A Special Gift: Archetypes in Ancient Literature as a Reflection of Readers' *Languaged Understandings*

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Context

Arguably, all college instructors have an interest in a learner's reading skills even if we do not teach arts and letters. Logically, this interest extends to those products of student reading that Egan (1997) called *languaged understandings*: individual *recognitions* served by oral and written language activities. Many of us may similarly concur that learning is enhanced by if not dependent upon the learner's ability to connect something new to something known. Defabio (1993) claimed the ability to connect as critical to evaluating a learner's competence in language. In most classrooms, these connections likely involve a reader's linking parts of a text, text/s to texts, and sometimes texts to personal experience.

However, as nature and nurture vary, to make these connections, students are situated and motivated variously. While it seems incumbent upon an instructor to find ways to assist, only the student decides whether to take advantage of it. If decision-making is to some degree shaped by both feeling and thinking, as Myers Briggs theory has long supposed, then meaningful interactions with texts is more likely to occur more often for more students when assignments prompt both kinds of considerations.

A subject like literature naturally lends itself to affective considerations because its characters engage in behaviors and reveal attitudes which speak variously to readers' values. Although many of us were raised to see literature as providing *vicarious* experience, Rosenblatt (1938) was among the first to claim that reading literature creates *direct* experience with a text. Decades later, Rosenblatt (1978) distinguished the *text* from the *poem*, the latter being a construct of a reader's interaction with a text. Subsequently, reader response theory has won many proponents, who see *meaning* as a product of understandings generated as readers bridge gaps between language, text, and/or the writer and readers' worlds.

Purpose and Method

As we seek effective ways to help learners connect subject matter to prior knowledge or personal experience, we should not overlook tools that serve collective as well as individual *languaged understandings*. Thus, I use Rasmussen's (2000) redefinition of Egan's, *languaged understandings* as conceptual and physical methods "whereby people-in-relation come to under- stand, communicate, and negotiate meaning together." In this context, I present a case study from a literature course in which *archetypes*--concepts Carl Jung proclaimed to be part of the human collective unconscious--promoted reflective thinking, close reading, and links to personal experience within and across individual learners.

Although specializing in composition and rhetoric, I occasionally teach Western World Masterpieces I, from ancient to renaissance literature. My students are mostly freshmen, some having read Homer or a Greek tragedy or two in high school, but most arriving with relatively little prior knowledge of the material. At the outset, the potential to connect texts to one another is minimal. Moreover, many students bring along an attitude that equates *ancient* with *difficult, irrelevant*, and *boring*. Those who have come to college to get good or better jobs are daunted to look at the table of contents of a text that begins with *Gilgamesh*, an epic of the year 2000 B.C.E. What motivation can prompt them to mine *Gilgamesh* for intellectual nuggets, let alone personal ones? When the English Department recently elected to aim courses like L101 at recruiting prospective majors by combining critical goals with that of literary appreciation, I knew that I had to find something other than my own enthusiasm for the classics as an incentive to negotiate meaning, unlike years prior when I had relied less on cumulative reader response, is a more effective and worthwhile technology for systematic and meaningful study of ancient texts.

What *are* archetypes? and how can they inject interest and relevance into ancient literature for new undergraduates? For the purposes of L101, *archetypes* name sets of character qualities observed in human beings that can be associated with a quest to live meaningful lives. This article will use a qualitative method to show how archetypal analysis engaged students to negotiate meaning in response papers that demonstrated both an ability and

willingness to connect texts to one another and to their own lives. After laying out my rationale and the nature and scope of archetypal analysis, I will use excerpts of reader response papers from the first two weeks of last semester to show how students read closely and related well to these texts. The papers (half page or more) were word processed daily to address the assigned materials. Although readers could discuss the text either objectively or subjectively, they were expected to back up what they found significant with textual evidence. Response papers were awarded points on a 4.5 scale and comprised 40% of the course grade.

Process

On opening day, to start warming cold hearts toward ancient literature, I asked students, "Why study literature–especially ancient literature-- in a high-tech world?" Looking out on generally blank faces or raised shoulders, I invited them to talk about the authors, texts, characters, or themes they associated with the ancients. The name *Odysseus* came up, along with the notion of *heroism*. Except for a suggestion that heroes give us someone to model, the class showed little interest in the topic. Nonetheless, I knew from previous classes that Homer was alive and well. Few can read his work even in translation without experiencing its vitality. But to have this experience, one must be willing to read Homer, not merely *Cliff Notes*. I also knew I would give students a reason to read closely by counting the response papers so heavily and by using them as an exam study guides.

