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The Heart of the Muses: Teaching Narrative Writing Using Mythic/Archetypal Literary Criticism

I was speaking to a class several years ago in a course about world literature when one a keen moment of understanding struck me. My students and I had been exploring various methods of literary criticism, a new one every two weeks, and at the moment in question I was lecturing on the theory and use of mythic/archetypal criticism. Suddenly a revelation came, so intense that I hesitated in my speech and almost was unable to continue. *I am, I thought, talking about my own writing and self.* Mythic/archetypal criticism, I realized in that instant, wasn't just another theory with which to play; rather, it was an accurate representation of and guide to my own creative/narrative writing.

What a teaching moment, I thought, and proceeded to try to explain to my students—and to myself—what I was envisioning. I have no idea whether they understood me that first time. However, I understood myself—the self who writes creatively—better at that moment than ever before. Since that time I have developed myself both as a creative and narrative writer, and as a teacher of creative and narrative writing, because of that moment of insight and all it entails. This essay is my paean and guide to learning and to teaching others how to write mythically. In addition, I have learned that myth criticism—because of its powerful analyses of personal evocation—has the ability to offer helpful tools to postmodern pedagogies involving the writing and reading of cultural and personal narratives.

Myth Criticism's Jungian Foundations

Let me begin by defining myth criticism. Myth criticism is criticism of literature using archetypal and/or mythological identification. The two sources are archetypal criticism and mythic criticism. The first, archetypal criticism, was developed from the work of Carl Jung, the less libidinous and almost as famous disciple of Sigmund Freud; Jung's concerns were with archetypes, the collective unconscious, and our various selves or forms of self, conscious and unconscious. The second, mythological criticism, first developed from the anthropological world survey of myth by Sir James Frazier called *The Golden Bough* and from other like-minded anthropologists, and more recent work with mythology by such mythologists as Joseph Campbell. Mythologists and Jungian psychologists alike believe that there are basic symbols and realities for human existence through all major cultures and historical periods in the regularity. In some ways the story lines were formulaic: tragic—family faces personal catastrophe, finds in their depths the way to solve it, and comes out sadder but wiser in the end; or humorous—good but awkward man chases smart woman, smart woman chases him back without him realizing it, and both fall in love.

However, in spite of their at times formulaic quality, as long as I was able to write the stories in a way that felt real to me and to readers, the formulaic quality became a way of tapping universality, and I believe this universality helped them be published.

Part of my discovery process became more conscious when the course I taught about world literature and literary criticism—the one mentioned above in which I had my revelation about myth criticism—helped me understand why some of my works were more publishable than others. I had studied mythology and Jungian psychology many years earlier, but I had never seriously applied either to my writings, except to make them the impetus for some journal writing and for trying to write a few modern myths. As I revisited and taught archetypal and myth criticism in my world literature course, I came to realize quite specifically that readers, whether literary or popular, want archetypal characters and situations with which they can identify. They want earthy heroes and heroines, people who are like the sun or the moon; they want villainous snakes, beasts, and flames; they want great mothers and sky fathers.

As a result, in my creative writing since that course, increasingly I find myself moving in small turnings to the creative expression of mythic states of being as I create characters and situations in my narratives. Each turning is cautious, for I find it much too easy to create a cardboard plot structure and flat characters. The key, I have discovered, is to ignore much of intellect and turn to something other instead. Explaining this “other” is, however, no easy matter. Myth criticism, having helped guide me increasingly to this “other,” also has provided a framework for explaining it.

Writing the Mystery

In simplest terms, what I have turned to as a writer attempting the archetypal and mythic, is the use of feeling as a guide, rather than intellect. I feel my archetypes, not just think them.

For example, one of my best and most recent stories is about a drowned man whom children discover on their town's beach. Because, one can suppose, of the neglect of their busy parents, the children turn this man from the sea into a someone special who merely is sleeping. They spend hours with him, trying so hard to make him comfortable and special for the moment when he will awake that he becomes a hero to

them, even as they finally return him to the sea on what they perceive as his continuing travel to a heroic destination. The initial idea was wild (and, I should add, borrowed from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”); however, I carefully made the execution of the details as uniquely new and realistic as possible.

A year later, I wrote a story about the heroism my mother showed in the way she died—in this instance a true story, but one incorporating all the same elements of magic and realism as had the fiction of the man from the sea.

In both of these narrative, the combination of careful, accurate details, mythic values or meanings, and my use of my feeling or intuition as a guide in writing created stories that readers told me are powerful, moving tales that have are difficult to stop reading and yet have powerful universal themes.

