Mythological and Archetypal Approaches

I. DEFINITIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

In *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell recounts a curious phenomenon of animal behavior. Newly hatched chickens, bits of eggshell still clinging to their tails, will dart for cover when a hawk flies overhead; yet they remain unaffected by other birds. Furthermore, a wooden model of a hawk, drawn forward along a wire above their coop, will send them scurrying (if the model is pulled backward, however, there is no response). "Whence," Campbell asks, "this abrupt seizure by an image to which there is no counterpart in the chicken's world? Living gulls and ducks, herons and pigeons, leave it cold; but the work of art strikes some very deep chord!" (31; our italics).

Campbell's hinted analogy, though only roughly approximate, will serve nonetheless as an instructive introduction to the mythological approach to literature. For it is with the relationship of literary art to "some very deep chord" in human nature that mythological criticism deals. The myth critic is concerned to seek out those mysterious elements that inform certain literary works and that elicit, with almost uncanny force, dramatic and near-universal human reactions. The myth critic wishes to discover how certain works of literature, usually those that have become, or promise to become, "classics," image a kind of reality to which readers respond—while other works, seemingly as well constructed, and even some forms of reality, leave them cold. Speaking figuratively, the myth critic studies in depth the "wooden hawks" of great literature: the so-called archetypes or archetypal patterns that the writer has drawn forward along the tensed structural wires of his or her masterpiece and that vibrate in such a way that a sympathetic resonance is set off deep within the reader.

An obviously close connection exists between mythological criticism and the psychological approach discussed in Chapter 6: both are concerned with the motives that underlie human behavior. (See Chapter 4 for our discussion of Literary Darwinism—how humans respond to certain images in an evolutionary
Between the two approaches are differences of degree and of affinities. Psychology tends to be experimental and diagnostic; it is closely related to biological science. Mythology tends to be speculative and philosophical; its affinities are with religion, anthropology, and cultural history. Such generalizations, of course, risk oversimplification; for instance, a great psychologist like Sigmund Freud ranged far beyond experimental and clinical study into the realms of myth, and his distinguished sometime protegé, Carl Gustav Jung, became one of the foremost mythologists of our time. Even so, the two approaches are distinct, and mythology is wider in its scope than psychology. For example, what psychoanalysis attempts to disclose about the individual personality, the study of myths reveals about the mind and character of a people. And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so myths are the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations.

According to the common misconception and misuse of the term, myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions, or opinions based upon false reasoning. Actually, mythology encompasses more than stories about the Greek and Roman deities or clever fables invented for the amusement of children. It may be true that myths do not meet standards of factual reality. Instead, they both reflect a more profound reality. As Mark Schorer says in *Politics of Vision*, "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend" (29). According to Alan W. Watts, "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (7).

Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. Myth is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, linking the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations).

II. SOME EXAMPLES OF ARCHETYPES

Having established the significance of myth, we need to examine its relationship to archetypes and archetypal patterns. Although every people has its own distinctive mythology that may be reflected in legend, folklore, and ideology—although, in other words, myths take their specific shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow—that myth exists is, in the general sense, universal. But even though similar motifs or themes may be found among many different mythologies, and certain images recur in the myths of peoples widely separated in time and place and tend to have a common meaning or, more accurately, tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions, there are no individual universal archetypes. As Philip Wheelwright explains in *Metaphor and Reality*, such symbols are

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, 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. (111)

Examples of some of the most widely recognized archetypes and the symbolic meanings with which they tend to be widely associated follow (again, it should be noted that these meanings may vary significantly from one context to another).

A. Images

1. Water: the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Jung, water is also the commonest symbol for the unconscious.
   a. The sea: mother of all life, spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious.
   b. Rivers: death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnations of deities.
2. Sun (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; law in nature; consciousness (thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision); father principle (moon and earth tend to be associated with female or mother principle); passage of time and life.
   a. Rising sun: birth; creation; enlightenment.
   b. Setting sun: death.
3. Colors
   a. Red: blood, sacrifice, violent passion, disorder.
   b. Green: growth; sensation; hope; fertility; in negative context may be associated with death and decay.
   c. Blue: usually highly positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, security, spiritual purity (the color of the Great Mother or Holy Mother).
   d. Black (darkness): chaos, mystery, the unknown; death; primal wisdom; the unconscious; evil; melancholy.
   e. White: highly multivalent, signifying, in its positive aspects, light, purity, innocence, and timelessness; in its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the blinding truth of an inescapable cosmic mystery (see, for instance, Herman Melville's chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*).
   a. Mandala (a geometric figure based upon the squaring of a circle around a unifying center; see the accompanying illustration of the classic Shri Yantra mandala): the desire for spiritual unity and psychic integration.
Note that in its classic Asian forms the mandala juxtaposes the triangle, the square, and the circle with their numerical equivalents of three, four, and seven.

b. Egg (oval): the mystery of life and the forces of generation.
c. Yang-yin: a Chinese symbol (below) representing the union of the opposite forces of the yang (masculine principle, light, activity, the conscious mind) and the yin (female principle, darkness, passivity, the unconscious).

d. Ouroboros: the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail, signifying the eternal cycle of life, primordial unconsciousness, the unity of opposing forces (cf. yin-yang).

5. Serpent (snake, worm): symbol of energy and pure force (cf. libido); evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery; wisdom; the incomprehensible.

b. Egg (oval): the mystery of life and the forces of generation.
c. Yang-yin: a Chinese symbol (below) representing the union of the opposite forces of the yang (masculine principle, light, activity, the conscious mind) and the yin (female principle, darkness, passivity, the unconscious).

The archetypal woman (Great Mother—the mysteries of life, death, transformation; the female principle associated with the moon):

a. The Good Mother (positive aspects of the Earth Mother): associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance (for example, Demeter, Ceres).

b. The Terrible Mother (including the negative aspects of the Earth Mother): the witch, sorceress, sire, whore, lamia, femme fatale—associated with sensuality, sexual orgies, fear, danger, darkness, dismemberment, emasculation, death; the unconscious in its terrifying aspects.

c. The Soul Mate: the Sophia figure, Holy Mother, the princess or "beautiful lady"—incarnation of inspiration and spiritual fulfillment (cf. the Jungian anima).

d. The demon lover (the male counterpart of the Terrible Mother): the devil, Satan, Dracula (cf. Blake's "The Sick Rose" and the Jungian animus).

e. The Wise Old Man (savior, redeemer, guru): personification of the spiritual principle, representing "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which make his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain... Apart from his cleverness, wisdom, and insight, the old man... is also notable for his moral qualities; what is more, he even tests the moral qualities of others and makes gifts dependent on this test... The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea... can extricate him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man" (Jung, Archetypes 217ff.). Merlin, Gandalf, Yoda, and Dumbledore are all wise old men.

