Carl Jung and Archetypes

Myth is the natural and indispensable intermediate stage between unconscious and conscious cognition. True, the unconscious knows more than the consciousness does; but it is a knowledge of a special sort, knowledge in eternity, usually without reference to the here and now, not couched in language of the intellect. Only when we let its statements amplify themselves . . . does it come within the range of the understanding; only then does a new aspect become perceptible to us. The process is convincingly repeated in every successful dream analysis. That is why it is so important not to have any preconceived, doctrinaire opinions about the statements made by dreams. As soon as a certain “monotony of interpretation” strikes us, we know that our approach has become doctrinaire and hence sterile.

Jung  Memories, Dreams, Reflections

Many contemporary theorists and literary critics believe that the significance of a work of art may well lie in its universality—it’s appeal to all peoples regardless of time or culture. Certain images or situations, these critics assert, create similar emotional responses in nearly everybody. Consequently, both visual artists and writers may evoke those experiences that create the most striking responses. The identification of such archetypal elements can lead to a much deeper understanding of a work’s value.

Archetypal analysis, sometimes referred to as myth criticism, is a method of analysis that enhances our critical imagery, and situations that suggest recurrent human circumstances. In his book Contributions to Analytical Psychology, Jung writes that there are three basic qualities that characterize archetypes: primordial, universal, and recurrent.

Primordial Characteristics
The most fundamental quality that characterizes archetypes is that they are primordial: they are located within the human preconscious, that area of the mind from which information can be recalled (re-membered), though it is not present in the conscious mind. In humans, the experiences of the past that are so important for the species’ survival, such as the fear of falling, are the result of countless numbers of experiences of the same kind, experiences that literally began before the development of consciousness. They are innate images of experiences which have been repeated so often that they have formed deep, lasting impressions upon the human psyche. These experiences have a cumulative effect much like what happens to unprocessed photographic film passed through airport x-ray machines. One trip through an x-ray machine is probably not noticeable on the photographs, but when the film passes through the machines several times, as it does on a trip that requires several flights, a haze begins to appear. The more trips through the machine, the deeper the haze becomes. The film “remembers” each x-ray and is cumulatively affected by it until it becomes codified into an archetype, buried deeply within the collective unconscious and passed on by the species generation after generation. While this process has never been satisfactorily explained, (Is it genetic? Is it cultural? Is it mystical?) these
experiences represent those formed earliest in the development of the human species. Primordial experiences, therefore, are fundamental, original occurrences, repeated so many millions of times that they are mentally imprinted. Consequently, since Jung viewed them as models or prototypes of universal behavior, he named them archetypes.

**Universal Characteristics**

The second fundamental quality of archetypes is that they are universal; they are unaffected by time or situation, community or culture. They are now as they were in the past; they are as significant to tribal people, so isolated in dense jungles or on remote islands that they think their few members are the only human beings in existence, as they are to engineers striving to solve the complex problems of space travel. The ancient Greeks battling over Helen at the walls of Troy were as affected by archetypes as politicians today who are trying to calculate the interests and moods of the people so that successful election campaigns may be waged. From this perspective, humans have changed little in the past 4,000 years of recorded history, a period which is itself only an instant when compared with the backdrop of evolutionary time. The psycho-neurological functions of the modern mind remain essentially unchanged from the minds of Neolithic peoples. As a result, we all share similar experiences, emotions drives, needs, and archetypes with each other and with our ancient ancestors. Archetypes are, therefore, truly part of the human universal experience.

**Recurrent Characteristics**

The third fundamental quality of archetypes is that they are recurrent. Those who have conducted research in the fields of anthropology, comparative religion, and mythology have tended to confirm the similarities among peoples, while demonstrating that what differences do exist are attributable mostly to local adaptations. It makes little difference, for example, where people are on the earth or when they exist; all people have been concerned with their creation and the meaning of their existence. These concerns are universal, therefore, archetypal. The most fascinating aspects of any comparison, however, comes with the realization that the explanations of human origin and worldly creation are strikingly similar.

**Images or Symbols**

Archetypes are universal in their symbolism; certain images seem to have universal appeal. These images call from within us certain responses and associations that appeal to us in emotional ways quite apart from our intellect. For example, a ship:

- **the Pequod** The ship from *Moby Dick* symbolizes the conflict between humans and nature.
- **the Bounty** The ship from the famous mutiny symbolizes the connective link between the rigid Victorian culture of England and the permissive Polynesian culture of Tahiti.
the Discovery  The spaceship from 2001: A Space Oddysssey symbolizes the inexorable human quest for knowledge, even into the depths of the unknown.