I believe that succeeding in this type of writing—mythic and realistic at once—may involve what Northrop Frye calls the ability to “stand back” (140). He suggests that interpreting literature is like viewing a painting. If one stands very close, all one can see is the paint strokes and lines—little or no content (which is, he says, what the methodology called new criticism does). However, “the further back we go, the more conscious we are of the organizing design. . . . In the criticism of literature, too, we often have to ‘stand back’ from the poem to see its archetypal organization.” Using Frye's idea of standing back, we thus can say that good narrative writing (like good painting) needs attention to both macrocosm and microcosm: to archetypal symbols—the more broadly drawn strokes of character, plot, and setting; and to specific, close-up brush strokes of paint and line that fill in the details of character, plot, and setting.

Another element of myth criticism that I now sometimes teach in narrative writing is a part of Jungian psychology: the idea of a collective unconscious. Jung believed that we all have within us, mostly in a region normally unavailable to consciousness, all the basic archetypes of humanity—a common well of being or well of knowing that, as Jung hinted in some of his writings, might even be a psychic connection among us all. Wilfred L. Guerin et al. comment on the Jungian collective unconscious in an excellent chapter about archetypal criticism in their **Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature**. In this chapter, they offer Jung's own description of the collective unconscious from *his 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 . . . practically immortal. If such a being existed, . . . it would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to its immeasurable 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. (qtd. in Guerin et al. 166-7)

For me in recent years, writing has become an ever more mysterious process. I approach it with increasing reverence: the longer I am a writer, the less I feel confidence in simple explanations of how I write or how I use the elements of fiction. I have, however, come to trust the unconscious—the mystery, the heart of the power—into which I throw myself headlong when I produce my best writing. I don't always know where I am going when I throw myself into this body of the Muses; I only know, when I arrive, that I am There. I believe that such faith in the mystery is comparable to throwing oneself into the collective unconscious as Jung describes it, and descriptions of Jung's definition of the collective unconscious may even help developing writers trust the geography into which they are plunging, might even help them aim more surely for that dark, sparkling center of self and beyond. It is the source of the best creativity and the deepest revelations of self and other.

Aspects of the Self

One final idea of Jung's—that we have several different selves or forms of self—also bears mention. One of these selves, according to Jung, is the “shadow,” a second is the “persona,” and a third is the “anima/animus.”

As Jung defines it, the shadow is a darker layer of human selfhood that in our mundane or surface portions of our lives we deny or avoid expressing. According to Jung in *Psychological Reflections*, “The shadow is the invisible saurian tail that man still drags behind him”; or as he says in *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, it is the devil as shadow within us, the “dangerous aspect of the unrecognized dark half of the personality” (qtd. in Guerin et al. 170). This is a part within us in which we sometimes find ourselves as creative narrators. To touch this part of ourselves with our writing often is to feel endangered, for it is the geography within us that we did not know existed or, perhaps, would rather not know—a part we may fear. However, we need to explore this self if we wish to accomplish some of our most revelatory narratives. And my own experience with it, both as a creative writer and as a teacher of narrative writing, is that if one “writes through” the shadow experiences—if one does not stop writing part way through but continues onward to the other side of the shadow experience—the particular location of its geography in which he or she may find herself at the time—then that writer will arrive on the other side safe, secure, and more whole than before.

The persona is another of the Jungian selves. It is the public or outward self that one shows to the world. Writers in particular are aware of this self and the need to descend below or climb behind it to produce good narrative writing. What may help some writers is the knowledge that this public self or persona can be used as a separate character. In addition, writers must remember that all three-dimensional characters (is both fiction and non-fiction) possess both a personal and a private self.

A third self that Jung discusses is the anima/animus. The anima/animus, said Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, is the “soul-image,” the spirit of a man's *elan vital*, his life force or vital energy. The

anima/animus, says Jung, is the “living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life” (qtd. in Guerin et al. 170). In addition—a point especially interesting for narrative writers who enjoy exploring gender differences—the anima in a male usually is female, and the animus in a female usually is male. In other words, according to Jung, the “soul” energy or vital life force in us tends to develop or spring from the side of self within us that represents our opposite sex. As Guerin et al. point out, we tend, for example, to fall in love with people who mirror the best qualities within our own anima/animus. According to Guerin et al., “as the old German proverb puts it, ‘Every man has his own Eve within him’” (170).

A psychologically functional person, according to Jung, is able to allow portions of the anima/animus come forth. In my own experience as a published writer, discovering the narrative voice of my own anima has helped. I wrote a series of four published Christmas stories, each for one or more magazines, in which the fictional narrator was a mother and wife. I drew for these stories from my own experiences as a farm and small-town person and as a single father of three young children. The voice came to me almost as if magic: that kind of gift writers treasure when they find it, a fully developed character born like Athena from the forehead of Zeus, a character I did not have to build element by element, description by description. As I wrote from this voice over a period of several years, I gradually came to recognize her as a female side of me, neither more nor less wise, but different, and I came to treasure her insights and her deep feeling, feelings that I myself was struggling to express outwardly. She helped me learn to do so better, and indeed my ability to develop a panoply of characters has blossomed within me since that time. Likewise, I believe, other writers who are willing to explore their opposite-gender voices can learn to pass beyond their own cultural and biological representations of self to deeper and broader understanding and integration of self and other, and of one's own and others' cultures.