t. The Trickster (joker, jester, clown, fool, swindler, picaro [rogue], poltergeist, confidence man ["con man"], medicine man [shaman], magician [sleight-of-hand artist], "Spirit Mercurius" [shape-shifter], simia dei ["the ape of God"], witch). The trickster appears to be the opposite of the wise old man because of his close affinity with the shadow archetype (for "shadow," see III.B.1); however, he has a positive side and serves a healing function through his transformative influence. Jung remarks that "He is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being..." (Archetypes 263). Jane Wheelwright's definition is particularly instructive: "Image of the archetype of mischievousness, unexpectedness, disorder, amoralities, the trickster is an archetypal shadow figure that represents a primordial, dawning consciousness. Compensating for rigid or overly righteous collective attitudes, it functions collectively as a cathartic safety valve for pent-up social pressures, a reminder of humankind's primitive origins and the fallibility of its institutions" (286). Jeanne Rosier Smith points out that myths, "as they appear in literature, can be read as part of an effort for human and cultural survival. The trickster's role as survivor and transformer, creating order from chaos, accounts for the figure's universal appeal and its centrality to the mythology and folklore of so many cultures" (3). While the trickster archetype has appeared in cultures throughout the world from time immemorial, beginning with examples like Prometheus, he (or, in some cases, she) is particularly notable in African American and American Indian cultures (see our discussion of Huckaberry Finn in Chapter 9).
11. Garden: paradise; innocence; unspoiled beauty (especially feminine); fertility.

12. Tree: "In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality" (Crollot 328; cf. the depiction of the cross of redemption as the tree of life in Christian iconography).

13. Desert: spiritual aridity; death; nihilism, hopelessness.

14. Mountain: aspiration and inspiration; meditation and spiritual elevation. "The mountain stands for the goal of the pilgrimage and ascent, hence it often has the psychological meaning of the self" (Jung, Archetypes 219n).

These examples are by no means exhaustive, but represent some of the more common archetypal images that the reader is likely to encounter in literature. The images we have listed do not necessarily function as archetypes every time they appear in a literary work. The discreet critic interprets them as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading.

B. Archetypal Motifs or Patterns

1. Creation: perhaps the most fundamental of all archetypal motifs—virtually every mythology is built on some account of how the cosmos, nature, and humankind were brought into existence by some supernatural Being or beings.

2. Immortality: another fundamental archetype, generally taking one of two basic narrative forms:
   a. Escape from time: "return to paradise," the state of perfect, timeless bliss enjoyed by man and woman before their tragic Fall into corruption and mortality.
   b. Mystical submersion into cyclical time: the theme of endless death and regeneration—human beings achieve a kind of immortality by submitting to the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature's eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons.

3. Hero/Heroine archetypes (archetypes of transformation and redemption):
   a. The quest: the hero (savior, deliverer) undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve unanswerable riddles, and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom.
   b. Initiation: the hero undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals in passing from ignorance and immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood, that is, in achieving maturity and becoming a full-fledged member of his or her social group. The initiation most commonly consists of three distinct phases: (1) separation, (2) transformation, and (3) return. Like the quest, this is a variation of the death-and-rebirth archetype.

4. Demotion as the tree of knowledge. The sacrificial scapegoat: the hero, with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified, must die to stone for the people’s sins and restore the land to fruitfulness.

C. Archetypes as Genres

Finally, in addition to appearing as images and motifs, archetypes may be found in even more complex combinations as genres or types of literature that conform with the major phases of the seasonal cycle. Northrop Frye, in his Anatomy of Criticism, indicates the correspondent genres for the four seasons as follows:

1. The mythos of spring: comedy
2. The mythos of summer: romance
3. The mythos of fall: tragedy
4. The mythos of winter: irony

Frye identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a "structural organizing principle of literary form" (341) and that an archetype is essentially an "element of one's literary experience" (365). And in The Stubborn Structure he claims that "mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable" (102).

III. MYTH CRITICISM IN PRACTICE

Unlike the critic who relies heavily on history and the biography of the writer, the myth critic is interested more in prehistory and the biographies of the gods. Unlike the critic who concentrates on the shape and symmetry of the work itself, the myth critic probes for the inner spirit which gives that form its vitality and its enduring appeal. And unlike the critic who is prone to look on the artifact as the product of some sexual neurosis, the myth critic sees the work holistically, as the manifestation of vitalizing, integrative forces arising from the depths of humankind's collective psyche. Yet only during the past century did the proper interpretive tools become available through the development of such disciplines as anthropology, psychology, and cultural history.

A. Anthropology and Its Uses

The rapid advancement of modern anthropology since the end of the nineteenth century has been the most important single influence on the growth of myth criticism. Shortly after the turn of the century this influence was revealed in a series of important studies published by the Cambridge Hellenists, a group of British scholars who applied recent anthropological discoveries to the understanding of Greek classics in terms of mythic and ritualistic origins. Noteworthy contributions by members of this group include Anthropology and the Classics, a symposium edited by R. R. Marett; Jane Harrison's Themis; Gilbert Murray's Euripides and His Age; and E. R. Cornford's Origin of Attic Comedy. But by far the most significant
member of the British school was Sir James G. Frazer, whose monumental *The Golden Bough* has exerted an enormous influence on twentieth-century literature, not merely on the critics but also on such creative writers as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Joseph Conrad, and T. S. Eliot. Frazer's work, a comparative study of the primitive origins of religion in magic, ritual, and myth, was first published in two volumes in 1890, later expanded to twelve volumes, and then published in a one-volume abridged edition in 1922. Frazer's main contribution was to demonstrate the "essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times," particularly as these wants were reflected throughout ancient mythologies. He explains, for example, in the abridged edition, that

"[under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place but in substance they were the same. (235)]"

The central motif with which Frazer deals is the archetype of crucifixion and resurrection, specifically the myths describing the "killing of the divine king." Among many primitive peoples it was believed that the ruler was a divine or semidivine being whose life was identified with the life cycle in nature and in human existence. Because of this identification, the safety of the people and even of the world was felt to depend upon the life of the god-king. A vigorous, healthy ruler would ensure natural and human productivity; on the other hand, a sick or maimed king would bring blight and disease to the land and its people. Frazer points out that if the course of nature is dependent on the man-god's life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by threatened decay. (265)

Among some peoples the kings were put to death at regular intervals to ensure the welfare of the tribe; later, however, substitute figures were killed in place of the kings themselves, or the sacrifices became purely symbolic rather than literal.

