According to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths aim to resolve the contradictions inherent in the human condition, and to that end they create imaginative forms which serve to reconcile the conflicting elements of experience. Hence myths tend to exhibit a binary structure, leading to the elimination of discord. Morris's method in his romances is clearly related to the 'mythic' enterprise. In *The Wood Beyond the World* Morris is chiefly concerned to compare and contrast the two poles of sexual love, namely, lust and spirituality. This fundamental contradiction is expressed, and finally resolved, by the conduct of the four leading protagonists — the Mistress, the King's Son, the Maiden, and Golden Walter—who are paired off with one another in two contrasting love-relationships.

First let us consider Morris's treatment of the Mistress and the King's Son, whose love for each other is presented as a destructive, physical passion, which swiftly burns itself out. Of the two, the Mistress is drawn more carefully. She is characterised as an implacable sexual presence, beautiful, yet incapable of lasting affection. At their first meeting, the Maiden describes her to Golden Walter as a powerful sorceress, sensual but malevolent, "of whom I may say that scarce I wot if she be a woman or not: but by some creatures is she accounted for a god, and as a god is heried, and surely never god was crueller nor colder than she.... Many a time hath she cast the net for the catching of some goodly young man; and her latest prey (save it be thou) is the young man whom I named, when first I saw thee, by the name of the King's Son." 1

Although linked with physical gratification and the archetype of Venus, the Mistress can easily evoke feelings of wonder and dread. For example, when Golden Walter enters her throne-room for the first time, his reaction suggests that by doing so he has committed a forbidden act:

"then he looked up toward the high-seat, and him-seemed that a great light shone thence, and dazzled his eyes; and he went on a little way, and then fell on his knees; for there before him on the high-seat sat that wondrous lady whose lively image had been shown to him thrice before." 2

As the story develops our impression of the Mistress as hostile and unapproachable is gradually confirmed, and she begins to take on the attributes of Robert Graves' White Goddess, a powerful symbol of destructive sexuality, who is closely associated with Diana, the fierce "hunting goddess of the Gentiles," 3 whose indifference to Pan is well
known. In this connection the feral qualities of her most repugnant creature, the Dwarf, are to be seen as an embodiment of her own rapacious sensuality.

In contrast to the dark, physical passion which characterises the Mistress’s relationship with the King’s Son, Morris presents us with a second pair of lovers, Golden Waiter and the Maiden, whose feelings for each other are basically of a spiritual cast. In their case even physical contact is prohibited, and great stress is laid on the Maiden’s chastity, which she describes as the source of her occult power: “my wisdom both hath been, and now is, the wisdom of a wise maid, and not of a woman, and all the might thereof shall I lose with my maidenhead.” Interpreted in symbolic terms, such a prohibition emphasises the binary structure of Morris’s narrative, which polarises the physical and spiritual elements of sexual love.

The author makes no direct comment on the tensions inherent in his tale. His story is not a morality; the conflict he presents cannot be explained away, and instead he chooses to resolve it by an effort of the creative imagination. Hence, as the tale unfolds, the terms of the polarity he has constructed are forced closer together by a series of significant narrative events.

A central feature in this process of reconciliation is the containing form of the ritual quest, which Morris presents as a quest for love. The first stage in Walter’s journey involves a cluster of events which act to cut him off from his old life in Langton-on-Holm. As the story opens, he embarks on a long sea-voyage, and while away from home he hears of his father’s death. He makes ready to return, but a violent storm blows his vessel off course, and he finds himself set ashore in an alien country, where an old man, the sole inhabitant, advises him against crossing the range of mountains visible further inland. He ignores the warning, leaves his companions behind, and after an arduous journey finds himself in the Wood beyond the World, completely cut off from the sights, sounds, and associations of his past life.

Clearly Walter is at some kind of spiritual crossroads, and before long it becomes apparent that the wildwood is the arena where the sexual antagonisms at the core of the narrative are to be worked out. During his time there he is embroiled in a series of divergent roles, with the consequence that our sense of him as a self-contained, autonomous personality begins to crumble. Thus, he becomes the Mistress’s squire; he replaces the King’s Son as her lover; he takes part in several secret liaisons with the Maiden; he conspires to escape from the wildwood and end the Mistress’s power; he spies on the Mistress and the King’s Son; and above all he is a mortal who has trespassed into a magical region he cannot explain or control, where various forces seek to exert an influence over his actions.

The overwhelming impression is one of plasticity, which to some extent accounts for the innumerable loose ends in the plot; one feels that Morris could have ended his tale in many different ways, and taken many different routes to the eventual outcome. At one point Walter even doubts the fidelity of the Maiden, and begins to fear “she had but won his love to leave him and forget him for a newcomer, after the wont of fay-women, as old tales tell”. It is this feeling of flux, of the conditional nature of reality in the romance world, which enables Morris to transform the original Golden Walter, who cannot control his wife, into the glorious King of Battle, climbing down from the mountains to marry the Maiden, and take up the crown of Starkwall.
This revolution is expressed as a symbolic exchange of personality in which Walter replaces the King’s Son as the Mistress’s latest “catch” and is therefore obliged to mimic the other’s behaviour in order to survive. Their mutual identity is made more explicit when the Maiden changes the appearance of the King’s Son so that he resembles Walter exactly, thereby tempting the Mistress to destroy both her former lover and herself. The clear implication is that Walter has undergone a kind of symbolic death, a casting away of the old identity, prior to rebirth into a different state of being, such as occurs in the rites of passage described by anthropologists. In any event, once the King’s Son and the Mistress are dead, the effect is to diminish the sense of conflict in the narrative, and open the way for marriage between hero and heroine.

Equally important, however, is the way Morris contrives to neutralise the Mistress’s influence by transferring some of her attributes to the Maiden. Thus, it is hinted that both women are supernatural or preternatural in origin, and, significantly, the Maiden has the power to “change the aspect of folk so utterly that they seem other than they verily are; yea, so that one may have the aspect of another”. Later, when she and Golden Walter have made good their escape, she assumes the Mistress’s place as the nature-goddess worshipped by the primitive Folk of the Bear.

So, just as Golden Walter absorbs some of the functions and qualities of the King’s Son, the Maiden takes on the role of the Mistress, and duplicates certain aspects of her behaviour. However, out of this mingling of opposites a third term is produced, a synthesis which eliminates the conflict apparent in the story by going beyond it. Accordingly, the Maiden is not now the harsh, forbidding deity who came to the Bear Folk in the past and demanded human sacrifice. Instead she is the “Mother of Summer”, and she declares:

“times are changed since I wore the last shape of God that ye have seen, wherefore a change I command you. If so be aliens come amongst you, I will not that ye send them to me by the flint and the fire; rather, unless they be baleful unto you, and worthy of an evil death, ye shall suffer them to abide with you; ye shall make them become children of the Bears . . .”

At this point in the structure of the romance, when all discordant elements have been resolved, and a position of harmony has been reached, Walter returns to the city; not the city from which he set out on his quest, but certainly a transformation of it. There the imagery of restraint and denial is replaced by imagery of liberty; the gaols are opened, the Folk of the Bear are taught the secrets of husbandry, and a festival is held to celebrate the marriage and “home-coming” of hero and heroine.

NOTES

2 Ibid. p. 50.
3 Ibid. p. 65.
5 Ibid. p. 143.
7 The Wood beyond the World, p. 80.
8 Ibid. p. 141.