**Understanding Mythic References in Movies**

**Where do myths come from?**

Oral tradition – passed down verbally from

generation to generation and eventually written down

**The Gaia Principle**

Gaia (ancient Greek name for the Earth), Modern environmental interpretations of this word include the idea that the Earth, Gaia, is a living organism.

John Bonnet wrote a book on screenplay writing and the use of mythic archetypes (*Stealing Fire from the Gods*) and he came up with The Gaia Principle: a metaphor that illustrates how the great stories were probably first created. To start, for our purposes, the conceit (idea) that Gaia, the Earth itself, is a living organism with a brain. Then the metaphor works like this:

* starts with a real or imagined event in prehistory that is worth repeating
* story is told
* if really interesting, keeps being told from person to person, tribe to tribe, generation to generation, etc. until it’s told and retold millions of times and exists in hundreds of different versions around the world
* each time story told, it changes, due to certain natural but curious tendencies of the mind – the tendency to remember things that make a strong impression on us and to forget things that don’t; the tendency to exaggerate some things and minimize others, to glorify or ennoble, to idealize or vilify; the tendency to unconsciously analyze things; the tendency to simplify or edit; the tendency to conserve energy

(stories about exaggerated size of fish, only remembering the good of deceased people, the evil of bad people, adding elements to retelling of stories)

After years and years of retelling, it’s been thoroughly changed, yet still contains a “kernel of truth” at the heart of the story. This “kernel” is the reason the story impresses us and is worth repeating.

**SYNAPSE** -- junction across which a nerve impulse passes from an axon terminal to a neuron, muscle cell, or gland cell. Current memory theory holds that the synapse is both a storage area for memories and a transmitter of memories (your mind affects your memories).

We are, each of us, the various synapses in the brain of Gaia, storing and transmitting the great stories; we add, embellish, minimize but still retain that “kernel of truth” of the story.

Myths are stories that have evolved to such an extent that religions have been formed around them. All the major religions have myths as their justification and source of their truth.

It is the function of religion to utilize the truth revealed in these myths to guide their followers back to their original nature. When religion is not corrupt, it is a conscious, organized effort to get people on the path of truth and onto a spiritual journey.

All cultures around the world have similar myths; only the culture, customs, costumes, and languages change.

After 1000’s of years, the stories that impress us remain and we continue to tell them in modern venues: stories, books, tv shows, dramas, movies.

**MYTHIC ARCHETYPES**

(*Personality Theories*, a website maintained by Dr. C. George Boeree)

Carl Jung, a student of Sigmund Freud’s (the father of modern psychology), proposed a theory that divides the psyche into 3 parts:

**EGO** = the conscious mind;

**PERSONAL UNCONSCIOUS** = anything that is not

conscious but can be;

**COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS** = psychic inheritance

(what has been passed down to us of experiences as a

species, born with it, never directly conscious of it, influences all of our behavior and experiences, but especially emotional ones). Examples: love at first

sight, déjà vu, immediate recognition of certain

symbols and meanings of certain myths; bigger ex=

creative experiences of artists and musicians,

spiritual experiences (near death experiences),

parallels in dreams, fantasies, mythologies, fairy

tales, and literature.

**ARCHETYPES**

The content of the collective unconscious are called archetypes. Jung also calls these dominants, imagos, mythological or primordial images. An archetype is an UNLEARNED TENDENCY TO EXPERIENCE THINGS IN A CERTAIN WAY. It acts as an “organizing principal” on the things we see or do. An archetype is like a black hole in space. You only know it’s there by how it draws matter and light to itself.

**The Mother Archetype**

Nuturing being – no one would survive infancy w/o a nurturing being. We tend to need a mother, want a mother, seek her, recognize her, and deal with her.

Symbolized by the primordial mother or “earth mother” of mythology: Eve and Mary in western tradition; less personal church, nation, forest, ocean (all give life). If disappointed in real life by own mother, will spend lifetime seeking to identify with another mother (motherland/nation, life at see, life in church)

**Mana**

Spiritual power, often represented as a phallic symbol. The connection between the penis and strength, semen and seed, fertilization and fertility are understood by most cultures. May be displayed as the spirits being called on to increase the yield of crops or to heal someone.

**The Shadow**

Comes from our pre-human, animal past, when our concerns were limited to survival and reproduction, when we weren’t self-conscious.

The “dark side” of the ego, and the evil that we are capable of is stored here. The shadow itself is amoral, neither good or bad, like animals. Animals tenderly take care of their young and viciously kill for food, but don’t chose either. They just do what they do. Innocent. From human perspective, seems brutal, so the shadow becomes a dumping ground for parts of ourselves that we can’t admit to.