While I did not have to worry about enrollment–L101 is required of English education and nursing majors–I had to worry about any negative expectations they brought if I wanted them to read Homer. To return to the first day's volley of conversation, more students joined the discussion as we focused on the benefits of reading recent literature. What they suggested was encouraging: literature lets us gain experience by walking in a character's shoes; it brings us adventure, insight, mystery, dreams, and possibilities; it helps us to test what we think is worthwhile. Asked if these benefits would be any different for ancient texts, although several agreed they would NOT be, they could give few examples. Their exposure to the classics had proved to be largely forgettable.

Continuing day one, I suggested that the course materials could achieve those goals but that they could also provide a kind of self-study, for–apart from academic arguments over its nature and identity--the *self* often interests students. I conceded that although Western literature might be a *family* study for some readers, for everyone, it would be a *cultural* study of diversity across several lands and eras. Similarly, I assured them that for those who wanted to relate more personally, the selections we read would also invite universal interpretations of characters, to show their striving against themselves, others, nature, and the gods.

Naturally, raising student expectations created my next problem: how to meet them. In structuring the course around reader responses, I knew it would not be enough to aim only for the mind, which wanders, tires, and changes. So I decided to anchor the mental to the emotional, and perhaps try to touch even those higher aspirations that we sometimes call *spiritual*, though not necessarily *religious*. Before dismissal, I advised readers that they would do well to relax and try to bring an open, beginner's mind to each reading. Also, I began to speak the language of arch- types: I suggested that leaving behind familiar expectations to enter the unknown world of the ancients would itself be a hero's journey. From it they could return with a treasure, a new sense of connection to the past and a deeper awareness of the human condition. The treasure would have a cost: the need to fight off the dragons of diversion. This language helped students take a first step toward identification because in some sense they would be enacting the same journey as the characters being studied.

Likewise, in closing the first day's class, I advised that, like Odysseus, whom the gods assisted, students would not travel alone. Class discussion and reader responses would help everyone to learn. Yet I cautioned that, unlike the ancients-- who shared a common faith in myth--we moderns are more at odds over spiritual matters. I cautioned that if we were to speak freely of personal and social values touching upon the spiritual–as the ancients surely did–we would need a common language that does not intrude on religious belief or non-belief. At this point, I introduced the term *archetypes* as a tool through which we would interpret and discuss our materials. In using words like *soul* and *spirit*, we would be speaking of psychology, not of religion. Subsequently, the semester unfolded without negative incident.

In orienting L101'ers, I did not characterize archetypal analysis as the only or best way to read literature. Instead, I predicted that in other courses they would explore a variety of interpretive strategies. Meanwhile, I

explained, archetypes would stimulate class discussion by inviting not just *conversation*-taking turns talking-but *dialogue*--constructing knowledge together. Thus it would promote collective *languaged understandings*.

Archetypes

Serving affective as well as cognitive considerations, archetypes encourage us to relate personally to what we read in the safety of metaphor. We do not have to put our deepest values at public risk where we can speak in the third person, offer hypothetical examples, role play, and imagine, while deciding privately whether and how something touches us. The word *archetype* was popularized by Jung (1964) who believed that human beings are psychologically driven by a collective force toward growth and higher aspirations. As dream images help make us conscious of our "unconscious reactions or spontaneous impulses" (p. 67), so archetypes are "symbolic images" as "instinctive as the ability of geese to migrate (in formation)" (p. 68). Like dream images, archetypes arise from within and when brought to consciousness, they tell us about our personal development.

This developmental process is addressed and simplified by Carol Pearson's *Awakening the Heroes Within* (1991), a paperback supplement to our anthology. Pearson has grouped twelve archetypes in three sets of four, the qualities of each set relating to what she calls concerns of the *ego*, the *soul*, and the *(higher) self*, respectively. Yet she has described these concepts so clearly that one student reported reading the book's 300 pages overnight. To summarize Pearson in my own words, *ego* names the human drive to create discrete boundaries that help us to differentiate "self" from "other." *Soul* (from the Greek *psyche*) designates the human capacity to discover and to know meaning and purpose in life and to experience dissatisfaction without it.

