

Re-visioning an American Angel: Mythopoesis in The Tales of Alvin Maker



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Since first appearing on bookshelves, Orson Scott Card's Tales of Alvin Maker series (1987–2003) has stood out as one of the most accomplished works of Mormon mythopoetic literature. The books portray a fantastical alternate history of nineteenth-century America and focus on the titular Alvin Miller, who parallels Joseph Smith, Jr., founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “the Church” or “LDS”), and many of the most impressive scenes reimagine crucial episodes from Mormon history and lore within the context of an epic fantasy story. Nevertheless, Card's vision exceeds anything we might term devotional or evangelistic. Rather, Card takes advantage of the fact that “the cultural work that [speculative fiction] performs is aptly suited to a religion in which the sacred and the banal intermingle so indiscriminately” (Givens 321). This intermingling provides Card with the supernatural qualities of fantasy, but outside the strictures of Church doctrine and hierarchy. This article will examine the Shining Man scene from the first two books of the series—*Seventh Son* (1987) and *Red Prophet* (1988)—which reimagines the 1823 visitation of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith. The scene is a potent example of how Card attempts to rationalize and reorient Mormonism as a religious system that exceeds the Church as an institution. Specifically, Card removes the Church and even God from the narrative, and so breaks up the monologic discourse of authority granted from a higher power. Instead, Card portrays Mormon doctrine as the natural product of universal laws acting upon everyday life. This article aims to demonstrate how Card uses a blend of the fantasy and alternate history genres to transform sacred narrative from a monologic tautology into a dialogic and indeterminate narrative about individuals.

When I describe sacred narrative as monologic discourse, I refer to the way institution-based belief is received from a hegemonic source. When Church history is taught from the pulpit, it is monologically defined within the greater context of the Church's narrative. Devotional literature tends to be monologic by asserting a pre-determined structure and meaning into which characters and events are situated in order to affirm belief, often without actually questioning the merits of those claims. I take my notion of dialogic literature from Mikhail Bakhtin, who proposes that some texts pit different worldviews and beliefs against each other within the framework of story to see how those beliefs challenge and reshape each other. Such a dialogic text must be populated by “free people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Bakhtin, 6, emphasis in original). In a 1985 essay, Card describes his own work in similar terms, claiming his stories require the reader to “accept a causal system that makes every human being completely responsible for his own actions” (“SF and Religion” 13). Such character autonomy is only possible if Card is willing to reject the impulse to allegory,

meaning that even when he directly channels episodes from Mormon lore, the substance of the event must be natural to the character. Therefore, Card removes sources of monologic knowledge—specifically God and the Church—and finds new, non-religious ways of recreating Mormon myth and history.

Thanks to Card's profile as a practicing member of the Church and the ease with which certain scenes related to Mormon lore, some readers assumed the series would align with and reverence Church history, thinly veiling the official narrative behind a glamor of epic fantasy. Early reviewers of the series pointed to the Shining Man and other scenes to justify their expectations, such as Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, who anticipated that the series would culminate in a reenactment of the First Vision, the event in which Joseph Smith claimed that God the Father and Jesus Christ first appeared to him (172). It is more accurate to say that Card complicates his characters and storyworld by negotiating between both religious and secular history, and in this, he defuses the impulse toward allegory balancing the two.

Instead, Card uses the alternate history mode of fantasy to create a complex storyworld that references national and religious history while openly revising both. Alternate history has the ability to liberate historical actors and events from the determinacy of the historical record, leaving them "saturated with unspent potential" and infused with "the vitality of the permanently unfinished" (Gallagher 13). Similarly, alternate history can liberate characters and ideas from the strict confines of religious narrative. Entering into a counterfactual context, characters and settings from history may freely operate as they (or, at least, the author) see fit. In the case of *Alvin Maker*, the alternate-history storyworld reflects our world's nineteenth century, except Great Britain still controls many of its American colonies, some historical actors are recognizable but noticeably changed from their canonical versions, and the folk magic believed to exist actually, demonstrably, works. Such a world can contain the miraculous claims of a Mormon worldview while the new context enables Card to rethink Mormon beliefs in a world without the Church itself to dictate doctrine and meaning.

