

CARL JUNG AND THE THEORY OF ARCHETYPES

Background

Carl Gustav Jung was born July 26, 1875, in the small Swiss village of Kessewil...He was surrounded by a fairly well educated extended family, including quite a few clergymen and some eccentrics as well.

[Jung's father] started Carl on Latin when he was six years old, beginning a long interest in language and literature -- especially ancient literature. Besides most modern western European languages, Jung could read several ancient ones, including Sanskrit, the language of the original Hindu holy books.

Carl was a rather solitary adolescent, who didn't care much for school, and especially couldn't take competition. He went to boarding school in Basel, Switzerland, where he found himself the object of a lot of jealous harassment. He began to use sickness as an excuse, developing an embarrassing tendency to faint under pressure.

Although his first career choice was archeology, he went on to study medicine...he settled on psychiatry as his career.

...Carl Jung was to make the exploration of this "inner space" his life's work. He went equipped with ... an apparently inexhaustible knowledge of mythology, religion, and philosophy.

...He had, in addition, a capacity for very lucid dreaming and occasional visions. In the fall of 1913, he had a vision of a "monstrous flood" engulfing most of Europe and lapping at the mountains of his native Switzerland. He saw thousands of people drowning and civilization crumbling. Then, the waters turned into blood. This vision was followed, in the next few weeks, by dreams of eternal winters and rivers of blood. He was afraid that he was becoming psychotic.

But on August 1 of that year, World War I began. Jung felt that there had been a connection, somehow, between himself as an individual and humanity in general that could not be explained away. From then until 1928, he was to go through a rather painful process of self-exploration that formed the basis of all of his later theorizing.

He carefully recorded his dreams, fantasies, and visions, and drew, painted, and sculpted them as well. He found that his experiences tended to form themselves into persons, beginning with a wise old man and his companion, a little girl. The wise old man evolved, over a number of dreams, into a sort of spiritual guru. The little girl became "anima," the feminine soul, who served as his main medium of communication with the deeper aspects of his unconscious.

A leathery brown dwarf would show up guarding the entrance to the unconscious. He was "the shadow," a primitive companion for Jung's ego. Jung dreamt that he and the dwarf killed a beautiful blond youth... For Jung, this represented a warning about the dangers of the worship of glory and heroism which would soon cause so much sorrow all over Europe...

Jung dreamt a great deal about the dead, the land of the dead, and the rising of the dead. These represented the unconscious...a new **collective unconscious** of humanity itself, an unconscious that could contain all the dead, not just our personal ghosts. Jung began to see the mentally ill as

people who are haunted by these ghosts, in an age where no-one is supposed to even believe in them. If we could only recapture our mythologies, we would understand these ghosts, become comfortable with the dead, and heal our mental illnesses.

Critics have suggested that Jung was, very simply, ill himself when all this happened. But Jung felt that, if you want to understand the jungle, you can't be content just to sail back and forth near the shore. You've got to get into it, no matter how strange and frightening it might seem.

...But then Jung adds the part of the psyche that makes his theory stand out from all others: the **collective unconscious**. You could call it your "psychic inheritance." It is the reservoir of our experiences as a species, a kind of knowledge we are all born with. And yet we can never be directly conscious of it. It influences all of our experiences and behaviors, most especially the emotional ones, but we only know about it indirectly, by looking at those influences.

There are some experiences that show the effects of the collective unconscious more clearly than others: The experiences of love at first sight, of *deja vu* (the feeling that you've been here before), and the immediate recognition of certain symbols and the meanings of certain myths, could all be understood as the sudden conjunction of our outer reality and the inner reality of the collective unconscious. Grander examples are the creative experiences shared by artists and musicians all over the world and in all times, or the spiritual experiences of mystics of all religions, or the parallels in dreams, fantasies, mythologies, fairy tales, and literature.

