Myth and Psyche
The Evolution of Consciousness

This introduction to Jungian psychology was written by Donald Kalsched and Alan Jones as a companion to a photographic exhibition at The Hofstra Museum, in New York City, November 15 – December 19, 1986. The exhibit was presented by The Hofstra Museum with The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS). The exhibit was curated by Karin Barnaby and Annmari Ronnberg.

Introduction

Mythology is the most archaic and profound record we have of mankind's essential spirit and nature. As far back as we are able to trace the origins of our species, we find myth and myth-making as the fundamental language through which man relates to life's mystery and fashions meaning from his experiences. The world of myth has its own laws and its own reality. Instead of concepts and facts that make logical sense, we find patterns of irrational imagery whose meaning must be discerned or experienced by the participant-observer. Discovering these patterns of meaning is what Jung meant by the symbolic approach to religion, myth, and dream

The mythic image is not to be taken literally and concretely as it would be in the belief-system of a particular religion, nor is it to be dismissed as "mere illusion," as often happens in scientific circles. Instead, we must approach myth symbolically as revealed eternal "truths" about mankind's psychic existence – about the reality of the psyche. "Once upon a time" does not mean "once" in history but refers to events that occur in eternal time, always and everywhere. Any myth is very much alive today. Every night in sleep we sink back into that source of all mythological imagery, the unconscious psyche – the origin of dreams. Many of our games have their roots in mythology and much of contemporary art, literature, and film is shot through with mythological themes.

The comparative method is the basic key to a symbolic understanding of mythology. Through it we discover certain patterns which recur in widely varying cultures separated by an immensity of both distance and time. Jung called these underlying patterns "archetypes" from "arche" meaning primordial, and "typos" meaning typical. Archetypal images embody the most essential elements of the human experience and drama. They manifest both as powerful images, and as dynamic behavioral patterns. They are a repertoire of instinctive human functioning, analogous in our species to the instinctive impulse that impels, say, the Baltimore Oriole to build a beautiful teardrop nest, or Salmon to return to the streams of their birth. The generality of these images result from recurrent reactions of human beings to situations and stimuli of the same general order, repeated over thousands of years.

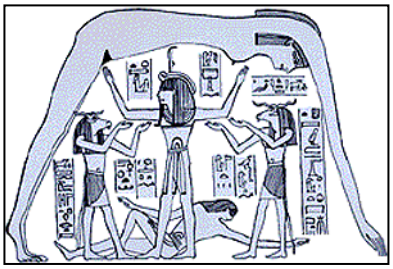
The archetypal images represent several basic stages of the life drama symbolized by the Hero myth. They lead from an initial stage of unconsciousness before the ego has awakened, through various stages of heroic struggle, to a final state of "wholeness" or integration when life has reached its full potential and a relationship between the human and divine has been reestablished. Jung called this process "individuation," the process of becoming the true individual that one really is. This "true self" Jung felt to be the dynamic factor in the unconscious of each individual. It represents the central archetype of order and wholeness among the other archetypes. Jung called it the Self.

The Original Embryonic State

In the beginning of many creation myths is an image of an original state of perfection, wholeness, and beatific containment. This is often represented as a containing circle, cave, pool, or sphere. The predominant archetypal symbol is that of the primordial Earth Goddess – the Great Mother with her nourishing and protective womb. Many other symbols express this archetype. Anything large and embracing or containing, such as a vessel, that enwraps, shelters, and preserves something small and fragile partakes of this "primordial mother" One very common symbol is the uroborus, the snake with its tail in its mouth. These symbols express a paradisal state prior to any degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy. The Garden of Eden, and the Golden Age when mankind lived in union with the gods, partaking of divine fullness and totality, are other common motifs of this psychological condition. In the biological life of the individual this symbolism corresponds not only to the pre-natal gestation of the embryo in the mother's uterus, but to the state of the newborn's total dependence upon the mother. Psychologically, these symbols express the stage when the ego is only a potential, or when the ego is dominated by the universal instinctual patterns of human response to the world, or a condition when little or nothing of a uniquely personal value is expressed by the individual.