When analyzing mythopoeic literature it is important to consider how the core narrative changes in the process of adaptation. According to Brian Attebery, it matters less that we identify a relationship between a myth and a fantasy novel because what we should pay attention to is what the new fantasy says through its invocation and reshaping of that myth within its new context (3). Authorial choices of what is kept and repurposed versus what is excised and replaced serve as cultural negotiations, speaking without cultural authority and therefore free to interrogate established, sanctioned belief (21). For Card, speculative fiction becomes a laboratory wherein he can test out the logical extensions of his theology. In books with explicitly Mormon characters—*Saints* (1984), *Folk on the Fringe* (1989), and *Lost Boys* (1992)—he explores the contours of devotion within the Church as a community made up of ordinary people who believe in an extraordinary cosmos. The *Alvin Maker* books offer Card a chance to explore the inverse, imagining a world without Mormonism as a formal entity but wherein the storyworld is theologically charged. Card does not believe he (or any author) can keep his most deeply held

moral and spiritual convictions from influencing his work (“SF and Religion” 12), but by excising the Church from the storyworld, he forces himself to rethink Mormon doctrine so that it arises naturally from the story and its underpinning metaphysics. In this way, Card reorients the goal of spirituality away from devotion to the institutional Church and toward a “self-conformity with laws that are intrinsically transformative” (Givens 39). In LDS scripture we read how “that which is governed by law is also...perfected and sanctified by the same” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88.34). In Alvin Maker, cosmology and commandments from a religious source are transmogrified into the highest expressions of natural law in place of the arbitrary demands of a divine Providence guiding the universe.

The Shining Man scenes are a useful example for how Card overtly draws upon Mormon lore to rethink the story of Mormonism in a rational context, retaining the mythic power of the tale but redirecting its thematic resonance. According to Smith’s account, in 1820 he wanted to know which Christian denomination to join, went into the woods to pray for guidance, and experienced a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ, who told him not to join any then-existent church. Three years later, while praying at his bedside on September 21, 1823, he noticed a light in the room and beheld a figure radiating light, clothed in a white robe. The personage identified himself as Moroni, an angel sent from God to inform Smith of his prophetic calling, and that Smith would obtain a record of ancient scripture buried nearby, which he would translate through a divine gift (“Joseph Smith—History” 1.30-35). The scene emphasizes Smith’s role as the first prophet in a new prophet-led epoch, similar to Moses’ mission to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. It is structured pedagogically, with Moroni declaring a message directly from God, and appearing three times throughout the night to deliver the same message each time. This story, sanctioned as scripture by the Church, is one of its most iconic and is received as archetypal for how God commences His divine work through prophets. As scripture it is monologic: Moroni’s message is not to be questioned, and Joseph passively receives it. By expunging the Church from the storyworld, Card must find a new narrative purpose for the scene. In so doing he deconstructs the monologic discourse into a dialogic event, with two characters who are each transformed within their respective narrative threads.

Card replaces the seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith with seven-year-old Alvin Miller, and the angel Moroni is replaced by a Native American named Lolla-Wossiky, the series’ alternate-historical version of Lalawethika,¹ also named Tenskwatawa. The scene is told twice, first from Alvin’s perspective in *Seventh Son*, in which the events are more sudden and mysterious, and Alvin refers to Lolla-Wossiky as the Shining Man.² The second version, in *Red Prophet*, makes Lolla-Wossiky the focalizing character and provides greater insight into his motives and the magical underpinnings of the storyworld. In terms of narrative, Moroni functions as a plot device through which God calls Smith to found the Church. By removing God and angels from the story, Card creates a fantasy world that can symbolically reflect sacred narrative but operates on the human level, with both characters dynamic actors within their individual stories, neither subservient to the other.