Characters
A number of recurrent, archetypal characters make up the cast in many works of literature, as well as in the mythology and in religion. These characters possess such remarkably similar experiences and behave in such a predetermined manner that their lives appear almost ritualistic in their predictability.

Probably the most common of these characters is the hero; the hero myth is universally a powerful shaper of beliefs, rituals, and arts. The hero story, according to many scholars, is the central motif of all mythology, and that story is known by many names:
- the hero’s journey or quest
- the adventure tale
- the epic
- the search
- the exploration
- the escape
- the wandering
- the love story

Other archetypal characters, like the hero, can be identified by what happens to them. Their experiences too are varied and are important for their representation in literature and mythology.

2. The outcast is a character who is condemned to wander after committing some crime against society (e.g. Cain; The Ancient Mariner; Clare Walker in “The Loving Shepherds”; Moses and the tribes of Israel).

3. The devil character is the personification of evil. He often offers fortune, fame, or power in return for a soul (e.g. Lucifer; Mephistopheles; Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord; the Emperor in Star Wars, Darth Vader’s master).

4. The scapegoat is a person whose death in a public ritual expiates the community’s sins (e.g. Mrs. Hutchinson in “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson; Jesus).

5. The star-crossed lovers’ relationship ends with the tragic death of one or both of them (e.g. Romeo and Juliet; Antigone; Psyche and Eros).

6. The intellectual (mathematician, astronomer, scientist, computer programmer)
   a. Anti-social—wicked or mad scientist, e.g. Victor Frankenstein
   b. Neutral—provides reasoning or explanation, e.g. Dr. Strangelove
c. Pro-social—often the power behind the hero, e.g. Mr. Spock of Star Trek; Merlin to King Arthur

7. The medicine woman is the possessor of the knowledge of the healing powers of nature (e.g. Ayla and Iza in Clan of the Cave Bear; Morgan la Fay in the legends of King Arthur; witches)

8. The shaman / holyman is the possessor of the knowledge of the healing powers of the spirit world, guardian of the traditions and rituals of the people (e.g. Mogar in Clan of the Cave Bear; don Juan in the books of Carlos Castaneda; the witch doctor)

Still other archetypal characters you may wish to investigate:
- artist
- sage or seer
- trickster
- fool
- warrior
- giant
- king
- child or innocent
- guru or disciple
- the double
- the father
- the mother

Situation
Several recurrent archetypal situations have been identified in the world’s literature through the use of Jung’s analytical techniques. These situations are what the images suggest and what the characters pursue. In one sense, the situation forms the basis for plot in the literature of the mythic story. Some of the most common situations are: the initiation, the task, the quest, the fall, death and rebirth, the wasteland.

Shadow, Anima, and Persona
On a much deeper plane than images, characters or situations, archetypal analysis is also concerned with the individual human psyche. Unlike Freud, however, Jung’s approach is to probe the characters’ psyches in literature in order to understand better the characters themselves, not to probe the psychological problems that may have confronted the author. As a result, you may find this approach somewhat more useful than Freud’s therapeutic psychological analysis.

Shadow—Jung believed that, in addition to the collective unconscious, the mind has a personal subconscious. The darker part of this region he referred to as the shadow, where the less pleasant aspects of the personality reside. This dark part of the personality, often dangerous, belongs to the primitive, uncivilized, pre-evolutionary past of the species. The shadow holds emotions such as jealousy and repressed desires such as avarice, which most people would prefer not to recognize as part of their being. The villain is a shadow character.

Anima / Animus—While the shadow exists in everyone and is not a part of the personality we like to admit to, the anima is the element that sets humans apart from
other animals. The anima is the life force, the vital energy within everyone; it is the part of people that is living and causes life. The Anima is the female soul image of a man, the Animus the male soul image of a woman. That is the most simple definition, and one with which many struggle since Jung defines a person’s soul image as gender opposite. Jung asserts that without the anima people would deteriorate into pathological idleness. The anima / animus is the life force, the center of ambition and creativity. If one is on good terms with one’s anima / animus he / she can prove a valuable messenger between the unconscious and the conscious, a connecting link—a veritable Hermes. The heroine is an anima character.

**Persona**—The persona is a concept that is perhaps more often familiar. Simply put, the persona is the social personality or actor’s mask that everyone puts on to face the world. Often, the persona is perceived as quite different from one’s true self. The chief function of the persona is to mediate between the ego and the world outside. A personality that is psychologically healthy and mature must possess a persona that is flexible. The hero is a persona character.