

A Close Reading Analysis of the Introduction to *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* Episode 1

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A disclaimer which I believe ought to precede just about *any* in-depth close reading of *any* work:

I do not mean to imply during the course of this analysis that the creators of this series necessarily *consciously* implemented the concepts, ideologies, etc. that I examine here. However, I *do* propose that these things are nonetheless latent in the work, whether or not the creators consciously placed them there. Any work of art is a complex network of references wrought from culture and history via the medium of the individual, herself an instrument of these forces. When we create, we create with the materials from which we ourselves were created.

The series opens in a "classic" fashion: a storybook opens magically as the female narrator speaks; "Once upon a time...". This familiar sequence establishes a number of associations immediately; the fairytale connotations of the narrative opener, coupled with the image of a storybook, brings to mind "magical" associations, along with the "magical," celestial-sounding motive heard shifting about in the first few seconds of the background music. The use of "Once Upon a Time," a phrase so deeply ingrained in Western culture, has ritualistic associations, like an invocation; we are being brought into a new, magical world, with its own mythology and history. It feels ancient and powerful, setting expectations high: you don't open just any work with "once upon a time"; it's a loaded phrase, considered by many to be a cliché. If a work is going to begin with "once upon a time," the story is setting itself up to be associated with the most well-established fairytales in our culture, making its bid for "classic" status alongside those works. This bid for association with canonic works (the phrase is not used ironically, as one could reasonably expect for modern times) is a gutsy move.

(Questions in the viewers head: will it be as timeless as it is asking to be seen? The title is *Friendship is Magic*, and the very first sequence is steeped in "magical" or "fairytale" allusive material. As a first-time male viewer, I was deeply skeptical of anything called *My Little Pony*; hearing "Once upon a time" as the opening gambit immediately raised the stakes: "gutsy move; can you back it up?" I was subconsciously intrigued, so, spurred on by the knowledge that my geeky friends liked it, I kept watching.)

[A note: the S-like decorations beneath the written words "Once upon a time" are the same that adorn Princess Celestia's royal neck ornament.]

The very next words establish the setting: "the magical land of Equestria." At this moment, the BGM cues the "My Little Pony" theme song, familiar to me from the toy commercials of my youth. It is given a sprawling, epic treatment; the majestic sweep of a string orchestra. (An intriguing transformation: what was a cheap ad jingle, now played reverently in the manner of the well-known middle theme from Holst's "Jupiter.") We are meant to take this story seriously; it is not meant to be ironic, or frivolous, though it will at times be comedic. We learn all of these things before the narrator even completes her first sentence.

The art "within" the storybook is revealed as the BGM unfolds. We are presented with a flat, pastel style recalling the medieval illustrations of an illuminated manuscript. This static, perspectiveless art style, panned over slowly by our "camera," thus conveys further "ancient" historical associations. What

we are witnessing is an ur-text, the foundations of a civilization and its mythology. In a sense, one gets the impression of reading a sort of Equestrian Bible, preserved by faithful pony monks and historians. Our setting and its historical context thus established (through these visual, audio, and linguistic cues), the narrator continues by introducing us to the rulers of our classic magical fairytale kingdom. We are introduced to the conceptual motif of "harmony" in the narrator's diction as the positive result of a successfully interdependent society (mediated by the social essentials of friendship and interpersonal cooperation). The two sisters, we are told, are the source of this harmony (a true benevolent monarchic matriarchy).

Together with the spoken narration indicating harmony, we are presented with the image of our "two regal sisters" perched aloft a cloud, metaphorically illustrating their royal status. What follows is a sequence establishing a duality -- an important conceptual motif to remain integral throughout the series. The two sisters represent day and night, as stewards of the sun and moon (I will breach the topic of the ponies' nature-stewardship in a moment). Though the narrator mentions the harmony of their rule, what we -see- foreshadows the schism to come: the two sisters face opposite directions on their cloud; when we are given a visual demonstration of their celestial duties, the sun and moon are presented in juxtaposition: the sun and moon arc through the air like weapons flung in a military opposition. We are told there is harmony, but what we perceive visually is a subtle, polarized duality. Thus, the "harmony" of ancient pony history with which we are presented is (subliminally) established as, at best, an uneasy truce. Harmony exists, but the night and the day remain as unmixed and alien as oil and water.