To achieve optimal resonance with Smith's account, Card efficiently mimics the staging of Moroni's visit. Lying in his bed, Alvin soon realizes that "There was a man standing at the foot of his bed, a man shining as if he was made of sunlight. The light in the room was coming from his skin, from his chest where his shirt was torn open, from his face, and from his hands. And in one of those hands, a knife, a sharp and steel knife" (SS 60). Alert readers will notice the narrator drawing attention to the parallels with Smith's account of Moroni's visitation: "His hands were naked, and his arms also, a little above the wrist; so, also, were his feet naked, as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom" (JS—H 1.31). The Shining Man's knife is the most significant difference from the scriptural version, and it is used to cut his own arm and activate his own magic to grant Alvin visions to teach him about his powers as a Maker. This redirects the supernatural qualities of the story away from divine origins and reinforces the fact that Card is reimagining myth on a mortal plane.

Other important echoes reinforce the connection between the scenes while also illuminating important narrative differences. Smith says he was praying for forgiveness because, "I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been" (JS-H 1.28). Moroni's visit signals God's benevolence and His willingness to operate through an imperfect—but self-aware—human prophet. In contrast, the Shining Man comes to rebuke Alvin for misusing his powers, specifically when he conscripts a swarm of cockroaches to invade his sisters' bedroom as petty revenge for having teased Alvin. The girls are terrorized, the roaches massacred, and Alvin revels in his vengeance. The first of the visions shown to Alvin reenacts the roaches' dying thoughts. Previously, Alvin's bedroom had provided a space of predictable order and safety, thanks to a social contract between Alvin and the roaches. After Alvin manipulates the roaches, he and his bedroom are deemed "worse than death—there the world had gone crazy, it was a place where anything could happen, where nothing could be trusted, where nothing was certain. A terrible place. The worst place" (SS 62). Whereas Moroni comes to Smith in response to repentance and then to call Smith to his prophetic role, the Shining Man comes to teach Alvin the magnitude of his powers and the importance of wielding them responsibly, with no specific goal or purpose beyond that.

The linear progression of discourse between the characters is central to how Card reworks Mormon myth into a dynamic exchange rather than monologic instruction. Moroni visits Smith three times throughout the night, each time offering roughly the same instruction with slight variations, making it more cyclical. Because Alvin is not called to uncover ancient scripture, establish a church, or become a prophet, Card must find a way to retain the three visits while redirecting the mythic energy back into the story and its themes. The first visit shocks Alvin into contrition and he swears to never use his magic again. The Shining Man realizes that Alvin has learned the wrong lesson, and so the second vision comes as a corrective, first showing a Native American hunter killing a deer, but doing so with reverence and for the purpose of maintaining

life rather than for selfish sport; “Alvin knew that in this vision there wasn’t no sin at all, because dying and killing, they were both just a part of life” (63). The vision then changes to show Alvin himself on a mountain “pressing his hands against a stone, and the stone melted like butter under his hands, came out in just the shape he wanted...and rolled away, a perfect ball, a perfect sphere, growing and growing until it was a whole world” (63-64). This imagery, which evokes Biblical prophecy (see Daniel 2:35&45), teaches Alvin that being a Maker “wasn’t a terrible power, it was a glorious one, if he only knew how to use it” (SS 64). When the Shining Man appears for the third time, he does not offer Alvin any instruction, but waits until Alvin attempts to use his powers to try healing the Shining Man’s eye that was shot out of him in his youth. Although Alvin fails to create a new eye, we learn later that it has healed a different trauma. The dynamic and mutual exchange of instruction and healing invigorates the scene, resulting naturally from the characters’ own personalities and desires, reworking the mythic energy of Smith’s account to empower both characters to progress independently in their own stories.

Not only is the scene dialogic by making it a mutual exchange between human characters, but they dialogue within themselves. Being only human, each character has a limited knowledge about Alvin’s powers and the broader body of magic in the series, and the exchange honors that fact; Lolla-Wossiky shares visions rather than dictate prescriptive rules to Alvin, who must then interpret and internalize the lessons he learns subjectively on his own. Certainty of the laws that govern Making remain elusive, and Alvin struggles to apply these lessons throughout the series, frequently reflecting and testing how he understands each principle.

