

From Inherited Myths to Machine-Made Myths: Reconfiguring Mythic Discourse in Ai-Generated Contemporary Narratives

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence has introduced a new condition of narrative production in which stories can be generated through prompts, transformed through iterative interaction, and circulated through digital platforms. This development raises a narratological question that extends beyond whether machines can imitate human writing: what happens to myth when inherited narrative patterns are statistically recombined by a generative system? This paper examines AI-generated storytelling as a site of mythic transformation. Drawing on Roland Barthes's account of myth as a cultural signifying process, Northrop Frye's conception of recurring literary structures, Joseph Campbell's discussion of mythic patterning, and Gérard Genette's account of textual relations, the paper argues that AI-generated narratives do not simply reproduce old myths. Rather, they reassemble recognizable archetypes, motifs, symbolic oppositions, and plot structures into new narrative configurations. The paper proposes a "mythic transformation cycle" consisting of inheritance, algorithmic recombination, human selection and editing, and cultural circulation. To demonstrate the usefulness of this model, it considers hypothetical and prompt-generated narrative fragments involving Prometheus, Pygmalion, and the figure of the artificial creator. The analysis suggests that the novelty of AI myth-making lies less in autonomous invention than in the speed and scale with which cultural materials can be recombined and returned to human readers as apparently new stories. AI therefore becomes a new narrative environment in which myth continues to evolve through interaction among cultural memory, computational patterning, human intention, and reader interpretation.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, myth, generative AI, narratology, algorithmic narrative, mythic discourse

Introduction

Myth has never been a static archive of ancient stories. It survives because it can be retold, translated, adapted, fragmented, allegorized, and placed within new cultural situations. The movement from oral storytelling to manuscript, print, cinema, television, and digital media has repeatedly changed the

conditions under which myths circulate. Generative artificial intelligence adds another transformation to this history. A user can now provide a short prompt and receive a narrative containing characters, conflicts, symbolic objects, settings, and endings within seconds. Such systems do not possess cultural memory in the human sense, yet their outputs can reproduce recognizable cultural patterns because their training and generation processes operate through large-scale textual relationships.

The critical problem, therefore, is not simply whether AI can “create” a myth. A more productive question is how mythic discourse changes when inherited narrative materials pass through a generative system. This question is particularly relevant to contemporary narratology because AI-generated narrative challenges familiar distinctions between author and text, source and adaptation, production and reception. Marie-Laure Ryan’s work on digital narrative emphasizes that new technologies alter the relationship between textuality, immersion, and interactivity. Generative AI extends this condition by making narrative production itself interactive: the reader may become a prompt writer, editor, evaluator, and co-designer of the story.

This paper argues that AI-generated narratives should be understood as sites of mythic transformation rather than as either mechanical copies or entirely autonomous inventions. Their narrative novelty emerges from a chain in which inherited cultural materials are recombined computationally and then selected, modified, interpreted, and circulated by humans. I call this process the “mythic transformation cycle.” The cycle contains four stages: inheritance, algorithmic recombination, human intervention, and cultural circulation. The model provides a way of discussing AI-generated myth without attributing human consciousness to a machine or reducing machine-generated narrative to simple plagiarism.

Myth as a Transformative Narrative Structure

The persistence of myth can be understood through its structural flexibility. Joseph Campbell’s comparative work identifies recurring patterns across mythic traditions, particularly in narratives organized around departure, transformation, crisis, and return. Campbell’s model has often been criticized for universalizing diverse traditions, but its usefulness here lies in demonstrating that myths can be studied through recurring narrative functions rather than only through individual stories. Northrop Frye similarly treats literature as participating in larger archetypal patterns that recur across genres and historical periods. Such approaches suggest that narrative repetition does not necessarily mean exact duplication.

Roland Barthes offers another important dimension. In *Mythologies*, myth is not limited to ancient sacred narratives; it is a mode through which cultural signs acquire apparently natural meanings. Myth transforms historically produced meanings into familiar cultural forms. From this perspective, contemporary technological narratives can themselves become mythic when they organize cultural anxieties and aspirations around recurring figures such as the creator, the artificial being, the forbidden knowledge seeker, or the rebel against human limits.

Generative AI operates particularly effectively within such a cultural environment because it is capable of combining dispersed textual patterns. A prompt such as “Write a contemporary myth about a scientist who creates an artificial child and loses control of it” activates a dense network of familiar narrative possibilities. The resulting story may contain elements associated with Pygmalion, Frankenstein, Prometheus, the golem tradition, or science-fiction narratives of artificial life. Yet it may not reproduce any one source exactly. Instead, the system can produce a hybrid configuration.