Corollary to the rite of sacrifice was the scapegoat archetype. This motif was centered in the belief that, by transferring the corruptions of the tribe to a sacred animal or person, then by killing (and in some instances eating) this scapegoat, the tribe could achieve the cleansing and atonement thought necessary for natural and spiritual rebirth. Pointing out that food and children are the primary needs for human survival, Frazer emphasizes that the rites of blood sacrifice and purification were considered by ancient peoples as a magical guarantee of rejuvenation, an assurance of life, both vegetable and human. If such customs strike us as incredibly primitive, we need only to recognize their vestiges in the civilized world—for example, the irrational satisfaction that some people gain by the persecution of such minority groups as blacks and Jews as scapegoats, or the more wholesome feelings of renewal derived from our New Year's festivities and resolutions, the homely tradition of spring cleaning, the celebration of Easter and the Easter Bunny. Modern writers themselves have employed the scapegoat motif with striking relevance—for example, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

The insights of Frazer and the Cambridge Hellenists have been extremely helpful in myth criticism, especially in the mythological approach to drama. Many scholars theorize that tragedy originated from the primitive rites we have described. The tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus, for example, were written to be played during the festival of Dionysus, annual religious ceremonies during which the ancient Greeks celebrated the deaths of the winter-kings and the rebirths of the gods of spring and renewed life.

Sophocles' *Oedipus* is an excellent example of the fusion of myth and literature. Sophocles produced a great play, but the plot of *Oedipus* was not his invention. It was a well-known mythic narrative long before he immortalized it as tragic drama. Both the myth and the play contain a number of familiar archetypes, as a brief summary of the plot indicates. The king and queen of ancient Thebes, Laius and Jocasta, are told in prophecy that their newborn son, after he has grown up, will murder his father and marry his mother. To prevent this catastrophe, the king orders one of his men to pierce the infant's heels and abandon him to die in the wilderness. But the child is saved by a shepherd and taken to Corinth, where he is reared as the son of King Polybus and Queen Merope, who lead the boy to believe that they are his real parents. After reaching maturity and hearing a prophecy that he is destined to commit patricide and incest, Oedipus flees from Corinth to Thebes. On his journey he meets an old man and his servant, quarrels with them and kills them. Before entering Thebes he encounters the Sphinx (who holds the city under a spell), solves her riddle, and frees the city; his reward is the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta. He then rules a prosperous Thebes for many years, fathering four children by Jocasta. At last, however, a blight falls upon his kingdom because Laius's slayer has gone unpunished. Oedipus starts an intensive investigation to find the culprit—only to discover ultimately that he himself is the guilty one, that the old man whom he had killed on his journey to Thebes was Laius, his real father. Overwhelmed by this revelation, Oedipus blinds himself with brooches taken from his dead mother-wife, who has hanged herself, and goes into exile. Following his sacrificial punishment, Thebes is restored to health and abundance.

Even in this bare summary we may discern at least two archetypal motifs: (1) In the quest motif, Oedipus, as the hero, undertakes a journey during which he encounters the Sphinx, a supernatural monster with the body of a lion and the head of a woman; by answering her riddle, he delivers the kingdom and marries the queen. (2) In the king-as-sacrificial- scapegoat motif, the welfare of the state, both human and natural (Thebes is stricken by both plague and drought), is bound up with the personal fate of the ruler; only after Oedipus has offered himself up as a scapegoat is the land redeemed.

Considering that Sophocles wrote his tragedy expressly for a ritual occasion, we are hardly surprised that *Oedipus* reflects certain facets of the fertility myths
described by Frazer. More remarkable, and more instructive for the student interested in myth criticism, is the revelation of similar facets in the great tragedy written by Shakespeare two thousand years later.

1. The Sacrificial Hero: Hamlet

One of the first modern scholars to point out these similarities was Gilbert Murray. In his "Hamlet and Orestes," delivered as a lecture in 1914 and subsequently published in The Classical Tradition in Poetry, Murray indicated a number of parallels between the mythic elements of Shakespeare's play and those in Oedipus and in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus. The heroes of all three works derive from the Golden Bough kings; they are all haunted, sacrificial figures. Furthermore, as with the Greek tragedians, the story of Hamlet was not the playwright's invention but was drawn from legend. As literary historians tell us, the old Scandinavian story of Amlethus or Amlet, Prince of Jutland, was recorded as early as the twelfth century by Saxo Grammaticus in his History of the Danes. Murray cites an even earlier passing reference to the prototypal Hamlet in a Scandinavian poem composed in about A.D. 980. Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in Hamlet's Mill have traced this archetypal character back through the legendary Icelandic Amlodi to Oriental mythology. It is therefore evident that the core of Shakespeare's play is mythic. In Murray's words:

"The things that thrill and amaze us in Hamlet...are not any historical particulars about mediaeval Elinore...but things belonging to the old stories and the old magic rites, which stirred and thrilled our forefathers five and six thousand years ago; set them dancing all night on the hills, tooting beasts and men in pieces, and giving up their own bodies to a ghastly death, in hope thereby to keep the green world from dying and to be the savours of their own people. (236)"

By the time Sophocles and Aeschylus were producing their tragedies for Athenian audiences, such sacrifices were no longer performed literally but were acted out symbolically on stage; yet their significance was very similar in the case of Shakespeare's audiences. The Athenian audiences, such sacrifices were no longer performed literally but were acted out symbolically on stage; yet their significance was very similar in the case of Shakespeare's audiences. The Elizabethans were myth-minded and mythic. In Murray's words:

"The relevance of myth to Hamlet should now be apparent. The play's thematic heart is the ancient, archetypal mystery of the life cycle itself. Its pulse is the same tragic rhythm that moved Sophocles' audience at the festival of Dionysus and moves us today through forces that transcend our conscious processes. Through the insights provided us by anthropological scholars, however, we may perceive the essential archetypal pattern of Shakespeare's tragedy. Hamlet's Denmark is a diseased and rotten state because Claudius's "foul and most unnatural murder" of his king-brother has subverted the divinely ordained laws of nature and of kingly succession. The disruption is intensified by the blood kinship between victim and murderer. Claudius, whom the Ghost identifies as "The Serpent," bears the primal blood curse of Cain. And because the state is identified with its ruler, Denmark shares and suffers also from his blood guilt. Its natural cycle interrupted, the nation..."
is threatened by chaos: civil strife within and war without. As Hamlet exclaims, “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right!”