Accordingly, during the second session of the term, I talked to students about these terms. Positive signs of *soul* arise when we experience a deep sense of meaning, purpose or self-knowledge, while negative signs manifest when we feel empty. Much of the time, we dwell between the poles, feeling both a connection with life and a separation. *Soul* is that mythical quality which calls the *self* to be fully alive and effective-to use its many archetypal resources for a cause beyond the *ego*. Thus, it is soul-searching that puts us in touch with a mature sense of our *personhood*. Every individual's task, like that of every hero, is to birth, nurture, and communicate genuine "self expression" in this higher sense.

Gradually incorporating archetypal language to relate ancient literary characters to others and to their own lives, L101 readers accessed a new and ready vocabulary. Its concepts helped them describe how they and others viewed the world and to identify with or question certain associative qualities. Archetypal patterns also signaled the maturity levels at which a character may be said to operate in a particular situation, as well as revealing a number of smaller journeys along the *heroic path*.

Psychological patterns into which we organize our beliefs, feelings, and actions, archetypes live and die by their practical value. To interpret a character's experiences in a literature class, they provide entry into multiple features for analysis. To illustrate, in *The Odyssey*, where a father and son took separate journeys, students noted that in book 2, Telemachus felt abandoned by Odysseus. Reading Pearson, students saw that *abandonment* is a central concept of a drama of *fallen innocence*. Having located the archetype of *innocence*, they could examine a whole set of issues faced by Telemachus, including his struggles to remain safe, to seek rescue, to discern duty, and to trust authority.

Pearson pairs archetypes by their tendency to compete for our attention when we face a particular issue. Therefore, to discover one archetypal pattern is to discover a second. For example, *security* is a key focus for an innocent. In approaching *security*, Telemachus is caught in the tension of *the innocent* and *the orphan*. In fearing exploitation, an orphan plays a kind of "victim" role, whose pain suggests the need for others' help. Therefore, an orphan's task includes working to replace dependence on authority with mutual cooperation and interdependence. This archetype is reflected in Telemachus' goal to regain safety by casting out the suitors, his fear of their exploitation, his feeling victimized both by them and by his father's absence, his ability to experience the pain of these conflicts, and his willingness to look at a situation realistically. For instance, he accepted Athena's help in agreeing to his mission to leave Ithaca in search of news of his father.

When Telemachus journeyed away from home, a primary concern for him is no longer *security* but *identity*. To face its *dragons*, he is served by the competing archetypes of *seeker* and *lover*, whose patterns offer complementary, balancing resources. On the one hand, he risks security in leaving home. On the other hand, he risks disconnection from his family and homeland. In reconciling this tension, he finds greater autonomy, which prepares him to help his father defeat the suitors when they later joined forces. In turn, this act bonds him more directly to Odysseus.

In relating six paired archetypes to an individual's maturation journey, students did not choose the same issues to analyze the behaviors of Telemachus' father. Odysseus' concerns pointed to *responsibility* and *power*. For the one, he worked to balance the resources of his *caregiver* and *warrior* sides, for he had left his kingdom and family to serve the Greek cause in the Trojan War. Subsequently, during a ten-year battle to return home, Odysseus developed both skill in caring for his men and in competition and survival. Similarly, with respect to the issue of *power*, competing for Odysseus' attention are *magician* and *ruler* characteristics. While the one set led him through a series of synchronistic experiences that inspired him to mastery, the other set moved him homeward to heal the wounds caused by and in his absence.