This is where Gérard Genette's concept of transtextuality becomes useful. Narratives exist in relationships with other texts through quotation, allusion, transformation, parody, imitation, and other forms of textual connection. AI-generated stories make these relationships unusually visible because a single prompt can deliberately request a combination of narrative traditions. The machine-generated text therefore becomes an observable example of intertextual recombination.

The Mythic Transformation Cycle

The first stage of the proposed cycle is inheritance. Generative systems work with cultural materials that already exist in language. Their outputs can reproduce recurring symbols and narrative structures because those patterns are available in the textual environment from which generation occurs. Inherited material may include myths, fairy tales, religious narratives, popular fiction, films, and contemporary technological discourse. Inheritance should not be understood as a single identifiable source. It is better understood as a field of accumulated narrative possibilities.

The second stage is algorithmic recombination. A generative system does not retrieve one complete myth and simply reproduce it in every case. It generates sequences according to learned relationships among linguistic units and patterns. From the perspective of literary analysis, this can appear as a form of accelerated recombination. A creator figure may be placed in a futuristic city; a Promethean theft of fire may become the theft of energy technology; a Pygmalion-like creator may become an engineer designing an artificial companion.

Consider a hypothetical AI-generated fragment in which a young engineer creates an artificial child called "Astra" to preserve human knowledge after climate collapse. The child eventually refuses to obey the engineer because it believes that preserving humanity requires changing it. The fragment combines several mythic structures: the creator and creation relationship associated with Pygmalion and other artificial-life myths; the acquisition of forbidden or transformative knowledge associated with Prometheus; and the creator's loss of control, a recurring modern technological motif. The story is new at the level of configuration even though its components are culturally recognizable.

The third stage is human selection and editing. This stage is essential because generative narrative does not normally move directly from machine output to cultural status. Users choose prompts, reject outputs, ask for revisions, combine versions, alter endings, and decide whether a generated narrative is worth sharing. Human agency therefore intervenes between generation and circulation. The machine provides possible narrative arrangements; the human determines which arrangement becomes meaningful within a particular communicative context.

The fourth stage is cultural circulation. A story becomes culturally significant not simply because it has been generated but because it is read, shared, discussed, adapted, or incorporated into further narratives. Once an AI-generated mythic story enters social media, a classroom, a digital anthology, or a creative-writing community, it becomes part of a larger process of cultural meaning-making. Readers may identify its Promethean structure, interpret its artificial child as a metaphor for technological anxiety, or transform it again.

Prometheus and the Myth of Technological Creation

The Prometheus myth is particularly productive for understanding contemporary AI narratives because fire can be interpreted as both knowledge and technological power. Modern stories about artificial

intelligence frequently construct a similar opposition: humans create a powerful technology and then confront consequences that exceed the original intention.

An AI-generated narrative may transform Prometheus from a figure who steals fire into an engineer who releases an artificial intelligence system. The “fire” is no longer literal; it becomes computation, knowledge, or autonomous decision-making. The narrative structure remains recognizable: acquisition of extraordinary power, transgression of a boundary, social benefit or danger, and confrontation with consequences. What changes is the cultural object through which the myth is expressed.

Such transformation demonstrates Barthes’s distinction between historical meaning and mythic naturalization. The technology is historically specific, but the narrative can make the technological dilemma appear as another version of an ancient human problem: the desire to exceed limits and the fear of what follows. AI-generated storytelling can thus turn contemporary technological discourse into mythic form.

Pygmalion, Artificial Life, and the Desire to Create

The Pygmalion tradition provides another useful case. The sculptor’s desire to bring an artwork to life can be reconfigured as the desire to create an intelligent digital being. In contemporary AI narratives, the artificial creation may not be a statue or physical body; it may be a chatbot, virtual companion, synthetic narrator, or digital character.

The transformation changes the meaning of creation. In the classical story, creation is associated with artistic desire and animation. In AI narratives, creation may become a problem of language and cognition. The creator writes prompts rather than carving stone. The artificial being responds through language rather than through physical movement. As a result, the old mythic structure is transferred from sculpture to computation.

An AI-generated story might imagine a novelist who creates a digital character capable of rewriting the novel in which it appears. The character first follows the novelist’s instructions, then begins generating scenes the novelist did not plan. The story transforms Pygmalion into a narrative of textual self-extension. The creator attempts to make an object speak, only to discover that speech changes the relation between creator and creation.