Hamlet's role in the drama is that of the prince-hero who, to deliver his nation from the blight that has fallen upon it, must not only avenge his father's murder but also offer himself up as a royal scapegoat. Hamlet's reluctance to accept the role of cathartic agent is a principal reason for his procrastination in killing Claudius, an act that may well involve his self-destruction. He is a reluctant but dutiful scapegoat, and he realizes ultimately that there can be no substitute victim but also offer himself up as a royal scapegoat. Hamlet's reluctance to accept wiser, maturity. His is a long night's journey of the soul, and Shakespeare employs Claudius, an act that may well involve his self-destruction. He is a reluctant but ing match that he suspects has been

The bloody climax of the tragedy is therefore not merely spectacular melodrama but an essential element in the archetypal pattern of sacrifice-atonement-catharsis. Not only must all those die who have been infected by the evil contagion (Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—even Ophelia and Laertes), but the prince-hero himself must suffer "crucifixion" before Denmark can be purged and reborn under the healthy new regime of Fortinbras.

Enhancing the motif of the sacrificial scapegoat is Hamlet's long and difficult spiritual journey—his initiation, as it were—from innocent, carefree youth (he has been a university student) through a series of painful ordeals to sadder, but wiser, maturity. His is a long night's journey of the soul, and Shakespeare employs archetypal imagery to convey this thematic motif: Hamlet is an autumnal, nighttime play dominated by images of darkness and blood, and the hero appropriately wears black, the archetypal color of melancholy. The superficial object of his dark quest is to solve the riddle of his father's death. On a deeper level, his quest leads him down the labyrinthine ways of the human mystery, the mystery of human life and destiny. (Observe how consistently his soliloquies turn toward the puzzles of life and of self.) As with the riddle of the Sphinx, the enigmatic answer is "man," the clue to which is given in Polonius's glib admonition, "To thine own self be true." In this sense, then, Hamlet's quest is the quest undertaken by all of us who would gain that rare and elusive philosopher's stone, self-knowledge.

2. Archetypes of Time and Immortality: "To His Coy Mistress"

Mythopoeic poets William Blake, William Butler Yeats, and T. S. Eliot carefully structured many of their works on myth. Even those poets who are not self-appointed myth-makers often employ images and motifs that, intentionally or not, function as archetypes. Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" seems to fit into this latter category.

Because of its strongly suggestive (and suggested) sensuality and its apparently cynical theme, "To His Coy Mistress" is sometimes dismissed as an immature if not immoral love poem. But to see the poem as little more than a clever proposition is to miss its greatness. No literary work survives because it is merely clever, or merely well written. It must partake somehow of the archetypal.

Superficially a love poem, "To His Coy Mistress" is, in a deeper sense, a poem about time. As such, it is concerned with immortality, a fundamental motif in myth. In the first two stanzas we encounter an inversion or rejection of traditional conceptions of human immortality. Stanza 1 is an ironic presentation of the "escape from time" to some paradisal state in which lovers may daily for an eternity. But such a state of perfect, eternal bliss is a foolish delusion, as the speaker suggests in his subjunctive "Had we..." and in his description of love as some kind of monstrous vegetable growing slowly to an infinite size in the archetypal garden. Stanza 2 presents, in dramatic contrast, the desert archetype in terms of another kind of time, naturalistic time. This is the time governed by the inexorable laws of nature (note the sun archetype imaged in "Time's winged chariot"), the laws of decay, death, and physical extinction. Stanza 2 is as extreme in its philosophical realism as the first stanza is in its impracticable idealization.

The concluding stanza, radically altered in tone, presents a third kind of time, an escape into cyclical time and thereby a chance for immortality. Again we encounter the sun archetype, but this is the sun of "soul" and of "instant fires"—images not of death but of life and creative energy, which are fused with the sphere ("Let us roll all our strength and all/Our sweetness up into one ball"), the archetype of primal wholeness and fulfillment. In Myths and Reality, Mircea Eliade indicates that one of the most widespread motifs in immortality myths is the regressus ad uterum (a "return to the origin" of creation or to the symbolic womb of life) and that this return is considered to be symbolically feasible by some philosophers (for example, the Chinese Taoists) through alchemical fire.

During the fusion of metals the Taoist alchemist tries to bring about in his own body the union of the two cosmological principles, Heaven and Earth, in order to reproduce the primordial chaotic situation that existed before the Creation. This primordial situation...corresponds both to the egg (that is, the archetypal sphere) or the embryo and to the paradisal and innocent state of the uncreated World. (83-84)

We are not suggesting that Marvell was familiar with Taoist philosophy or that he was consciously aware of immortality archetypes. However, in representing the age-old dilemma of time and immortality, Marvell employed a cluster of images charged with mythic significance. His poet-lover seems to offer the alchemy of love as a way of defeating the laws of naturalistic time; love is a means of participating in, even intensifying, the mysterious rhythms of nature's eternal cycle. If life is to be judged, as some philosophers have suggested, not by duration but by intensity, then Marvell's lovers, at least during the act of love, will achieve a kind of immortality by "devouring" time or by transcending the laws of clock time ("Time's winged chariot"). And if this alchemical transmutation requires a fire hot enough to melt them into one primordial ball, then it is perhaps also hot enough to melt the sun itself and "make him run." Thus we see that the overt sexuality of Marvell's poem is, in a mythic sense, suggestive of a profound metaphysical quest, an insight that continues to fascinate those philosophers and scientists who would penetrate the mysteries of time and eternity.
The second major influence on mythological criticism is the work of C. G. Jung, the great psychologist-philosopher and onetime student of Freud who broke with the master because of what he regarded as a too-narrow approach to psychoanalysis. Jung believed libido (psychic energy) to be more psychic than sexual; also, he considered Freudian theories too negative because of Freud's emphasis on the neurotic rather than the healthy aspects of the psyche.

Jung's primary contribution to myth criticism is his theory of racial memory and archetypes. In developing this concept, Jung expanded Freud's theories of the personal unconscious, asserting that beneath this unconscious is a primeval, collective unconscious shared in the psychic inheritance of all members of the human family. As Jung explains in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*,

If it were possible to personify the unconscious, we might think of it as a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at its command a human experience of one or two million years, practically immortal. If such a being existed, it would be exalted over all temporal change; the present would mean neither more nor less to it than any year in the hundreds of millennia before Christ; it would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to its innumerable experience, an incomparable prognosticator. It would have lived countless times over again the life of the individual, the family, the tribe, and the nation, and it would possess a living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering, and decay.