Postmodern Narratives of Self and Culture

One of my authorial intentions in creating this paper has been to avoid limiting myself to a careful, parenthetically noted academic discussion, and rather to allow this paper to flower as a personal statement of my own experiences with mythic/archetypal criticism, my story writing, and my teaching of narrative writing. In other words, I have attempted as an author, even while recognizing academic standards, to write this essay from a location near my creative center. In so doing, I am representing narrative, the personal, and the self as being important in writing.

This overarching sense of self that I am encouraging in both one's own writing and the analysis of other people's writings is a very important element of what sometimes is referred to as the personal-story, personal-essay, or personal-narrative movement. Telling our personal narratives and understanding more deeply the narratives of others is one of the methods used in some writing and other classrooms to awaken each student to a deeper sense

of self, one's culture, and the selves and cultures of others. What I am suggesting in this essay concerning creative writing and the teaching of it also applies to personal-story or personal-narrative writing: after all, is it not myths, good and bad, that we seek to discover in ourselves and others when we wish to understand our differing selves and cultures more deeply? To the extent that I can understand my own various selves and cultural archetypes and those of others, to that extent I can reach beyond my mere self to a more whole understanding of the world. Through writing my self can I understand my self, and with caring guidance can then better hear the narratives of other selves. In this manner, myth criticism has a universality that applies not just to an old system of literary criticism and not only to fiction writing, but also to narrative discovery of self, cultural archetypes, and the creation and appreciation of our own and others' cultures.

In writing about self, students usually construct myths that locate them more deeply in the regions they believe they occupy—or wish to occupy—in life. As Thomas Newkirk argues in his book **The Performance of Self in Student Writing** that students writing personal narratives attempt not so much to reconstruct reality as they do “a self that works, that will be taken seriously” (16). As they rebuild, says Newkirk, our job as writing teachers is not to discount their conventional myths

about themselves, but rather to help them find what is positive within their conventional myths so that they can build deeper and more inclusive ones. His book offers practical methods toward accomplishing this.

In addition, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that in discussing and practicing mythic/archetypal writing, we are locating ourselves somewhere in the territory of postmodernism. Jacques Derrida's oft quoted statement “There is nothing outside of the text” (158) means simply that the textual meaning does not exist in reality: any text we read does not perfectly recreate reality but rather interprets it. Mythic/archetypal writing agrees: as we write, we create meaning by selectively choosing parts of reality that lie within not only our personal focus, but also within the belief systems, the emotions, and the overall whole in which we ourselves exist and that we are trying to convey. To put it more bluntly, we create myths—half real, half interpretive—as we write. And whereas Derrida's emphasis in postmodern **reading** is to **deconstruct old myths**, tearing them apart into their constituent elements to show limitations, opposites, and biases, the emphasis in mythic/archetypal **writing** is to **construct new myths**, over and against the old ones when necessary, myths that are more accurate—not from better mirroring of detail but rather from better (re)mythologizing of our and others' deepest selves. All writing in this sense is a mythologizing process. As Jean Reynolds explains in her well written introductory guide to “Deconstruction in the Composition Classroom,” “All experience is shaped by language. Psychologist James Hillman says that we don't even know our personal histories until we begin to tell them. A ‘true’ story will vary as different

narrators emphasize certain details, omit others, and select varying starting and ending points for the tale . . .” (257). Mythic criticism and postmodernism argue that when we write, not only are we involved in, as Ann Berthoff so succinctly describes it, “the making of meaning,” but also we are participating in the making of meaningful myth: we mythologize ourselves and others—ideally in ever more meaningful ways.

Conclusion

I believe that as writers creating our deepest, most meaningful stories, we can come to our brilliances (and our failures) through a variety of paths. One of these paths of discovery for me is my myth criticism. Before myth criticism became personal to me, I described the writing mystery, this headlong flight into the center of the creative vortex, in several ways excellent but less useful to me. Sometimes I referred to this mystery as a process-oriented, expressive writing event; at others, as Natalie Goldberg's Zen concept of “writing down the bones”; or as a friend of mine, author Bill Meissner, more poignantly refers to it, “learning to breathe underwater.” Now, though, I also can speak of it as my personal dance with the heart of my other selves—a swirling waltz, if you will, deep behind my public persona and far within the chaotic, awesome, boundless gene pool of Jung's collective, archetypal unconscious.

And so it becomes, when I am writing, just me and my shadow, dancing in the reconstructed light of the moon. I welcome all who would seek—and teach—this heart of the Muses with me.

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The Funeral Train

She is dressed
in her Sunday
best-even
though it's
Wednesday.
Traffic stops
as a long line
of cars snake
slowly through
the quiet streets
at exactly twelve o'clock
noon.
Black pearls
strung around
her neck
barely move.