(The fact that the main character, yet to be introduced, bears the name "Twilight" is meaningful; Twilight, of course, being a time of harmonious balance between Day and Night).

-----Further notes on Duality and Myth-----

Duality:

I would characterize the duality of night and day presented to us by the narrator as a "harmonious duality": two sides of the same coin; parts/aspects of a unified whole; essentially non-dualistic at core. However, the duality we SEE (the two sisters facing opposite directions, the sun and moon moving in seeming opposition to one another) I would call "dissonant duality": two positions perceived as separate or opposing forces, rather than as aspects of a single universal constant; an illusory and harmful notion.

Friendship is Magic bases many of its core tenets on the concept that everything is part of a coherent, harmonious whole; disharmony tends to be based on misunderstanding and miscommunication. Being duped by the notion that the individual is not worthy of love or part of a harmonious whole is portrayed as the root of all suffering. Thus, evil does not exist except as an aspect of ignorance as to the true nature of things: Luna becomes "evil" simply because she *believes* she is being shunned; a false notion (or, more correctly, an *incomplete* notion).

(Finally, notice the obvious kinship between the image of the two alicorns arced around sun and moon and the yin/yang, implying a link with the ancient Eastern philosophies from which non-duality originated.)

Myth:

The splitting of day and night is reminiscent of many ancient religious creation myths, including Judaism and Christianity. Thus, *Friendship is Magic* immediately establishes a subliminal symbolic network linked to myths regarding the creation of the universe and life itself -- ie, the emergence of the dualities "life" and "not-life." Luna & Celestia are feminine reincarnations of Joyce's Shaun & Shem -- the well-liked master of day & the shunned night sibling (one important difference is that Celestia, unlike Shaun, seems to actually *deserve* her admiration).

Introduced simultaneously with the motif of duality is the equally important concept of the ponies' nature stewardship. The two royal sisters maintain the cycles of day and night by raising the sun and moon *manually* (ignoring, for the time being, the hand-connnotations of that word). This direct responsibility for virtually all "natural" events (as they are known in "our world") is an important and pervasive aspect of the social, natural, and cultural structures of Equestria's ponies, with far-reaching ideological implications. Most obviously, this stewardship of nature endorses a naturalistic stance for humans: vegetarianism, cultivation of the Earth, Oneness with Nature, responsibility and caretaking of animals and the environment, etc., in a very literal and immanent fashion. However, I would argue that this is perhaps *too* crude & obvious an assessment; the union of the ponies (humanity) and Nature goes deeper. I will analyze this relationship in more depth as we move further along in the series and more details surface within the course of the narrative itself. **[2016 note: Never happened, probably never will.]**

Conflict is explicitly introduced for the very first time with the story of the younger sister's envy. Envy is, classically, the second-most detrimental of the Seven Deadly Sins, trumped only by Pride. In the Bible, mankind's Original Sin is Pride -- believing oneself to be separate from or superior to God/Nature. Envy becomes possible when Separation is perceived to be real. The tale of the two sisters' rivalry is a retelling of the story of Cain and Abel, with the ages shuffled: the younger sibling's offering is shunned while the elder sibling receives praise, prompting the shunned sibling to rebel and attack.

According to Lauren Faust (though never explicitly stated in the show itself), the force responsible for transforming Princess Luna into Nightmare Moon was an evil entity that took advantage of her growing resentment of her sister's greater recognition. This entity feeds on her dark feelings and gives her power.

The basic feelings that led to Princess Luna's dark transformation are quite understandable, given the context. She saw inequality in her role and sought what she felt was equal credit. Thus, when she assumes the form of "Nightmare Moon," she gains a neckpiece with the same S-like decorations as her sister and her body transforms to rival her sister's stature. Nightmare Moon threatens to "shroud the land in eternal night" -- essentially an aggressive bid for recognition made by a princess apparently atrociously unschooled in social interaction. One could easily imagine an attention-hungry child doing something similar in an ill-advised attempt to secure admiration. The evil force that possessed Luna seems to magnify existing insecurities and weakness, and provide her with the power and stubborn recklessness to selfishly impose her (formerly repressed) will upon the world.