Separation, Creation, and the Birth Of Consciousness

Comparative mythology teaches us that there is always a creative tension or urgency in the original embryonic state which leads to trouble. The great uroboric round breaks open and light is born into the world. A typical personification of this impulse is the snake that tempts Eve to violate her passive containment in the Garden, or the shadowy figure or animal in Fairy Tales that tempt the hero or heroine to break the status quo and do something "evil," i.e., individual. Such acts result in expulsion from paradisal condition. The protection of childhood, as well as the contentment with the past or with what has been achieved, are types of a paradise that are lost when life calls for a new adaptation.



This process begins with a cataclysmic *separation*. In myth it is often imaged as the separation of the world Parents. Father Sky and Mother Earth hold each other in an embrace and the world is left in darkness. The children born between them must thrust them apart, despite their parents' protesting cries and groans. Only then does light enter the world. This light symbolizes consciousness. Only in the light of consciousness can man *know*. Yet the acquisition of consciousness is a Promethean act subjecting the hero to the danger of inflation and retribution. For stealing fire from the Gods Prometheus was chained to a rock where an eagle ate his liver every night; when Icarus flew too high on his man-made wings, their wax melted and he plunged to his death in the sea. As a bearer of light, the hero is willing to face these dangers, despite the awareness of his aloneness, individuality, and mortality, in order to carry development further.

However, once the apple is eaten the world falls into opposites, and "good" and "evil" are assigned their place in the world. The Great Good Mother shows her dark aspect, the hateful or Terrible Mother, while the creative Father now sits opposite the Destructive Father, and brothers kill each other in the name of love, and the world is alternately either an enchanted or persecutory place.

The Hero Myth: Birth, Call, Journey

The hero myth symbolizes that personality formation occurs only through struggle, suffering, and sacrifice. The hero's triumphs and defeats are the paradigms of the individual's confrontation with the challenges of his or her own individual life – no matter how mundane or exalted. The birth of the hero usually occurs in humble surroundings such as a manger or cave, but it is always extraordinary in some way. Often there is a special light around the child, or the child is perceived to be a threat to the King. Frequently, the hero has two fathers – his personal father and a "higher" father. Often the mother is a virgin, and the hero's conception is of divine origin. The hero thereby inherits a dual nature. He is a human being like everyone else, yet at the same time he feels himself to be an outsider, a stranger to the community. He does not fit in, and discovers within himself something that sets him apart, such as his prophetic powers, healing abilities, or creative powers. These lead him to extraordinary deeds.

The heroic adventure often begins with some message or "call" from a miraculous source. A frog talks to the princess, or Moses confronts a burning bush, or an empty rice bowl floats upstream (Buddha), or there is an annunciation in a dream. The call often comes at an important moment. Old life values have often been outgrown and a certain sterility has set in. Parsifal's quest for the Holy Grail was set in motion by the Fisher King's realm having become a wasteland. Whatever its form, the call awakens the hero to his or her special destiny.

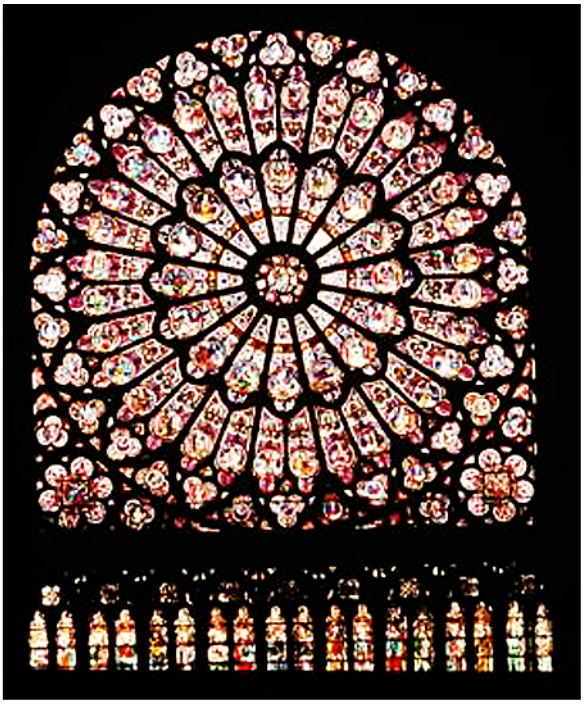
The Hero Myth: The Dragon Fight and Redemption of the Feminine

