**Carl Jung, the Collective Unconscious and Archetypes**

In studying the human psyche, Carl Jung (1875-1961) created a theory with three parts, the third being 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.

People who had no contact with each other formed myths to explain natural phenomena such as great floods and the creation of the world as well as to answer questions as to why we die and why we are born. The fantasy images of the primitive mind are so similar for all cultures, that Jung refers to them as the **collective unconscious**.

They remain part of every human unconscious mind as dreams of fantasy and fear; living, psychic forces which demand to be taken seriously. Jung believes that we can never legitimately be cut loose from our archetypal foundations.

**Characteristics of Archetypes:**

1. They are not individual, but we share them with humanity.

2. They are an inherited part of being human which connects us to past.

3. They are not directly knowable, but instead express themselves in forms (situations,

symbols, and characters)

4. They grow out of man’s social, psychological, and biological being.

5. They are universal. From gladiators to astronauts, they are the same.

6. They cannot be explained by interaction among cultures because geography and

history made it impossible.

**Archetype Definition(s):**

1. Archetype is a Greek word meaning “original pattern, or model.”

2. In literature and art, an archetype is a character, an event, a story or an image that

recurs in different works, in different cultures and in different periods of time but

that carries similar meanings despite the culture difference.

3. An inherited mode of thought that is defined from experience of the race and is

present in unconscious minds.

**Further Archetype Explanations:**

Wilfred Guerin (1979) states that archetypes are universal symbols, motifs or themes that may be found among many different cultures. They recur in the myths of people worldwide. These symbols carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind . . . . certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, and others recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them. (157)

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. "Mythological and Archetypal Approaches." A Handbook of Critical

Approaches to Literature. NY: Harper & Row, 1979: 157-161.

**Icons:**

Sometimes actual people take on archetypal roles for a society. These historical figures are called icons. They become "bigger-than-life" and are known more for what they represent to our society than who they are as individual personalities. The icons are perfect examples of archetypes as what they represent is a model or pattern that can be found in all cultures.

o John Wayne, Michael Jordan, Colin Powel (heroes),

o Amelia Eathart, Diane Fossey, Captain Karen Walden, Sally Ride, Carrie Strugg (heroines)

o James Dean, River Phoenix, Kurt Cobain (outcast)

o Martin Luther King, jr. Ryan White (scapegoats)

o Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein (Devil Figures)

**Situational Archetypes:**

1. **Quest** – the search for someone or some object which when found or brought back

will restore fertility to a wasted land.

2. **Task** – to save the kingdom, to win the fair lady, or to prove one’s rightful position, the hero

must perform some nearly superhuman deed. This also restores fertility to a wasted

land.

3. **The Initiation** – usually takes the form of an initiation into adult life – RITE of passage

4. A) **The Journey** – a hero/heroine goes in search of truth or information necessary to

restore fertility to the kingdom; usually he/she descends into a real or psychological

hell to discover the blackest truths concerning his/her faults.

B) **Journey Variation** – a group finds themselves together on a voyage or in an

isolated situation. Each member of the group will represent a level of society. As a

microcosm of society, the group will descend into a real or psychological hell to

discover the blackest truths concerning a society or culture.

4. **The Fall** – a descent from a high to low state of being which involves a defilement or loss of

innocence; often characters are expelled from a kind of paradise as a penalty.

5. **Death and Rebirth** – a common archetype which draws parallels between the cycle of

nature and cycle of life. Morning and spring are birth, while winter and evening is

death.

**Character Archetypes:**

1. **Hero/Heroine** – some or all of the following criteria are present in the life of the

hero/heroine:

a. Mother is a virgin or at least pure of heart and spirit.

b. An attempt is made to kill the pregnant mother or kill the child at an early age.

c. He/she is reared by foster parents.

d. (Male) after proving himself (usually defeating a wild beast) marries a princess,

becomes king, knight, or warrior of the realm or village. (Female) possess unusual

skills (often supernatural gifts) and takes on a special role in the kingdom or

positions usually occupied by men in that society (spiritual leader, warrior, judge)

e. Falls from favor with the gods.

f. Becomes an outcast.

g. Upon death, body is not buried.

2. **Young one from provinces** – this hero/heroine is spirited away and raised by strangers.

Later returns to his/her home as a stranger with new solutions to kingdom’s problems.

3. **The Initiates** – The hero or heroine, who prior to their quest, must endure some training or

ceremony. Initiates are usually innocent and wear white.

4. **Mentor** – Mentors serve as teachers or counselors to initiates. The

mentor acts as a role model for the protagonist, and can function as father and mother

figures to initiate as well. The mentor teaches by example the skills necessary to survive the quest/task/journey.

5. **The Devil Figure** – this character is evil incarnate who offers worldly goods, fame or

knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of the soul.

6. **Devil Figure with Ultimately Good Heart** – devil figure who is saved by the nobility or

love of the hero.

7. **The Outcast** – a figure who is banished from a social group for some crime (real or

imagined) against society. The outcast usually wanders from place to place.

8. **The woman figure** – Archetypally, male characters generally play one role at a time: the

warrior, the holy man, the villain, etc. Women play very special roles in society, or they

can play more than one archetypal role at a time. The following are a list of the most common female archetypes:

a. **Earthmother** – symbolic of spiritual and emotional nourishment, she is often

depicted in earth colors. She is usually depicted as having large breasts and hips representing childbearing capability.

b. **The temptress** – sensuous in beauty, this woman brings about the downfall of the

hero by tempting him to turn away from his goal.

c. **The platonic ideal** – this is an inspiring woman for whom the protagonist has an

intellectual rather than physical attraction.

d. **The unfaithful wife** – a married woman who finds her husband dull or unattractive

seeks a more virile or interesting man. Archetypally, the woman is the center of the

family and is responsible for keeping it together. While the role of the father/husband

(as provider and protector) can be easily replaced, the absence of the wife/mother (as

nurturer and teacher) throws a family into a different chaos than the loss of the male.

e. **The Damsel in distress** – The vulnerable woman must be rescued by the hero.

She is often a trap by the devil figure or the temptress to ensure the unsuspecting hero.

f. **The Star Crossed Lovers** – this is a love affair fated to end tragically because it

receives the disapproval of the society, friends, and/or family. Other times, it is a situation which separates the lovers such as a war, their respective positions in society, where they live, or untimely death.

**Symbolic Archetypes:**

1. **Water**: birth-death-resurrection; creation; purification and redemption; fertility and growth.

2. **Sea/ocean**: the mother of all life; spiritual mystery; death and/or rebirth; timelessness and

eternity.

3. **Rivers**: death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of

the life cycle.

4. **Sun:** (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; thinking, enlightenment, wisdom,

spiritual vision.

Rising sun: birth, creation, enlightenment.

Setting sun: death.

**Symbolic Archetypes:** Colors

1. **Red**: blood, sacrifice, passion; disorder.

2. **Green**: growth, hope, fertility.

3. **Blue**: highly positive; secure; tranquil; spiritual purity.

4. **Black**: darkness, chaos, mystery, the unknown, death, wisdom, evil, melancholy.

5. **White**: light, purity, innocence, timelessness; [negative: death, terror, supernatural]

6. **Yellow**: enlightenment, wisdom.

7. **Orange**: ambition