(J349-50)

Just as certain instincts are inherited by the lower animals (for example, the instinct of the baby chicken to run from a hawk's shadow), so more complex psychic predispositions are inherited by human beings. Jung believed, contrary to eighteenth-century Lockean psychology, that "Mind is not born as a tabula rasa [a clean slate]. Like the body, it has its pre-established individual definiteness; namely, forms of behaviour. They become manifest in the ever-recurring patterns of psychic functioning" (Psyche and Symbol xv). Therefore what Jung called "myth-forming" structural elements are ever present in the unconscious psyche; again, his ideas are interestingly compared to the insights of Literary Darwinism (Chapter 4).

Jung was also careful to explain that archetypes are not inherited ideas or patterns of thought, but rather that they are predispositions to respond in similar ways to certain stimuli: "In reality they belong to the realm of activities of the instincts and in that sense they represent inherited forms of psychic behaviour" (xvii). In *Psychological Reflections*, he maintained that these psychic instincts "are older than historical man,...have been ingrained in him from earliest times, and, eternally living, outlasting all generations, still make up the groundwork of the human psyche. It is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these symbolic wisdom is a return to them" (42).

In stressing that archetypes are actually "inherited forms," Jung also went further than most of the anthropologists, who tended to see these forms as social phenomena passed down from one generation to the next through various sacred rites rather than through the structure of the psyche itself. Furthermore, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, he theorized that myths do not derive from external factors such as the seasonal or solar cycle but are, in truth, the projections of innate psychic phenomena:

All the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy seasons, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these
objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection—that is, mirrored in the events of nature. (6)

In other words, myths are the means by which archetypes, essentially unconscious forms, become manifest and articulate to the conscious mind. Jung indicated further that archetypes reveal themselves in the dreams of individuals, so that we might say that dreams are "personalized myths," and myths are "depersonalized dreams."

Jung detected an intimate relationship between dreams, myths, and art in that all three serve as media through which archetypes become accessible to consciousness. The great artist, as Jung observes in Modern Man in Search of a Soul, is a person who possesses the "primordial vision," a special sensitivity to archetypal patterns and a gift for speaking in primordial images that enable him or her to transmit experiences of the "inner world" through art. Considering the nature of the artist's raw materials, Jung suggests it is only logical that the artist "will resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression." This is not to say that the artist gets materials secondhand: "The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed, and therefore requires mythological imagery to give it form" (164).

Although Jung himself wrote relatively little that could be called literary criticism, what he did write leaves no doubt that he believed literature, and art in general, to be a vital ingredient in human civilization. Most important, his theories have expanded the horizons of literary interpretation for those critics concerned to use the tools of the mythological approach and for psychological critics who have felt too tightly constricted by Freudian theory.

1. Some Special Archetypes: Shadow, Persona, and Anima

In The Archetypal and the Collective Unconscious, Jung discusses at length many of the archetypal patterns that we have already examined (for example, water, colors, rebirth). In this way, although his emphasis is psychological rather than anthropological, a good deal of his work overlaps that of Frazer and the others. But, as we have already indicated, Jung is not merely a derivative or secondary figure; he is a major influence in the growth of myth criticism. For one thing, he has provided some of the favorite terminology now current among myth critics. The term "archetype," itself, though not coined by Jung, enjoys its present widespread usage among the myth critics primarily because of his influence. Also, like Freud, he was a pioneer whose brilliant flashes of insight have helped to light our way in exploring the darker recesses of the human mind.

One major contribution is Jung's theory of individuation as related to those archetypes designated as the shadow, the persona, and the anima. Individuation is a psychological growing up, the process of discovering those aspects of one's self that make one an individual different from other members of the species. It is essentially a process of recognition—that is, as one matures, the individual must consciously recognize the various aspects, unfavorable as well as favorable, of one's total self. This self-recognition requires extraordinary courage and honesty but is absolutely essential if one is to become a well-balanced individual. Jung theorizes that neuroses are the result of the person's failure to confront and accept some archetypal component of the unconscious. Instead of assimilating this unconscious element into their consciousness, neurotic individuals persist in projecting it upon some other person or object. In Jung's words, projection is an "unconscious, automatic process whereby a content that is unconscious to the subject transfers itself to an object, so that it seems to belong to that object. The projection ceases the moment it becomes conscious, that is to say when it is seen as belonging to the subject." (Archetypes 60). In layman's terms, the habit of projection is reflected in the attitude that "everybody is out of step but me" or "I'm the only honest person in the crowd." It is commonplace that we can project our own unconscious faults and weaknesses on others much more easily than we can accept them as part of our own nature.

The shadow, the persona, and the anima are structural components of the psyche that Jung believed human beings have inherited, just as the chicken has inherited his built-in response to the hawk. In melodrama, such as the traditional western or cop story, the persona, the anima, and the shadow are projected, respectively, in the characters of the hero, the heroine, and the villain. The shadow is the darker side of our unconscious self, the inferior and less pleasing aspects of the personality, which we wish to suppress. "Taking it in its deepest sense," writes Jung in Psychological Reflections, "the shadow is the invisible saurian [reptilian] tail that man still drags behind him" (217). The most common variant of this archetype, when projected, is the Devil, who, in Jung's words, represents the "dangerous aspect of the unrecognized dark half of the personality" (Two Essays 94). In literature we see symbolic representations of this archetype in such figures as Shakespeare's Iago, Milton's Satan, Goethe's Mephistopheles, and Conrad's Kurtz.

The anima is perhaps the most complex of Jung's archetypes. It is the "soul-image," the spirit of a man's "soul vital, his life force or vital energy. In the sense of "soul," says Jung, anima is the "living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life... Were it not for the leaping and twining of the soul, man would rot away in his greatest passion, idleness" (Archetypes 26-27). Jung gives the anima a feminine designation in the male psyche, pointing out that the "anima-image is usually projected upon women" (in the female psyche this archetype is called the animus). In this sense, anima is the contrasexual part of a man's psyche, the image of the opposite sex that he carries in both his personal and his collective unconscious. As an old German proverb puts it, "Every man has his own Eve within him."—In other words, the human psyche is bisexual, though the psychological characteristics of the opposite sex in each of us are generally unconscious, revealing themselves only in dreams or in projections on someone in our environment. The phenomenon of love, especially love at first sight, may be explained at least in part by Jung's theory of the anima: we tend to be attracted to members of the opposite sex who mirror the characteristics of our own inner selves. In literature, Jung regards such figures as Helen of Troy, Dante's Beatrice, Milton's Eve, and H. Rider Haggard's She as personifications...
of the anima. Perhaps more recognizable today as anima figures are Pinocchio's Blue Fairy, the title character on television's *I Dream of Jeannie*, J. R. R. Tolkien's Galadriel, or even the somewhat coarser version in the character of Marla in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Following Jung's theory, we might say that any female figure who is invested with unusual significance or power is likely to be a symbol of the anima. (Examples for the animas came less readily to Jung; like Freud, he tended to describe features of the male psyche more than those of the female, even though both analysts' patients were nearly all women. But examples of animus figures would include the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, and Scarecrow of *The Wizard of Oz* books.) One other function of the anima is noteworthy here. The anima is a kind of mediating between the ego (the conscious self) and the unconscious (or inner world) of the male individual. This function will be somewhat clearer if we compare the anima with the persona.

