

Archetypally Speaking BY SUSAN LAWSON

We've all heard writers or storytellers say there are perhaps only a few dozen really unique stories, and the rest are different versions of those. Well, there is some truth to that, and the truth lies in the archetypal dimension.

Etymologically

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the word *archetype* back to the Greek for "first" + "impress" or "stamp," So it is a prototype or kind of first image of something. Etymologically, *metaphor* means "to transfer," "to bear," "to carry."

We use this transfer process in writing as a way to imply relationship, usually one of similarity, and it is the vehicle for carrying the archetype.

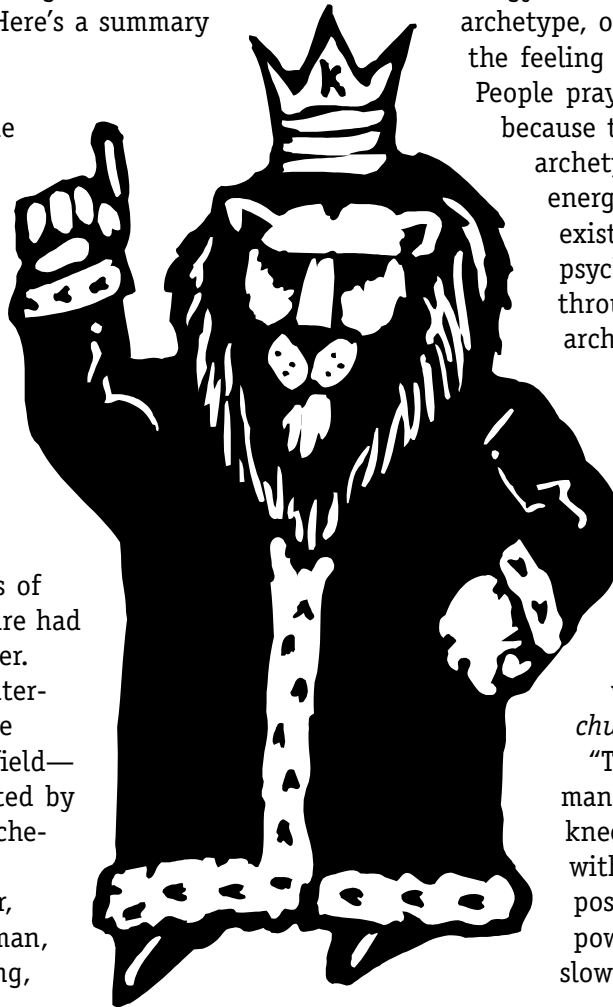
Psychologically

Psychiatrist Carl Jung did perhaps the most research on understanding the idea and importance of archetypes. Here's a summary of his observations:

- Archetypes are inherited structural elements of the human psyche—building blocks of images that have existed in the collective unconscious, and therefore in each individual unconscious, for as long as anyone can recall. These "types" appear in the written and oral traditions of all cultures, with variation, regardless of whether or not one culture had early contact with another.
- Archetypes are like an interconnected web within the psyche—a sort of force field—encompassed and regulated by a sort of overseer, the archetype of the Self. So the archetypes of the mother, the father, the wise old man, the hag, the fool, the king,

the beggar, etc. are all connected and a part of the larger principle of the Self.

- The idea or image of the archetype is a sort of instinct, not merely an abstract image. They are systems of readiness for action, and at the same time images and emotions. They present themselves as ideas and images, but are more clearly understood as *possibilities* of ideas.
- Archetypes appear to be what connect human beings to instinctual nature; so when the archetypes within us are excited in some way, we respond with emotion. They manifest personally through an individual's complexes (emotionally charged groups of ideas, for example, "mother complex") or collectively as characteristics of whole cultures.
- The archetype is "absolutely indestructible because it is the instinctive store of energy in man. By the contact with an archetype, one is reinforced, one gets the feeling of tremendous energy. People pray to symbolical figures because they are the expressions of archetypes and therefore stores of energy. So in every cult that ever existed on earth, there is a psychological system of myths through which the contact with archetypes is produced."



Aboriginally

Jung gave an example of how the archetype works in an aboriginal Australian culture. That group provided every man with a slab of stone or wood at initiation called a *churinga*.

"The rite is very simple. The man takes the *churinga* on his knees and rubs it a long time with his hands, and it is supposed that his bad health-power, his bad libido, will slowly filter into his *churinga*,

so he can rid his system of everything that has gone wrong with him. Then he stores the stone away in some secret place, in a hollow tree or somewhere in the ground, for instance, and leaves it for months perhaps, or until he feels rotten again, and then instead of going to have a dream analyzed, he goes back to his *churinga* and again works all



the rotten stuff off into the stone. For in the meantime the *churinga* has got rid of it and is healthy again. I have no theory as to how the *churinga* does that. They simply state that when they go back, it is fresh, the wrong stuff digested, and they can get the right stuff out of it again and so renew themselves. That is the most primitive idea of contacting the archetype in order to be restored with new life power, mana, or libido.

"...And so it is possible to contact energy in an image. That is really the fundamental idea in the worship of any idol. The idol is the form or the picture of the power, and in worshipping that form you contact the power expressed in it and are able to establish a contact with the archetypal instincts again."

Dreams do this for us naturally, and, he said, "If a dream contains a powerful archetype, you are sure to have an effect afterwards."

Rhetorically

This is a tool writers and storytellers can use not only to their advantage in writing, but also to the advantage of the audiences who receive their stories. Jung said it best: "...putting people into contact with archetypes ...produce[s] the magic effect." The Catholic church, he added, has always known that.

In fact, all religions, myth, legend, folklore and fairytale are full of archetypal images, and hence, complex metaphors. Thus a story or poem resonates deeper with audiences when archetypal dimensions are built into it, either intuitively or purposefully, giving it additional layers of meaning.

A good example from pop culture is perhaps the *Star Wars* movies, in

which the Darth Vader character was an archetype of the "dark side of God." When the movie came out in the late 1970s, some religious groups objected to the suggestion that God even had a dark side. And yet George Lucas got the idea straight out of the Old Testament book of Job, where Yahweh shows Job the "place of shards" and reveals his dark side to Job. Embedding this idea into the larger *Star Wars* story gave the movie its archetypal—or bigger-than-life—dimension.

The stories you want to tell because they resonate within you already have a built-in archetypal dimension—that's the source of *your* emotional tie to them. It's also why it's critical to write what you know—because this intrinsic value can't be duplicated.

Sure, it's fine to fictionalize, but build a *careful frame* through which audiences experience your story. As you fictionalize real life, stay tuned into its archetypal dimension so the story remains eternally true and most of all, eternally powerful.

SOURCES:

- *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930-1934 by C. G. Jung, Vol. 1*, edited by Claire Douglas. Princeton, NJ: Bollingen, 1997 (pages 65-67)
- *C. G. Jung Lexicon: A Primer of Terms and Concepts*, by Daryl Sharp. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1991.