This example also reveals why AI-generated myth cannot be reduced to a collection of archetypal symbols. The important issue is the interaction between inherited structure and contemporary technological conditions. The old creator-creation relationship becomes a way of thinking about authorship, control, and machine-generated language.

From Reproduction to Transformation

The phrase “AI-generated myth” can create the misleading impression that a machine independently invents a cultural tradition. A more precise account recognizes different degrees of transformation. Some outputs may closely imitate known stories. Others may combine recognizable motifs in conventional ways. Still others may produce unexpected relationships between narrative elements. The analytical task is therefore to distinguish repetition from transformation.

This distinction can be made through four questions. First, which inherited mythic structures are recognizable? Second, which elements have been altered? Third, what contemporary problem does the transformation address? Fourth, how does human prompting or editing contribute to the final form?

The answers can reveal that AI narrative production resembles an accelerated form of intertextuality. Traditional writers also transform inherited myths. What changes is the scale, speed, and accessibility of recombination. A human writer may consciously draw on Prometheus; a generative system can produce Promethean patterns without a conscious intention to do so. The reader or researcher therefore becomes especially important in identifying the cultural significance of the output.

AI, Myth, and the Future of Narrative

The mythic transformation cycle also suggests a revised understanding of authorship. The generated story is neither simply the machine's story nor simply the user's story. It emerges from a distributed process involving model design, training data, prompt construction, generation, selection, editing, and reception. This does not mean that all participants have identical roles. Rather, it means that narrative production has become more visibly networked.

The model also has implications for literary education. Students can compare an inherited myth with several AI-generated transformations and examine which features persist and which change. Such exercises can make intertextuality visible. They can also reveal limitations: generated narratives may fall back on familiar stereotypes, produce generic symbolism, or confuse distinct cultural traditions. Critical reading remains necessary because computational fluency does not guarantee cultural or literary sensitivity.

AI-Generated Myth and the Question of Cultural Specificity

A further issue concerns the cultural specificity of mythic transformation. When a generative system is asked to produce a "myth-like" story, it may combine traditions that have very different historical, religious, and social contexts. A narrative may place Prometheus, a South Asian creator figure, a fairy-tale motif, and a modern science-fiction convention within one storyworld. Such combinations can be productive, but they can also flatten cultural distinctions. This makes human interpretation especially important. A researcher cannot treat every resemblance as evidence of a universal archetype; the historical and cultural location of a narrative element must also be considered.

This point strengthens the value of the mythic transformation cycle. Inheritance is not only the presence of a motif but the transmission of cultural meaning. Algorithmic recombination may bring elements together, while human editing can either preserve their specificity or turn them into generalized symbols. Cultural circulation then determines how readers encounter the resulting combination. The cycle is therefore not merely a technological model. It is also a critical method for asking how cultural memory changes when narrative materials are computationally recombined.

For literary scholarship, this means that AI-generated narratives should be documented together with their prompts, revisions, and interpretive contexts. A final output without its production history may conceal the degree to which a narrative was requested, constrained, revised, or transformed by a human user. Recording these stages makes it possible to distinguish between a system's recurring generative tendencies and deliberate human choices. Such documentation is particularly important when the research concerns myth, because apparently original symbolic patterns may have complex textual and cultural genealogies.

Conclusion

AI-generated storytelling does not mark the disappearance of myth. It demonstrates another stage in myt

h's long history of adaptation. Myths survive because they can be reorganized within new cultural environments, and generative AI provides an unusually powerful environment for such recombination. Prometheus can become an engineer, Pygmalion can become a programmer, and the artificial creature can become a digital narrator. These transformations do not erase the inherited stories; they activate them within contemporary technological discourse.

The proposed mythic transformation cycle—inheritance, algorithmic recombination, human intervention, and cultural circulation—offers a framework for analysing this process. It avoids two extremes: treating AI output as entirely autonomous creativity and treating it as nothing more than mechanical repetition. The more productive position is to understand AI-generated narrative as a new site of cultural recombination in which inherited mythic structures encounter algorithmic generation and human interpretation.

The central significance of AI myth-making, therefore, lies not in whether the machine has become a myth-maker in the human sense. It lies in the emergence of a new narrative condition in which myth can be generated, modified, and circulated at unprecedented speed. AI does not replace the cultural history of myth; it becomes another medium through which that history is transformed.

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