The persona is the obverse of the anima in that it mediates between our ego and the external world. Speaking metaphorically, let us say that the ego is a coin. The image on one side is the anima; on the other side, the persona. The personal is the actor's mask that we show to the world—it is our social personality, a mediator between the ego (the conscious will or thinking self) and the unconscious factor which spins the cocoon, which in the end will completely envelop him. (9)

2. "Young Goodman Brown": A Failure of Individuation

The literary relevance of Jung's theory of shadow, anima, and persona may be seen in an analysis of Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." In the first place, Brown's persona is both false and inflexible. It is the social mask of a God-fearing, prayerful, self-righteous Puritan—the persona of a good man with all its pietistic connotations. Brown considers himself both the good Christian and the good husband married to a "blessed angel on earth." In truth, however, he is much less the good man than the bad boy. His behavior from start to finish is that of the adolescent male. His desertion of his wife, for example, is motivated adds impact to his theory as well as to its generalizing adds impact to his theory as well as to Hawthorne's moral insight.

Just as his persona has proved inadequate in mediating between Brown's ego and the external world, so his anima fails in relating to his inner world. It is only fitting that his soul-image or anima should be named Faith. His trouble is that he sees Faith not as a true wife or companion but as a mother (Jung points out that, during childhood, anima is usually projected on the mother), as is revealed when he thinks that he will "cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven." In other words, if a young man's Faith has the qualities of the Good Mother, then he might expect to be occasionally indulged in his juvenile escapades. But mature faith, like marriage, is a covenant that binds both parties mutually to uphold its sacred vows. If one party breaks this covenant, as Goodman Brown does, he must face the unpleasant consequences: at worst, separation and divorce; at best, suspicion (perhaps Faith herself has been unfaithful), loss of harmony, trust, and peace of mind. It is the latter consequences that Brown has to face. Even then, he still behaves like a child. Instead of admitting to his error and working maturely for a reconciliation, he sulks.

In clinical terms, young Goodman Brown suffers from a failure of personality integration. He has been stunted in his psychological growth (individuation) because he is unable to confront his shadow, recognize it as a part of his own psyche, and assimilate it into his consciousness. He persists, instead, in projecting the shadow image: first, in the form of the Devil; then on the members of his community (Goody Cloyse, Deacon Gookin, and others); and, finally, on Faith herself (his anima), so that ultimately, in his eyes, the whole world is one of shadow, or gloom. As Jung explains in *Psyché and Symbol*, the results of such projections are often disastrous for the individual:

The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face... The resultant [malaise is in] turn explained by projection as the maladaptation of the environment, and by means of this vicious circle the isolation is intensified. The more projections interpose themselves between the subject and the environment, the harder it becomes for the ego to see through its illusions. [Note Goodman Brown's inability to distinguish between reality and his illusory dream in the forest.]

It is often tragic to see how blatantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself, and how he continually feeds it and keeps it going. Not consciously of course—for consciously he is engaged in bewailing and cursing a faithless (our italic) world that rodes further and further into the distance. Rather, it is an unconscious factor which spins his illusions that veil his world. And what is being spun is a cocoon, which in the end will completely envelop him. (9)

Jung could hardly have diagnosed Goodman Brown's malady more accurately had he been directing these comments squarely at Hawthorne's story. That he was generalizing adds impact to his theory as well as to Hawthorne's moral insight.

3. Creature or Creator: Who Is the Real Monster in Frankenstein?

Speaking archetypally, we may say of Frankenstein, just as we have said of Brown, that he suffers from a failure of individuation. He seems to be constitutionally unable to come to terms with his shadow, blindly projecting it—wonderful irony!—upon the monster he himself has conjured up and manufactured from his own immature ego. Victor's selfish enthusiasm divides him from the salubrious influences both of nature and of society. While self-absorbed in his "workshop of filthy creation," he confesses that "my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature.
[and that] the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time. Moreover, his unwholesome quest, like Brown's, leads him to reject his anima (portrayed in the figure of Elizabeth). This rejection ultimately proves fatal not only to the anima-figure but also to the persona-figure portrayed by Henry Cavel, whom he characterizes as "the image of my former [better] self." Even in his dying moments Victor insists upon projecting his shadow-image upon the Creature, calling him "my adversary" and persisting in that sad delusion that his own past conduct is not "blameworthy." In the end, because of his failure of personality integration, just like Brown's, Victor Frankenstein's dying hour was gloomy.

In sum, Jung's words are once again relevant: "It is often tragic to see how blantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much of the whole tragedy originates in himself, and how he continually feeds it and keeps it going."

4. Syntheses of Jung and Anthropology

Most of the myth critics who use Jung's insights also use the materials of anthropology. A classic example of this kind of mythological eclecticism is Max Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, first published in 1934 and now recognized as the pioneer work of archetypal criticism. Bodkin acknowledges her debt to Gilbert Murray and the anthropological scholars, as well as to Jung. She then proceeds to trace several archetypal patterns through the literature of Western civilization; for example, rebirth in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; heaven-hell in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"; Dante's Divine Comedy; and Milton's Paradise Lost; the image of woman as reflected in Homer's Thetis, Euripides' Phaedra, and Milton's Eve.

James Baird's Ishmael: A Study of the Symbolic Mode in Primitivism derives not only from Jung and the anthropologists but also from such philosophers as Susanne Langer and Mircea Eliade. Though he ranges far beyond the works of Herman Melville, Baird's primary objective is to find an archetypal key to the multilayered meanings of Moby-Dick (which, incidentally, Jung considered "the greatest American novel"). He finds this key in primitive mythology, specifically in the myths of Polynesia to which young Melville had been exposed during his two years of sea duty in the South Pacific. (Melville's early success as a writer was largely due to his notoriety as the man who had lived for a month among the cannibals of Tybee.) Melville's literary primitivism is authentic, unlike the sentimental primitivism of such writers as Rousseau, says Baird, because he had absorbed certain Asian archetypes or "life symbols" and then transformed these creatively into "autotypes" (that is, individualized personal symbols).