Reader Responses

In interpreting *The Odyssey*, L101 students were free to decide which archetypal patterns applied to particular characters and events. Using archetypal patterns seemed to give them a confidence in choosing which manifested itself as strong verb selection. For instance, the following collage of brief commentary on books 9 and 10 from several students hints at a depth of ownership of the material:

"It is very hard NOT to find an archetype anywhere in the story.... [Although] we do see Odysseus as a great warrior archetype, we also see another side of him which is the orphan and caregiver" (Chris H.). A special instance of caregiving occurs "when three of his men ate the plant and lost their memory of home and duty. He had the choice of leaving them there [but] he . . . used the gifts of compassion and generosity by taking them" (Laura M.). Likewise, when Odysseus boasted to the Cylops, "My Name is Nobody," he showed a magician's goal, "to cast off his old identity," which filled him with "courage and inner confidence [But] he was so caught up in his personal pleasure that he didn't stop to think of the consequences." He acted the "fool" in pursuing self enjoyment "in being clever. His pride led him not to think "of home, his men, or even his life. He was simply succumbing to being a human with frailties (and need I say shadow archetypes?)" (Kristy W.). "The fool archetype" worked negatively here for Odysseus. Though it gave him "inner strength and motivation," it put him in "danger" when the Cyclops asked his father "to punish Odysseus severely" (Susan M.).

Another sign that archetypes enriched ancient literature study surfaced in accounts like that of Lisa D., affirming Rosenblatt's faith that readers gain more than vicarious experience. In reflecting on the *Odyssey*, she linked Athena's support of Telemachus in book 2 to an event in her own life, expressed safely in the third-person:

Once there was a young girl who had a baby boy when she was only 15. Her parents thought she should get herself through high school and then get a job to support her child. They never encouraged her to further her education, because it never occurred to them that education was important. She married at 19 and had two daughters immediately. With her husband's encouragement, she then went to college part time. [But] working full time . . . and caring for her family . . . turned out to be too difficult so she quit school [until] the youngest was in lst

grade.... Although the world is frightening to her and she is constantly battling demons within herself, every time she crosses a hurdle she feels empowered, so every day she feels a little better about herself.

Of course, to allow personal revelation means that an instructor could potentially be called upon to intervene. This problem did not occur, but had it, I would have talked briefly with the student and made a professional referral. As a precaution, in the guidelines to response work, I cautioned readers to write only what they were comfortable to share with classmates in small groups.

Some students connected their personal lives to the material more overtly than Lisa. For instance, in thinking about how the Sirens lured Odysseus with their songs, one reader recalled that in her first year of high school, just as Odysseus relied on his *sage* instincts to resist betrayal,

Jody R. avoided the consequences of an unnamed temptation by wisely recognizing deception.

Likewise, Sheila F. saw in her current love life strains of Odysseus' dilemma between the rock of Scylla and the hard place of Charybdis, which led her to speculate, "I can either remain in love with this utter fool that has a girlfriend on the side, or I can attempt to force myself out of love with him and pretend to find someone else to fill the void!"

Another important personal link came from Mimi C., who identified with Telemachus' unquestioning obedience to Athena when she asked that he drop his travels and return home. One spring day her senior year of high school, Mimi received an urgent message to go home. Despite having two tests that day and a track meet that she would miss if she left, she obeyed. As a result, Mimi was gratified to know, "I rescued my mother from a bleeding problem which the doctors were able to repair before it could become a major health threat."

Not only were L101 readers sometimes able to see the heroic in their own behaviors because of archetypal study, but they could let go of the self-consciousness not atypical of a freshman response. This ability was evidenced in the following cultural reflection provoked by Odysseus' rationale for getting involved with Kirke: "Now, being a man, I could not help consenting." To this, Kristy W. retorted,

Oh Please! Men have been claiming that excuse since the Classical Greek era . . . Archetypical characteristics are running wild! Odysseus finds a feeling of safety after so long, that "innocence" convinces him to stay. He stays for a long time, however, because of obvious passion from the "lover" archetype. He seems to have abandoned his gifts of control and responsibility given by the "ruler." I could write a book about how men simply need to get their Archetypes straight in order to remain faithful to their wives.

But with fair-minded balance, Kristy was kinder to Odysseus when he exclaims, "I sought out Kirke, my heart high with excitement, beating hard":

Whoa! Slow down Odysseus! He is so complex in this passage. He's the lover who follows his bliss, the fool who has the gift of joy and freedom, the warrior confronting the problem for his men, and the magician who wants to transform his problems into something less stressful and freeing. After being so weighted with such a journey, it is almost expected that he will be enticed by the goddess. Although here he does not act with his men in mind, who can blame him at this point?

Kristy linked Odysseus' rationalization to four different archetypes, none assigned thus far. Obviously, she had enjoyed reading and writing about Odysseus as if he were a real human being whom she found worthy of her feelings.