Finally, because there are two iterations of the Shining Man scene across two novels, the versions become dialogic with each other. The *Seventh Son* version resembles the Joseph Smith account but with important differences. The *Red Prophet* version, told from Lolla-Wossiky’s perspective, is far more disruptive to a devotional reading of the series. Through Lolla-Wossiky, we learn that the magic of the series functions as a connection between humans and the Earth as a whole. Before meeting Alvin, Lolla-Wossiky is beset by “the black noise,” a buzzing mental and spiritual fog that has afflicted him for years and hampers his connection to the land. In a moment of fleeting clarity, he beholds a vision that he interprets as an invitation to seek out his dream beast, a spiritual guide, which he hopes can undo the black noise. Eventually, he comes upon Alvin, and he wonders whether Alvin (who appears to him as a shining figure, prefiguring Lolla-Wossiky’s later appearance to Alvin) might be his dream beast. When he witnesses the incident with the roaches, he realizes that he has insight and knowledge that can guide Alvin, declaring “I didn’t come here to find my own dream beast, but to be the dream beast for this boy” (RP 90). Both turn out to be true, as Lolla-Wossiky’s interventions awaken Alvin to a more responsible sense of his powers, and Alvin, attempting to restore Lolla-Wossiky’s ruined eye, does heal him of the black noise.

The second iteration of the scene connects Alvin’s story to a larger world, with characters who operate independent of one another. Teaching Alvin is Lolla-Wossiky’s own choice, and it is not the end of his story. Freed from the black noise, he goes off on his own and has an epiphany

in which he beholds himself as a spiritual leader to his people and takes the name Tenskwa-Tawa (RP 97). It is unfortunate that Card connects this epiphany (a revision of how the historical Lalawethika became Tenskwatawa, a spiritual leader amongst the Shawnee people) to a white settler healing Lolla-Wossiky of the oppressive buzzing noise. Though Card seems respectful of his indigenous characters by retaining as much of their original stories as his storyworld can sustain, his project does subsume the history and culture of North American indigenous people into the history of white settlers and Mormon lore. Nevertheless, while the novel mainly follows Alvin, Tenskwa-Tawa remains a significant character with his own storyline. Like his historical analog, he establishes Prophetstown [sic], a community for Native Americans where William Henry Harrison leads a military expedition intent on massacre. The story culminates in Tenskwa-Tawa using the power of the land to curse their assailants and declare a line of demarcation, forbidding white settlers from pursuing him and his people west.

It is tempting to read the Tales of Alvin Maker series as a hagiographic allegory in which Card extols his faith and its founder, even without the Church expressly manifest. Instead, readers should recognize how Card complicates his allusions by overlaying the alternate history and fantasy genres. That Card successfully reimagines important scenes from religious narrative without the Church or scriptural canon suggests that his own version of Mormon theology is not merely a cluster of commandments and dictates blindly received from Church leaders. Instead, Card portrays Mormonism as a dynamic belief system that negotiates theological and historical narratives in an effort to identify the natural laws that encompass and direct mortal and divine lives. Doctrines and commandments stem from a universe operating by its own rational (though metaphysical) logic. For Card, at least, Mormon cosmology and spirituality become inevitable and natural, even without heavenly administration or ecclesiastical direction.

Notes

1. The historical Lalawethika was a Shawnee spiritual leader and the brother of Tecumseh. At one time known as the town drunk, he had an experience in which he claimed he had communed with an entity he identified as the Master of Breath. Thereafter, he promoted cooperation among the Native American tribes and rejected the encroachment of Euro-American settlers.
2. For an analysis of the problematic aspects of Card, a white author, incorporating Native American personalities and magic into his series, see Weronika Łaskiewicz's "(Dis) empowerment of Native Americans in Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker*" (*Ilha do Desterro* 74.1, p. 307-326).

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