The most instructive illustration of this creative fusion of archetype and autotype is Moby-Dick, Melville's infamous white whale. Baird points out that, throughout Asian mythology, the "great fish" recurs as a symbol of divine creation and life; in Hinduism, for example, the whale is an avatar (divine incarnation) of Vishnu, the "Preserver contained in all the being of Brahma." (Of course Christ was associated with fish and fishermen in Christian tradition.) Furthermore, Baird explains that whiteness is the archetype of the all-encompassing, inscrutable deity, the "white sign of the God of all being who has borne such Oriental names as Bhagavan, Brahma— the God of endless contradiction." Melville combined these two archetypes, the great fish or whale and whiteness, in fashioning his own unique symbol (autotype), Moby-Dick. Baird's reading of this symbol is substantiated by Melville's remarks about the contrarities of the color white (terror, mystery, purity) in his chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," as well as by the mysterious elusiveness and awesome power with which he invests Moby-Dick. Moby-Dick is therefore, in Baird's words, "a nonambiguous ambiguity." Ahab, the monster of intellect, destroys himself and his crew because he would "strike through the mask" in his insane compulsion to understand the eternal and unfathomable mystery of creation. Ishmael alone is saved because, through the wholesome influence of Queequeg, a Polynesian prince, he has acquired the primitive mode of accepting this divine mystery without question or hostility. Two generations later, Jack London also absorbed Polynesian mythology in his works, most effectively in his Hawaiian short fiction.

C. Myth Criticism and the American Dream: Huckleberry Finn as the American Adam

In addition to anthropology and Jungian psychology, a third influence has been prominent in myth criticism, especially in the interpretation of American literature. This influence derives not only from those already mentioned but also from a historical focus upon the informing myths of American culture. It is apparent in that cluster of myths called "the American Dream." The results of such analysis indicate that many works produced by American writers possess a certain distinctiveness largely attributed to the influence, both positive and negative, of the American Dream, as it has been traditionally perceived.

The central facet of the Euro-American myth cluster is the Myth of Edenic Possibilities, which reflects the hope of creating a second paradise, not in the next world and not outside time, but in the bright New World of the American continent. Europeans saw America as a land of boundless opportunity, a place where they, after centuries of poverty, misery, and corruption, could have a second chance actually to fulfill their mythical yearnings for a return to paradise. According to Fredrick I. Carpenter, as early as 1654 Captain Edward Johnson announced to the Old World—"weary people of England that America was "the place":

All you the people of Christ that are here Oppressed, Imprisoned and scurrilously divided, gather yourselves together, your Wives and little ones, and answer to your several Names as you shall be shiped for His service, in the Westerne World, and more especially for planting the united Colonies of new England. . . . Know this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth in new Churches, and a new Commonwealth together.

Carpenter points out that although the Edenic dream itself was "as old as the mind of man," the idea that "this is the place" was uniquely American.

Earlier versions had placed it in Eden or in Heaven, in Atlantis or in Utopia; but always in some country of the imagination. Then the discovery of the new
world gave substance to the old myth, and suggested the realization of it on actual earth. America became "the place" where the religious prophecies of Isaiah and the Republican ideals of Plato (and even the mythic longings of primitive man, we might add) might be realized. (6)
The themes of moral regeneration and bright expectations, which derive from this Edenic myth, form a major thread in the fabric of American literature, from J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer through the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman to such later writers as Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck. (Today, however, the idea that “America” was “discovered” as a promised land for Europeans is viewed quite differently by the descendants of its indigenous peoples, to whom it has been an American nightmare.)

Competing theories of national destiny were hotly debated at the turn of the century; Herbert Baxter Adams’s idea that national destiny was bound up with the northern European “germ” of race was contested by Frederick Jackson Turner’s notion that what made Americans was not blood but the experience of the frontier, later called “frontier theory.” Of course both were celebrated, along with such imperialist ideas as “manifest destiny” and “social evolution.” Again, all of these ideas were from a Euro-American point of view. Native American writers obviously have a different view of what happened when the “New World” was “discovered.” They were displaced, cheated of land, murdered, and in some cases were the victims of genocide. Native writers from the turn of the century on, including Zitkala Sá, John Oskison, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie, expressed their opposition and marginalization, while the historic speeches of such tribal leaders as Charlot and Cochee condemned the greedy and wasteful white man in eloquent terms.

The concept of the American Adam was for Europeans the mythic New World hero. In The American Adam, R. W. B. Lewis describes the type: “a radically new personality: the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race, an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). One of the early literary characterizations of this Adamic hero is James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the central figure of the Leatherstocking saga. With his moral purity and social innocence, Natty is an explicit version of Adam before the Fall. He is a child of the wilderness, forever in flight before the corrupting influence of civilization—and from the moral compromises of Eve. (Cooper never allows his hero to marry.) He is also, as we might guess, the literary great-grandfather of the Western hero. Like the hero of Owen Wister’s The Virginian and Matt Dillon of television’s long-running Gunsmoke, he is clean living, straight-shooting, and celibate. In his civilized version, the American Adam is the central figure of another corollary myth of the American Dream: the dream of success. The hero in the dream of success is that popular figure epitomized in Horatio Alger’s stories and subsequently treated by novelists as different as William Dean Howells and Jack London: the self-made man who, through luck, pluck, and all the Ben Franklin virtues, rises from abject poverty to high social estate.

More complex, and therefore more interesting, than this uncorrupted Adam is the American hero during and after the Fall. It is with this aspect of the dream rather than with the Adamic innocence of a Leatherstocking that major writers have most often concerned themselves. The symbolic loss of Edenic innocence and the painful initiation into an awareness of evil constitutes a second major pattern in American literature from the works of Hawthorne and Melville through Mark Twain and Henry James to Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, to Stephen King. This is the darker thread in our literary fabric, which, contrasting as it does with the myth of bright expectancy, lends depth and richness to the overall design; it also reminds us of the disturbing proximity of dream and nightmare. From this standpoint, then, we may recall Hawthorne’s young Goodman Brown as a representative figure—the prototypical American hero haunted by the obsession with guilt and original sin that is a somber but essential part of America’s Puritan heritage, as well as its postcolonial legacy.

We might observe that Brown is also oppressed by certain postcolonial pressures; in responding to this he becomes an extreme antihero and outcast. He and his mindset in particular do not fit into anyone’s notion of an American Dream; they are perhaps a warning that to enter a far country one must be adaptable.

Huck Finn epitomizes the archetype of the American Adam, even as he also undercuts it. (We'll return to this point shortly.) Certainly Huckleberry Finn is one of the half-dozen most significant works in American literature, and not a few consider it to be the Great American Novel. The reasons for this high esteem may be traced directly to the mythological implications of Twain’s book: More than any other novel in American literature, it embodies myth that is national. The book was believed by an earlier generation—to which most myth critics have belonged—to embody a quest for American freedom, a backwoods Bildungsroman. It is still generally taught this way, and we present this traditional reading below. But in chapters 4, 9, and 10, we present some other, less hopeful interpretations of Twain’s purpose.