In the fight with the dragon the hero battles the regressive forces of the unconscious which threaten to swallow the individuating ego. The forces, personified in figures like Circe, Kali, medusa, sea serpents, Minotaur, or Gorgon, represent the Terrible side of the Great Mother. The Hero may voluntarily submit to being swallowed by the monster, or to a conscious descent into Hades so as to vanquish the forces of darkness. This mortifying descent into the abyss, the sea, the dark cave, or the underworld in order to be reborn to a new identity expresses the symbolism of the night-sea journey through the uterine belly of the monster. It is a fundamental theme in mythology the world over – that of death and rebirth. All initiatory rituals involve this basic archetypal pattern through which the old order and early infantile attachments must die and a more mature and productive life be born in their place.

The mythological goal of the dragon fight is almost always the virgin, the captive, or more generally, the "treasure hard to attain." This image of the vulnerable, beautiful, and enchanting woman, guarded by and captive of a menacing monster gives us a picture of the inner core of the personality and its surrounding defenses. The hero's task is to rescue the maiden from the grasp of the monster and, ultimately, to marry her and establish his kingdom with her. This dragon fight and liberation of the captive is the archetypal pattern that can guide us through those major transitional passages in our personal development where a rebirth or reorientation of consciousness is indicated. The captive represents the "new" element whose liberation makes all further development possible.

In response to the call the hero undertakes a journey, usually a dangerous journey to an unknown region full of both promise and danger. Often the journey is a descent. Sometimes, as with Jonah, Aeneas, Christ, and Psyche, it is a descent into the depths — the sea, the underworld, or Hades itself. Always there is a perilous crossing. Sometimes the faintheartedness of the hero is balanced by the appearance of guardians or helpful animals that enable the hero to perform the superhuman task that cannot be accomplished unaided. These helpful forces are representatives of the psychic totality that supports the ego in its struggle. They bear witness to the fact that the essential function of the hero myth is the development of the individual's true personality.

The Goal of Individuation and Its Symbols



The successful completion of the hero drama forges a relationship between the psychic opposites which split apart at the birth of consciousness. The major symbols for this synthesis are various forms of the *Coniunctio Oppositorium* or *Mandala* in which the original wholeness is now re-established but on a higher, more differentiated level. In the images of King and Queen united in marriage, or male and female united in the form of the androgyne, or geometrical opposites paradoxically united in the "squared circle" or life and death come together in the mysterious image of the immortal God suffering a mortal wound, the integration of the opposites within the personality are symbolized. Additional symbols of wholeness are the elixir of immortality, the pearl of great price, and the divine child, representing a life-transcending potential for future growth.

The hero myth tells us that the ego's courage to suffer the burdens of fear, guilt, and the conflicts within the personality – the willingness to be crucified on the cross of one's own doubleness and to hold this inwardly – is the only way God and man can be reconciled and drawn closer together. The original unity of God and man, as in the Garden, is broken when the ego aspires to consciousness. The ego is then banished to a world full of opposites which war with each other within the personality, as brother falls upon brother in war and devastation. But into the chaos is born the child of light, the hero, whose struggle can forge an everlasting relationship between male and female, light and darkness, life and death, God and man. This is the promise, the Ring, the Covenant, the Flaming Rainbow Bridge which can unite the human and divine in the inward depths of the human psyche.