Umberto Eco. Together, these theorists offer a multi-faceted approach through which Pratchett's *Mort* and *Hogfather* may be viewed as self-conscious mythmaking, in which parody and pastiche act as, and simultaneously, critical and creative instruments of cultural renewal.



Revising Parody: Linda Hutcheon's Ethical Framework Regarding Irony

The initial framework of this analysis is based on one of Linda Hutcheon's foundational texts. In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon defines parody as "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (Hutcheon 37). Parody should not merely be classified as ridicule or homage, as it is something more complex: "repetition with critical distance" (6). Hutcheon herself states that parody is an ideological site of dialogue. It recognizes textual predecessors while interrogating their beliefs. In Pratchett's case, the predecessors are Western mythic and religious narratives. Archetypal systems that his novels destabilize and honor.

The description of parody as "complicit critique" (Hutcheon 101) explains Pratchett's ironic myth engagement. His novels do not dichotomously reject or blindly replicate the myth. Instead, they execute what Hutcheon describes as, "an ironic signaling of difference at the heart of similarity" (26). For example, in *Mort*, Death is an archetype of the character, but he is not to be mocked. Instead, he is humorously transformed into a reflective, almost human, character. Pratchett is not merely parodying myths; through irony, he is exposing the myths that lie at the core of his work and their ideology. Hutcheon alludes to the ethical prospects of postmodern parody. In contrast to the seemingly nihilistic connotations of postmodernism, Hutcheon describes parody as a "politics of irony," an act that centers on reinterpretation and multiplicity instead of annihilation (Hutcheon, *Politics* 97). This way, the ethical labor of Pratchett's parody is to get readers to understand the myth as both a fiction and a necessity, a human construct that continues to be precisely self-aware because its self-awareness.

Pastiche as Plurality: Fredric Jameson and the Ethics of Imitation

Jameson argues that pastiche juxtaposes and complicates Hutcheon's more positive view of parody. For Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' describes pastiche as 'blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.' For Jameson, the spread of pastiche is a sign of late capitalism in culture of 'the closing in of depth, the meaning and historical consciousness.

Pratchett's work is a *sin qua non* example of the 'stylistic eclecticism'. Pastiche, in certain circumstances, can be ethical and epistemologically constructive, as his novels provide. For example, in *Hogfather*, Pratchett employs mythic and folkloric narratives and the commercial facets of the Christmas story into a self-conscious collage. 'Blank parody' does not describe this intertextuality. Rather, moral bricolage: the reassembly of disparate cultural pieces into a coherent meditation on belief and imagination, is the most appropriate formulation. Transforming intertextual play into meaningful pastiche, Pratchett moves beyond mere appropriation to embrace pluralism. His novels integrate an entire spectrum of



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intertextuality, embodying the multiplicity of the myth, without hierarchical selection. In this regard, Pratchett's work illustrates, in part, the phenomenon described by Jameson of "the return of narrative as cognitive mapping" (54), in which the author provides a technique for navigating human experience through a latticework of stories that are historically inherited as well as actively reinterpreted.

Myth as Semiotic and Archetype: Barthes and Frye

The myth-critical work of Roland Barthes and Northrop Frye provides the essential groundwork to understand Pratchett's mythopoeic parody and pastiche. For Barthes, myth is a second-order semiotic system: "a mode of signification that turns history into nature". Pratchett's self-conscious mythic storytelling exposes this process, turning the mythic inside out. In *Hogfather*, when Death insists that belief in fictional entities is what allows the sun to rise, the text both dramatizes and subverts Barthes's claim: myth is revealed as a human semiotic operation and as the condition of meaning itself.

In contrast to Barthes's position of demystification, Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* regards myth as the principal ordering factor of imaginative literature. Frye considers the mythic mode the source of all narrative archetypes, claiming, "the myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and the dream" (Frye 136). In the intersection of Barthes's ideological critique and Frye's archetypal renewal lies Pratchett's work. He puts forth the constructedness of myth and, at the same time, its imaginative merit. In *Mort*, for example, the archetypal journey of apprenticeship within Frye's romantic mode is crafted into a comic exploration of destiny and free will. Parody, as a form of revitalizing and evolving myth, serves to keep it alive. Pratchett's mythmaking is anchored in the tension illuminated by Barthes and Frye: demystification and re-enchantment. This is the essence of meta-mythopoeisis, where Pratchett's unique mode of myth creation lies, as the narrative, in mimicry, it does not cancel belief and, rather, invites deeper engagement.