A nice example that has been greatly discussed recently is the near-death experience. It seems that many people, of many different cultural backgrounds, find that they have very similar recollections when they are brought back from a close encounter with death. They speak of leaving their bodies, seeing their bodies and the events surrounding them clearly, of being pulled through a long tunnel towards a bright light, of seeing deceased relatives or religious figures waiting for them, and of their disappointment at having to leave this happy scene to return to their bodies. Perhaps we are all "built" to experience death in this fashion.

Archetypes

The contents of the collective unconscious are called **archetypes**. Jung also called them dominants, imagos, mythological or primordial images, and a few other names, but archetypes seems to have won out over these. An archetype is an unlearned tendency to experience things in a certain way.

The mother archetype

The **mother archetype** is a particularly good example. All of our ancestors had mothers. We have evolved in an environment that included a mother or mother-substitute. We would never have survived without our connection with a nurturing-one during our times as helpless infants. It stands to reason that we are "built" in a way that reflects that evolutionary environment: We come into this world ready to want mother, to seek her, to recognize her, to deal with her.

So the mother archetype is our built-in ability to recognize a certain relationship, that of "mothering." Jung says that this is rather abstract, and we are likely to project the archetype out into the world and onto a particular person, usually our own mothers. Even when an archetype doesn't have a particular real person available, we tend to personify the archetype, that is, turn it into a mythological "story-book" character. This character symbolizes the archetype.

The mother archetype is symbolized by the primordial mother or "earth mother" of mythology, by Eve and Mary in western traditions, and by less personal symbols such as the church, the nation, a forest, or the ocean. According to Jung, someone whose own mother failed to satisfy the demands of the archetype may well be one that spends his or her life seeking comfort in the church, or in identification with "the motherland," or in meditating upon the figure of Mary, or in a life at sea.

The shadow

Sex and the life instincts in general are, of course, represented somewhere in Jung's system. They are a part of an archetype called the **shadow**. It derives from our prehuman, animal past, when our concerns were limited to survival and reproduction, and when we weren't self-conscious.

It is the "dark side" of the ego, and the evil that we are capable of is often stored there. Actually, the shadow is amoral -- neither good nor bad, just like animals. An animal is capable of tender care for its young and vicious killing for food, but it doesn't choose to do either. It just does what it does. It is "innocent." But from our human perspective, the animal world looks rather brutal, inhuman, so the shadow becomes something of a garbage can for the parts of ourselves that we can't quite admit to.

Symbols of the shadow include the snake (as in the garden of Eden), the dragon, monsters, and demons. It often guards the entrance to a cave or a pool of water, which is the collective unconscious. Next time you dream about wrestling with the devil, it may only be yourself you are wrestling with!

The persona

The **persona** represents your public image. The word is, obviously, related to the word person and personality, and comes from a Latin word for mask. So the persona is the mask you put on before you show yourself to the outside world. Although it begins as an archetype, by the time we are finished realizing it, it is the part of us most distant from the collective unconscious.

At its best, it is just the "good impression" we all wish to present as we fill the roles society requires of us. But, of course, it can also be the "false impression" we use to manipulate people's opinions and behaviors. And, at its worst, it can be mistaken, even by ourselves, for our true nature: Sometimes we believe we really are what we pretend to be!

Anima and animus

...The **anima** is the female aspect present in the collective unconscious of men, and the **animus** is the male aspect present in the collective unconscious of women. Together, they are referred to as **syzygy**. The anima may be personified as a young girl, very spontaneous and intuitive, or as a witch, or as the earth mother. It is likely to be associated with deep emotionality and the force of

life itself. The animus may be personified as a wise old man, a sorcerer, or often a number of males, and tends to be logical, often rationalistic, even argumentative...

Other archetypes

Jung said that there is no fixed number of archetypes which we could simply list and memorize. They overlap and easily melt into each other as needed, and their logic is not the usual kind. But here are some he mentions:

Besides mother, there are other family archetypes. Obviously, there is **father**, who is often symbolized by a guide or an authority figure. There is also the archetype **family**, which represents the idea of blood relationship and ties that run deeper than those based on conscious reasons.

