The Language of Archetypes

Archetypes are the common themes, or in Jung’s words “mythological motifs”, that emerge from the collective unconscious and reappear in symbolic form again and again in myths, symbol systems and dreams. James Hillman, the contemporary (American) founder of archetypal psychology, refers to them as “the deepest patterns of psychic functioning”: they are “the roots of the soul governing the perspectives we have of ourselves and the world … the axiomatic, self-evident images to which psychic life and our theories about it ever return”.

Without access to the myth-making vitality of the archetypes, we are confined to a few rooms of the splendid mansion that is the mind, and shut out from the creative source of our own psychic life.

In most instances, archetypal dreams leave us feeling that we have received wisdom from a source outside what we commonly recognize as ourselves. Whether we describe this source as a reservoir of spiritual truth or as an untapped dimension of our own minds is of less importance than that we acknowledge its existence.

In our “grand” dreams, archetypes appear as symbols, or take personified form as the particular gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, fabulous beasts and powers of good and evil, that are most familiar to our conscious minds. Jungians stress, however, that we should never identify with individual archetypes, because each is only a fragment of the complete self. By integrating the many archetypes of the collective unconscious, Jungians hope to progress towards individuation (see page 31).

Archetypal dreams are most likely to occur at important transitional points in life, such as early schooldays, puberty, adolescence, early parenthood, middle age, the menopause, and old age. They also occur at times of upheaval and uncertainty, and mark the process toward individuation and spiritual maturity.

Jung found archetypal dreams occurring in all walks of life, experienced as much by “people who are inwardly cut off from humanity and oppressed by the thought that nobody else has their problems” as by those far advanced on the individuation process. Yet in these two extreme cases the dream content is different: the dreams of the alienated personality reflect personal concerns and the dreams of the integrated personality reflect supra-personal themes such as birth and death, immortality, and the meaning of existence.

However, Jung cautions that if archetypal dreams contain potent material that appears greatly to contrad the ideas and beliefs of the dreamer’s conscious mind, that lacks the moral coherence of genuine mythological material, then a deep division, born of resistance or repression, may exist between the collective unconscious and the dreamer’s waking life. Such psychic blocks must be dealt with before further progress is possible.

Dream archetypes are vital to the search for our “selves”. By looking for them in dreams, and learning to recognize them, we can build bridges that stretch over our unconscious minds. Each archetype is a link in a chain of mythic associations. By identifying one archetype, we can draw other archetypes into dreaming awareness, and delve deeper into the creative power of our collective unconscious.

According to the Jungian analysts Edward Whitman and Sylvia Perera, we know that we have entered the world of archetypes if our dreams confront us with elements that are rationally impossible in everyday life, and that lead to “the realms of myth and magic”. Most dreams reflect
constraints of waking reality, but the moment that we find ourselves in a shape-shifting world in which animals talk, men rise unscathed from mortal wounds, strangers enter through locked doors, and trees twine themselves into beautiful women, we know that we are in the presence of archetypal powers.

Archetypal dream images and events often appear to have a predetermined, all-encompassing, dramatic power, described by Whitmont and Perera as a “numinosity which creates a sense of awe in the dreamer”. The dream may be set in an historical or cultural environment far removed from that of the dreamer, symbolizing the fact that he or she is travelling outside the boundaries of waking sensory and psychological experience. It has also been found that archetypal dreams convey a sense of great significance to the dreamer, prompting him or her to see in them “some suggestion of enlightenment, warning, or supernatural help”. Above all, archetypal dreams have about them what Jung called a “cosmic quality”, a sense of temporal or spatial infinity conveyed by dream experiences such as movement at tremendous speed over vast distances, or a comet-like flight through space, an experience of hovering far above the earth, or a breathtaking expansion of the self until it transcends its narrow individuality and embraces all of creation. Cosmic qualities can also emerge in our dreams as astrological or archetypical symbols, or as experiences of death and re-birth.

Many archetypal dreams involve magical journeys or quests which often, like the quest for the Holy Grail, represent a search for some aspect of ourselves. A common theme in fairy tales is that of the young hero who must journey to a foreign land to discover his manhood, or true self, before returning to slay a dragon, or rescue a suffering maiden. When such themes appear in dreams they usually symbolize a journey into the unconscious, where the dreamer seeks to find and assimilate fragmented parts of the psyche in order to achieve a psychological confidence and wholeness that can differentiate him or her from collective society.

A common archetypal journey is the night sea passage, in which the hero is swallowed up and nearly destroyed by the monster that he has attempted to slay. As in the Biblical tale of Jonah and the whale, the hero still manages to destroy the monster from within, to escape and finally to reach land in a symbolic representation of the dreamer’s successful quest to reclaim life-energy from the depths of the unconscious, and thus deprive unconscious impulses of the power to dominate conscious behaviour.

Other archetypal journeys, such as sea voyages toward the rising sun, can represent re-birth and transformation. Dreams may also involve baptism and other forms of ritual initiation, emergence from the primal depths of a cave, or alchemical archetypes such as the phoenix rising from the flames that destroy the past and leave the dreamer free to create his or her future. Such mythical creatures as the phoenix may not embody primary archetypes in themselves, but may be used by the dreaming mind as representatives of the archetypes. For example, sphinxes in dreams may symbolize the occult wisdom of the archetype of the Great Mother, while the Hindu deity Garuda (half man, half eagle) may stand for the fierce, purifying energy of the Wise Old Man. Jung saw the Dragon, however, as a primary symbol, related to the collective or overbearing social aspect of the Great Mother, who must be slain if the hero is to be free.

One archetype with a profoundly numinous quality is the Spirit, the opposite of matter, sometimes manifested in dreams as an impression of infinity, spaciousness, invisibility. The Spirit may also appear as a ghost, or as a visit from the dead, and its presence often indicates a tension between the material and non-material worlds. Other major archetypes, including the Shadow, the Trickster and the Divine Child, are described on the following pages.