**Symbols of the shadow** = snake, dragon, monsters, demons. Often guard the entrance to a cave or pool of water, which is the collective unconscious. (Next time you dream about wrestling with the devil, you may just be wrestling with yourself!)

**The Persona**

Related to the words person and personality, from the Latin word for mask.

The persona represents your public image, the “mask” you put on before you show yourself to the outside world. It is the part of us most distant from the collective conscious. It is our “good impression” we wish to present, but it can become the “false impression” that we use to manipulate others. At its worst, it can be mistaken, even by ourselves, for our true nature. We can really start believing we really are what we pretend to be!

**Anima and Animus**

The role of male or female. For most people, this role is determined by physical gender. Jung, like Freud, Adler and others, felt that we are really bisexual in nature, beginning life as fetuses with undifferentiated sex organs that only gradually, under the influence of hormones, become male or female. They believe that when we begin our social lives as infants, we are neither male or female, but under the influence of society, we gradually become molded male or female.

In all societies, expectations placed on men and women differ, usually based on different roles in reproduction, but often involving details that are purely traditional. In our society, remnants of these traditional expectations can be seen with women expected to be more nurturing and less aggressive, men expected to be strong and less emotional. Jung felt these expectations limit us to developing half our potential.

The **anima** is the female aspect in the collective unconscious of men, and the **animus** is the male aspect present in the collective unconscious of women. Together, they are referred to as syzygy (/sizijē/). The anima may be personified as a little girl, very spontaneous and intuitive, or as a witch, or as the earth mother. Associated w/deep emotionality and the force of life itself. The animus may be personified as a wise old man, a sorcerer, or different males that tend to be logical, rationalistic, even argumentative.

The anima or animus is the archetype through which we communicate with the collective unconscious. Responsible for much of our love life, often seen to be looking for “our other half,” for that person who “fills” our anima or animus archetype.

**Some other archetypes**

Other family archetypes:

**Family**: Idea of blood relationship, ties that run deeper than those based on conscious reasons.

**Father**: symbolized as a guide and authority figure.

**Child:** represented in mythology and art by children, infants, and other small creatures. The Christ child represents the future, becoming, rebirth and salvation. Christmas falls during the winter solstice, which in northern primitive cultures also represents the future and rebirth (Christmas is NOT the exact birth of Christ; he was actually born in October). The child archetype often blends with other archetypes to form the child-god or the child-hero.

**Many archetypes are story characters:** The **hero** is the mana personality, defeater of evil dragons or other monsters (the shadow), represents the ego. Often dumb (ignorant of the collective conscious). Example: Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* films.

Hero often out to rescue a **maiden**, who represents purity, innocence, and naivet`e. In the beginning of the *Star Wars* story, Princess Leia is the maiden, but as the story progresses, she becomes the anima, discovering the powers of the force – the collective unconscious – and becoming an equal partner with Luke, who turns out to be her brother.

The hero is guided by the **wise old man**, a form of the animus, who reveals the nature of the collective unconscious. In *Star Wars*, he is Obi Wan Kenobi and later Yoda. Notice what they teach Luke about the force and, as Luke matures, they die and become a part of him.

Darth Vader is the “dark father,” representing the shadow and master of the dark side of the force.

**Animal** archetype: representing humanity’s relationships with the animal world. Examples: hero’s faithful horse, pets, even loyal little robots and reliable old spaceships – The Falcon (?)

**Trickster:** represented by a clown or magician, role is to hamper hero’s progress and to generally make trouble. In Norse mythology, many of the gods’ adventures originate from some trick played on the gods by the half-god Loki.

**Original Man:** represented in western religion by Adam.

**God:** represented our need to comprehend the universe, to give meaning to all that happens, to see it all as having purpose and direction.

**The Hermaphrodite:** both male and female, represents the union of opposites, an important idea in Jung’s theory. In some religious art, Jesus is portrayed as a rather feminine man. In China, the character Kuan Yin began as a male saint but was portrayed in such a feminine way that he is more often thought of as the female goddess of compassion.

**The Self:** ultimate unity of the personality, symbolized by the circle, the cross, the mandala (a simple or complex drawing used in meditation that tends to draw a person’s focus back to the center). The personifications that best represent self are Christ and Buddha, two people who many believe achieved perfection. However, Jung felt that perfection of the personality is only truly achieved in death.

Jungian archetypes enter the literature and movies of every culture that a sophisticated reader/viewer can spot.

**Hero Quest (the Monomyth):** *Star Wars*, *Under the Tuscan Sun*

**Cinderella:** *Titanic*, *Pretty Woman*

**Cain and Able (the constant battle between organization and disorder):** *Of Mice and Men*, almost any western but especially *Shane*

**Overcoming the father-*figure:*** *Death of a Salesman, Star Wars, Broken Lance, Executive Suite*