There is also the **child**, represented in mythology and art by children, infants most especially, as well as other small creatures. The Christ child celebrated at Christmas is a manifestation of the child archetype, and represents the future, becoming, rebirth, and salvation. Curiously, Christmas falls during the winter solstice, which in northern primitive cultures also represents the future and rebirth. People used to light bonfires and perform ceremonies to encourage the sun's return to them. The child archetype often blends with other archetypes to form the child-god, or the child-hero.

Many archetypes are story characters. The **hero** is one of the main ones... Basically, he represents the ego -- we do tend to identify with the hero of the story -- and is often engaged in fighting the shadow, in the form of dragons and other monsters. The hero is, however, often dumb as a post. He is, after all, ignorant of the ways of the collective unconscious. Luke Skywalker, in the **Star Wars** films, is the perfect example of a hero.

The hero is often out to rescue the **maiden**. She represents purity, innocence, and, in all likelihood, naivete. In the beginning of the **Star Wars** story, Princess Leia is the maiden. But, as the story progresses, she becomes the anima, discovering the powers of the force -- the collective unconscious -- and becoming an equal partner with Luke, who turns out to be her brother.

The hero is guided by the **wise old man**. He is a form of the animus, and reveals to the hero the nature of the collective unconscious. In **Star Wars**, he is played by Obi Wan Kenobi and, later, Yoda. Notice that they teach Luke about the force and, as Luke matures, they die and become a part of him.

You might be curious as to the archetype represented by Darth Vader, the "dark father." He is the shadow and the master of the dark side of the force. He also turns out to be Luke and Leia's father. When he dies, he becomes one of the wise old men.

There is also an **animal** archetype, representing humanity's relationships with the animal world. The hero's faithful horse would be an example. Snakes are often symbolic of the animal archetype, and are thought to be particularly wise. Animals, after all, are more in touch with their natures than we are. Perhaps loyal little robots and reliable old spaceships -- the Falcon-- are also symbols of animal.

And there is the **trickster**, often represented by a clown or a magician. The trickster's role is to hamper the hero's progress and to generally make trouble. In Norse mythology, many of the gods' adventures originate in some trick or another played on their majesties by the half-god Loki.

There are other archetypes that are a little more difficult to talk about. One is the **original man**, represented in western religion by Adam. Another is the **God** archetype, representing our need to comprehend the universe, to give a meaning to all that happens, to see it all as having some purpose and direction.

The **hermaphrodite**, both male and female, represents the union of opposites, an important idea in Jung's theory. In some religious art, Jesus is presented as a rather feminine man. Likewise, in China, the character Kuan Yin began as a male saint (the bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara), but was portrayed in such a feminine manner that he is more often thought of as the female goddess of compassion!

The most important archetype of all is the **self**. The self is the ultimate unity of the personality and is symbolized by the circle, the cross, and the **mandala** figures that Jung was fond of painting. A mandala is a drawing that is used in meditation because it tends to draw your focus back to the center, and it can be as simple as a geometric figure or as complicated as a stained glass window. The personifications that best represent self are Christ and Buddha, two people who many believe achieved perfection. But Jung felt that perfection of the personality is only truly achieved in death.

The archetypes, at first glance, might seem to be Jung's strangest idea. And yet they have proven to be very useful in the analysis of myths, fairy tales, literature in general, artistic symbolism, and religious exposition. They apparently capture some of the basic "units" of our self-expression. Many people have suggested that there are only so many stories and characters in the world, and we just keep on rearranging the details.

This suggests that the archetypes actually do refer to some deep structures of the human mind. After all, from the physiological perspective, we come into this world with a certain structure: We see in a certain way, hear in a certain way, "process information" in a certain way, behave in a certain way, because our neurons and glands and muscles are structured in a certain way. At least one cognitive psychologist has suggested looking for the structures that correspond to Jung's archetypes!

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