Narrative Self-Consciousness: Eco and the Meta-Mythic Turn

The work of Umberto Eco completes one of the final corners of the framework concerning textual openness and irony. In *The Role of the Reader*, Eco posits that the modern text requires the reader's active collaboration in meaning making. He describes the text as "open," and continues to explain, "the addressee is called upon to collaborate in the construction of the text's meaning" (Eco 9). The narrative voice of Pratchett frequently breaks the fourth wall, reflecting on the act of narration and the structure of tales, as well as the conventions of the different genres. This self-consciousness invites readers to join in the act of mythmaking, playing, and stepping across the threshold that separates the fictive universe from the act of interpretation.



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This description of Eco's Postscript to *The Name of the Rose* is further expanded through the idea of "ironic faith." He elucidates that Postmodern writers (Pratchett) have no choice but to paradoxically "speak of them once more with irony" (Eco, Postscript 67). This is clearly seen in Pratchett's novels where one "believes while knowing one believes." In *Hogfather*, the characters capture myth through the awareness of its illusion. In a performative ritual act, belief is an active declaration, sustaining meaning in a culture of defiance, where a myth is more than an absolute, but a process.

Pratchett's works demonstrate Lyotard's postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives (The Postmodern Condition xxiv), yet Pratchett's skepticism is infused with empathy. There is irony, but it is, as Patrick Curry calls it, "compassionate" (Curry 205)-it critiques authority and, at the same time, it preserves awe. As a result, it is possible to describe the convergence of parody, pastiche, and self-aware storytelling in Pratchett's work as a form of meta-mythic practice- mythic storytelling that "moves," thanks to a continuing self-consciousness, renewal, and articulation of its own art.

Synthesizing the Framework

The conceptual model, which will inform the analysis of *Mort* and *Hogfather*, is derived from the fundamental principles discussed above.

1. Parody as Re-Vision – in the spirit of Hutcheon, the control and critique of repetition, which characterizes parody, is re-visioning and ironic reinterpretation of the mythic archetype.
2. Pastiche as Plurality – in the spirit of Jameson, Pratchett's pastiche is not a mere imitation, but rather a convergence of disparate mythic texts within one narrative frame.
3. Myth as Process – following both Barthes and Frye, myth in Pratchett's novels is a constructed ideology and an archetypal expression. It is both demystified and re-enchanted.
4. Narrative Self-Consciousness as Mythic Renewal – self-awareness, as discussed in Eco, becomes a generative element that converts irony into faith-in-fiction.

The elements work together to shape Pratchett's style: one becoming conscious of one's mythopoesis where parody and pastiche serve the purposes of philosophical contemplation and creative recuperation.

Pratchett's approach can be described as compassionate irony. His humour does not sneer at belief; it recognizes human vulnerability. He stands between faith and skepticism,



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reverence and laughter. In doing so, he challenges Fredric Jameson's pessimistic view of postmodern pastiche as depthless imitation. Pratchett's intertextual layering becomes moral archaeology, reassembling fragments of cultural memory into renewed ethical frameworks. Ultimately, these novels suggest a simple yet profound idea: stories matter. Even when we know they are invented, they shape how we think about justice, responsibility, and hope. Pratchett's "meta-myth" teaches humility. Gods depend on believers; storytellers depend on readers. Meaning is not imposed from above rather it is created together. In this way, *Mort* and *Hogfather* demonstrate that postmodern literature need not destroy myth. It can remake it. Through parody and pastiche, Pratchett transforms skepticism into creativity and irony into belief. His Discworld reminds us that storytelling is both mirror and medicine: it reflects the world as it is, and helps us imagine it as it might be.

Conclusion

Pratchett's *Mort* and *Hogfather* also demonstrate that in the postmodern era, myth does not have to disappear under parody, it can thrive alongside it. Pratchett's combination of parody, pastiche, and metafiction gives us literature that is skeptical and sacred, philosophy and play. Pratchett's self-conscious storytelling turns reading into a participatory rite in which the ritual is the renewal of collective belief sustained through shared laughter. In a time characterized more than ever by irony, the work of Pratchett reminds us that laughter can also be a form of belief. It suggests that parody, rather than negating myth, is a manifestation of it.

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