Luna's frustrations fall into the tradition of many villainous and maligned characters throughout mythologies. I think especially of the Ice King from *Adventure Time* – craving companionship & love, but totally inept at securing it, like a hungry ghost from the Buddhist mythology, or the accursed Shem of *Finnegans Wake*, gifted with dark powers of creativity (shunned by the general public), isolated by narcissistic social incompetence: the birth of The Artist.

-----Further notes on Evil, Chaos, Magic, and Nature-----

A recurring theme in FiM is the portrayal of "evil" as something stemming directly from a character's flawed worldview (ie, a disharmonious worldview that is blind to the power of friendship, ie, social harmony). "Villains" in FiM are more likely to be misunderstood or misguided than malicious; exceptions to this include Discord and various magical creatures in the Everfree Forest, which are essentially agents of chaos.

"Chaos" I would characterize as distinct from "disharmony." Discord and the creatures of the Everfree Forest predate the establishment of pony society; thus, their moral codes are "primitive" and at right angles to the spirit of cooperation established with the dawn of pony civilization. This primitive amorality is directly associated with the "chaos" of the Everfree Forest, where "the plants grow, the clouds move, [and] animals care for themselves" -- a world totally outside of the ponies' nature stewardship, and thus outside the realm of what is considered "natural" by the ponies.

In the "Elements of Harmony" guidebook, Lauren Faust laments the steady loss of "magic" as a child matures and accepts "reality." Elsewhere in the same book, she alludes to having had plans for the Everfree Forest to encroach upon pony civilization. The Everfree Forest, as a chaotic, primitive, and alien force, seems to oppose the "natural" union of the ponies and nature. One could speculate that in some far-flung future, "magic" has vanished from the world as the Everfree Forest's selfish atomisation (everything works independently; every creature for itself) has become the rule. This I take to be a metaphor for the perceived loss of direct spiritual experience in ancient civilizations, the usurpation of cyclic time by linear time, etc. in the modern day, as well as a metaphor for the loss of "magic" as a child grows into an adult.

Of course, these associations are somewhat loose, and I doubt that this ideology was intentionally integrated in any kind of systematic way before Ms. Faust was forced to leave the show.

Princess Celestia's response to her sister's transformation into Nightmare Moon is resolute, though she administers the punishment reluctantly: she banishes her sister to the moon for 1000 years. This seemingly excessive punishment was necessary to protect her subjects; "eternal night," according to Ms. Faust, would have been just one of many negative aspects of Luna's dark rule. Apparently, banishment was the only way for Princess Celestia to temporarily halt Nightmare Moon's attack -- I would speculate that because she only commanded half of the Elements of Harmony and was only one pony (rather than six), she wasn't able to command the power necessary to free Luna from the evil force, and had to settle for banishment.

At the close of the introduction, an interesting shift occurs. The female narrator's voice is slowly replaced with the voice of the main-character-to-be, Twilight Sparkle. The camera pans out to reveal Twilight reading aloud from the same book "we" had opened at the beginning of the episode. The

female narrator never appears again in the course of the series; however, the narrator's voice actress is the same as Princess Celestia's, who does not appear until the very end of the two-part opening story. This voice correspondence adds subtly to the characterization of Princess Celestia as a nigh-omniscient figure, and provides structural unity to the first two episodes (Celestia's voice bookends the arc, providing the initial exposition as well as the final resolution).

When Twilight Sparkle is shown (and heard) for the first time, the narrative's scope shifts from the universal/historical to the personal. The grand history of Equestria that we have just witnessed becomes immediately recontextualized (through audio and visual cues) as the present-day studies of a single pony. It is also important to note that the book serves a dual purpose -- it provides an in-universe excuse for the opening exposition and provides important characterization for Twilight Sparkle. After all, what better way to introduce a bookworm character than to have her sitting alone, deeply engrossed in a book?

(Twilight appears deeply concerned about the material she is reading, begging the question in the viewer's mind -- why is she so troubled about these events which clearly took place so long ago? At this point we are left with a well-placed cliffhanger as the show's theme song interrupts our narrative.)

To be continued....

[2016 note: Unlikely. Just crack open some Joseph Campbell and D.I.Y. if for some reason you care.]