Clinging to a 19th century Mindset: Jungians and Archetypes

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Abstract:

My position in this paper is that Jungian archetypes are historical ideas—not bedrock truth. Archetypes themselves are a historical fabrication that arose in the nineteenth century and bloomed in the twentieth. Because of this historical origin, Jungian archetypes are entwined in socio-cultural prejudices and discriminations. Thus, Jungian archetypes are racist and misogynist. They are not fundamental truths unmoved by time, culture, or the vagaries of psychological fashion. Rather, many of them, like the Old Man, the Hero/Warrior, the Terrible Mother or the Great Mother, are stereotypes: highly generalized and rigid definitions.

Like many of his contemporaries in the late 1800's, C.G. Jung was intrigued and then fascinated by ideas of a "human blueprint;" i.e, uncovering an essential structure or the master plan (divine schematics) for our minds, physiology, and behaviors. And by human, what was meant then was "man" or "men," certainly not "woman" or "women." Man was considered the primal form, the "true" human.[1] For some 19th century thinkers, this blueprint concept extended to how human societies develop, especially if a trajectory could be inserted into the theory that showed "primitive" societies (i.e. non-Western, non-white) as the starting point and Western industrialized societies as the endpoint.

Where Jungian Archetypes Arose From

Jung gathered his ideas of archetypes from several sources such as early Gnostic writings; Greek, Roman, and early Christian philosophy; together with nineteenth-century

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[1] This is exquisitely ironic as we all begin in utero as female.

anthropologist Adolph Bastian's *elementagedanken* (elementary ideas);[2] and Plato's "Theory of Forms" which states that there are primordial "forms" or "ideas" that constitute reality— our world merely mimics those forms. Many late nineteenth or early twentieth-century men were entranced by the idea of some sort of "pure" or "original" state. They revived and embroidered upon the Stoic concept of *logoi spermatikoi* which roughly postulated that God "seeded" the earth with prototypical forms imbued with fundamental properties, values, and development.

Jung's version of archetypes was further influenced by early Western biological thinking. Western biological theories at the time were "dominated by essentialism, the belief that every species has essential characteristics that are "unalterable."[3] During this historical period, there was a wide social quest to determine prototypes for the "eternal male" and the "eternal female."[4] Bastian's *elementagedanken* posits a "psychic unity of mankind (*sic*)"—in other words, a common mental blueprint.[5] This primal mental blueprint is then embellished by *volkergedanken* (folk ideas); ideas generated by a people's specific environment). Other influential nineteen-century men accepted and promoted this type of essentialist viewpoint. Frank Boas translated this concept into his theory of the unity of mental patterns, while Sir James Frazer called it "similar causes".[6]

In the budding field of psychology, the theory of pure collective mental states imprinted upon individual souls was especially attractive. Sigmund Freud saw a correlation between dreams and symbols, but found common ideas or beliefs were more prevalent in myths, legends, local folklore, and the like. He called this "unconscious ideation." Jung, being a man

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[2] Campbell. Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 1973 19.

[3] Wikipedia. "History of Evolutionary Thought." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_evolutionary_thought. accessed 3/7/13.

[4] Braudy, Leo. *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*. New York: Random, 2005.239, 244-45.

[5] Wikipedia. "Adolph Bastian." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Bastian. 25 Feb. 2013. accessed 3/7/13.

[6] Campbell, ibid.

of his times, joined the "primal cause" bandwagon. As his cultural contribution, he named the "elementary ideas" *archetypes,* assigned them to the "collective unconscious," and framed them in a psychological and mythological context.

Jung's Definition of Archetypes

In the following passages, Jung describes and defines archetypes:

> My views about the "archaic remnants," which I have called "archetypes" or "primordial images" are constantly criticized by people who lack a sufficient knowledge both of the psychology of dreams and of mythology. The term "archetype" is often misunderstood as meaning a certain definite mythological image or motif. But this would be no more than a conscious representation, and it would be absurd to assume that such variable representations could be inherited. The archetype is, on the contrary, an inherited tendency of the human mind to form representations of mythological motifs—representations that vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern. [. . .]
>
> This inherited tendency is instinctive, like the specific impulse of nest building, migration, etc. in birds. One finds these representation collectives practically everywhere, characterized by the same or similar motifs. They cannot be assigned to any particular time or region or race. They are without known origin, and they can reproduce themselves even where transmission through migration must be ruled out.
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> While personal complexes never produce more than a personal bias, archetypes produce myths, religions, and philosophical ideas that influence and set their stamp on whole nations and epochs.[7]

Jung's definitions show he is invested in the essentialism of the time and uses mythology as an anchor for his argument, and as quasi-validation for his theories. As mythology precedes written history, there is a sense that if there are similar mythological motifs in cultures,

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[7] Jung, C.G. *The Undiscovered* Self. Trans. by R.F.C. Hull. 1958. Princeton. NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. 108,118.

these motifs must then reflect fundamental (or eternal) truths about human nature. Jung does not consider that mythological motifs (and especially, patriarchal mythological motifs) can and often do reflect human culture during historical periods, rather than our intrinsic human nature.

Archetypes as Symbols of Patriarchy

Despite the practice of Jung and Jungians to commonly employ archetypes as defining primary or eternal models of humans, the very archetypes chosen and the associations linked to them are social and psychological constructs of patriarchy. This is apparent in the familiar Jungian "archetype" of the Old Man, which is merely another model of wisdom being held by an authoritative male, a white male. The wise Old Man is not a man of color.

His Great Mother is a psychological redux of the patriarchal praise of obedient reproductive wives or chaste, submissive, and nurturing women. His Terrible Mother is the psychological and cultural flip-side of patriarchy's censure of sexual women who are unattached or unowned by males, and who may have more social freedom than their reproductive sisters. Additionally, his "archetypes" of *anima* and *animus* follow the same pattern of patriarchally gendered views of women and men. Lyn Cowan does a masterful job of addressing, deconstructing and thoroughly debunking the so-called eternal nature of *anima* and *animus*.[8]

<u>Although Jung posits archetypes as a theory, and occasionally recognizes they arise out of societal and culture milieus</u>, this is not how he uses them. Thus, it is no surprise that this isn't how Jungians, archetypal psychologists, and laypersons alike use archetypes either. Instead, archetypes are marched out as fixed principles, deductive facts, or even (as the term implies), eternal truths. An "archetype" seen and used as an eternal truth or a fixed principle once can then suggest various mythical examples from one's own or another's patriarchal culture. Those mythological allusions are in turn presented as proof of archetypes. It is circular reasoning at best.

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[8] Cowan, Lyn."Dismantling the Animus." *The Jung Page: Reflections on Psychology, Culture and Life*. 22 Nov 2003. http://www.cgjungpage.org/index.php. 2013.

There may indeed be archetypes, but neither I nor anyone else knows for sure. What I do positively know is that if archetypes exist, they aren't the ones Jung crafted and Jungians still use. Those are based on a nineteenth century mindset thoroughly mired in patriarchal perspectives and unconscious of how thoroughly racist and misogynist these perspectives are.

Today, however, we are conscious. Jungian archetypes cannot continue to be used by anyone who is working to be aware. Because any archetype that is utilized whether in popular media or in academic work is commonly viewed as a Jungian one, I suggest that we must forgo using archetypes at all. In my view, it is unconscionable to continue to promote a "primal blueprint" based solely on men that embraces racism and sexism and is doled out in authoritatively-toned pieces called archetypes.