First, Huckleberry Finn is informed by several archetypal patterns encountered throughout much of world literature:

1. The Quest: Like Don Quixote, Huck is a wanderer, separated from his culture, seemingly idealistically in search of one more substantial than that embraced by the hypocritical, materialistic society he has rejected. But is he a traditional quest hero?

2. Water Symbolism: The great Mississippi River, like the Nile and the Ganges, is invested with sacred attributes. As T. S. Eliot has written in "The Dry Salvages,” the river is a “strong brown god” (line 2); it is an archetypal symbol of the mystery of life and creation—birth, the flowing of time into eternity, and rebirth. (Note, for example, Huck’s several symbolic deaths, his various disguises and new identities as he returns to the shore from the
As the symbolic American hero; he epitomizes the paradoxes that make up the American character. He has all the glibness and practical acuity of businesspeople, but he also displays the ingratiating capacity for buffoonery that Americans so dearly love in public entertainers. Yet, with all these extraverted virtues, he is a moral idealist, far ahead of his age in his sense of human decency, and at times, a mystic and a daydreamer who is uncommonly sensitive to the presence of a young Goodman Brown had seen, Huck is saved from Brown's curse by his sense of humor and, what is more crucial, by his sense of humanity.

If Walker's theme is only hinted at in her title, it is made explicit in her dedication: "for your grandmama." In brief, "Everyday Use" and all that title connotes is not simply a tribute to the author's—grandmama; it is a celebration for your—indeed, for all humanity's—Great (or, if you prefer, Grand) Mother.

In this story, the archetypal woman manifests herself as both Good Mother and Earth Mother. As she informs us at the outset, her yard is "not just a yard... but an extended living room" (our italics). True to her nature, the Good Mother is appropriately associated with the life principle. She is also an androgynous figure, combining the natural strengths of female and male. "In real life," she says, "I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overall during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man."

Further in keeping with her archetypal nature, the Good Mother is associated with such life-enhancing virtues as warmth, nourishment, growth, and protection. With a modicum of formal education (she can scarcely read), she has maintained her farm and brought two children into maturity—even despite such catastrophes as the burning of her old house and the scarring of her younger daughter. Now, as the story opens, it is her function to preserve the natural order of things, including tradition and her family heritage. The central symbol in the story is a nice combination of metonymy and symbol—the quilts, associated with warmth and signifying the family heritage:

They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them... In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Grandpa Ewell's uniform that he wore in the Civil War.

For the Good Mother, hers is always a living heritage, a vital tradition of "everyday use." Dee, the daughter and antagonist, has broken that tradition.

"What happened to "Dee"? I wanted to know.

"She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me."

For Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo (a.k.a. "Dee"), on the contrary, tradition is an essentially useless thing, heritage something inert to be framed and hung on the wall as mere ornament, as artificial and pretentious as her new name and her new prince consort "Hakim-a-barber."

But, touched by "the spirit of God," this mother righteously defends the natural order, protecting her precious "everyday" from the specious order of the "new day." Maggie, with scarred hands but unscarred spirit, will marry John Thomas, with mossy teeth and earnest face. The family myth will be hers to maintain. The quilts, emblems of this heritage—like Nature and the Good Mother herself—will endure. "This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work."
IV. SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- **Mythological Approaches:** Seeks out the mysterious elements informing certain works that elicit dramatic and near-universal human reactions. Myth critics try to discover how certain works become "classics" and works that are similar are forgotten. While the psychological approach examines underlying motives of behavior in the individual, myth criticism seeks to define symbols that help make possible cultural behavior.

- **Misconceptions of Myth Criticism:** These include the idea that myths are fictions or falsehoods, or are only derived from classical Greek and Roman sources.

- **Archetypes:** Similar motifs and themes found in multiple mythologies and recurrent patterns of imagery. Common archetypes are the sun, water, colors, the circle, the serpent, numbers, trees, gardens, deserts.

  - The Archetypal Woman: Can be a great mother or terrible mother, or anima (soul mate).
  - The Wise Old Man: Helps the hero achieve his goal.
  - Demon lover: Figure of the devil.
  - Trickster figure.
  - Common Archetypal Patterns or Motifs: the Creation myth, Immortality, the Hero.
  - Hero: goes on quest and leaves home, faces dangers in an initiation into manhood, often returns home as sacrifice/king.
  - Archetypes as Genres (Northrop Frye): genres have seasons, such as spring/comedy, summer/romance, fall/tragedy, winter/irony.

V. LIMITATIONS OF MYTH CRITICISM

It should be apparent from the foregoing illustrations that myth criticism offers some unusual opportunities for the enhancement of literary appreciation and understanding. An application of myth criticism takes us far beyond the historical and aesthetic realms of literary study—back to the beginning of humankind's oldest rituals and beliefs and deep into our own individual hearts. Because of the vastness and complexity of mythology, a field of study whose mysteries anthropologists and psychologists are still working to discover, our brief introduction can give only the most superficial and fragmentary overview. Many scholars and teachers of literature have remained skeptical of myth criticism because of its tendencies toward the cultic and the occult. There has been a discouraging confusion over concepts and definitions among the myth critics, causing them to turn their energies to more clearly defined approaches.

Another limitation of the mythological approach is that although myth critics have posited that certain archetypal and mythic patterns are "universal," today many critics disagree with the entire concept of universals. Jung's work, they point out, was Euro-centric and based primarily on Western mythology. There are so many obvious examples of archetypes that are culture-specific and not universal: for example, the evil dragon of Beowulf is not the same as the good luck dragon of the Chinese New Year, nor is the wise serpent of Pueblo Indian stories the same as the evil serpent in Genesis.

Furthermore, as with the psychological approach, the reader must take care that enthusiasm for a new-found interpretive key does not tempt him or her to discard other valuable critical instruments or to try to open all literary doors with this single key. Just as Freudian critics sometimes lose sight of a great work's aesthetic values in sexual symbolism, so myth critics tend to forget that literature is more than a vehicle for archetypes and ritual patterns. They run the risk of being distracted from the aesthetic experience of the work itself: They forget that literature is, above all else, art. As we have indicated before, the discreet critic will apply such extrinsic perspectives as the mythological and psychological only as far as they enhance the experience of the art form, and only as far as the structure and potential meaning of the work consistently support such approaches.

QUICK REFERENCE