This level of engagement was not evident until week two. We spent the first week on Genesis, in which students applied Pearson's chapters on the *innocent* and *orphan* archetypes to stories of the "Fall," "Cain and Abel," "Noah," and "Jacob" to describe what happened and what it meant. During this time, they learned to discuss

archetypal maturity in terms of five possibilities: the *call* or initial driving force, the *shadow*, or unconscious manifestations, as well as three operative levels of behavior which reflected increasing growth.

Interpreting literature through archetypes similarly matured L101 students' understanding of the symbolic nature of language and the developmental role of myth in everyday life. For instance, readers could see the *innocent* and *orphan* archetypes as myths for understanding that life can be better. While the innocent tries to rejoin the tribe, the orphan moves toward exile or rebellion. The difference is in the details.

Samples from early response papers showed students bonding with ancient characters and collapsing the boundaries of time, space and culture that can make ancient literature so remote. Also, they suggested how readers picked up "nuances" in a text surprising for freshmen. Even though the new terminology was initially a stretch, clearly students could employ archetypal concepts with insight. To illustrate, Lisa C. interpreted the story of Jacob through the orphan response: he exploits others to avoid exploitation:

Jacob is disillusioned when his mother instructs him to deceive his father, Isaac. He does so by tricking him to believe he is his brother, Essau, who is to receive the blessing which Jacob wrongfully obtains. Jacob's situation is similar to the example given by Pearson that the Orphan Archetype may be activated by different occasions such as when employers expect us to be complicit in unprofessional practices. (Lisa C.)

Noting his exile to Haran, where Jacob has sought to build a family by working seven years for Laban's daughter Rachel, only to be given her elder sister Leah, another student characterized Jacob's response to Laban's trickery as "giving up on failed authorities."

Yet another classmate caught a more mature Jacob later in the tale:

This story takes a turn for the best when Jacob is confronted with God (thigh out of joint). He battles with God and [accepts] that he was in need of God's help ... to be rescued.... When Jacob and Essau greeted each other [again], they were able to work civilly with one another. (Alicia B.)

Connecting with Jacob through personal experience, some students identified with the parental favoritism of his father Isaac for Essau and of his mother for Jacob. For example, Mariann B. observed,

"I can see when issues arise around my household which parent takes which children's side.... My mother didn't always agree [with my actions], so she would let me know what she thought [but my father's] silence ... [seemed like] betrayal, leaving me to feel like the Orphan.

Still another reader connected Jacob to her own personal goals:

What really made me respond to this story was that even though Jacob got what he wanted in life, not without being tricked himself a few times by Laban, he still realized that without your family and feeling good about yourself none of it really matters. When Essau and Jacob are reunited there is no hard feelings left between them. . . . The magician is also an apparent archetype in this story because of the way Jacob transformed himself to be a worthier man. The wrestling scene between Jacob and God is in part to show the inner struggle Jacob is having with the fool in him to make up for his colorful past. . . . [Like Jacob], my personal struggle is to find out who I am and to be the best person I can be. (Laurie T.)

In addition to the cognitive and affective benefits of archetypal study, I have noticed its prompting links of new texts with prior ones, generating *intertextuality*. Drawing on the Latin word *intertexto*, which describes a woven kind of intermingling, Julia Kristeva coined this term to suggest that texts are more broadly constituted than by their authors because, sharing the structures and language of other texts, they absorb and transform one another. For instance, after the first two classes on Genesis stories, in responding next to the early part of the *Odyssey*, one student linked Athena's cue that Telemachus return home to Ithaca with Jacob's wrestling with the angel. A second reader noticed the parallel between Odysseus' men eating the forbidden heifers of the sun god to Adam and Eve's disobedience. He observed, "Wrong choices cost us: a thunderbolt destroyed their ship. Yet Odysseus is able to escape, floating back towards Skylla." Despite such setbacks, Homer used the way Odysseus deals with them to "define what kind of a person he is" (Jeff S.).

Literary Appreciation

Without the use of archetypes, students in previous classes characteristically had conceptualized *myth* as *falsehood*. Those who used archetypes found myth less threatening. For example, gradually, they could discuss the ways in which an archetype like the *warrior* may vary in content from culture to culture, while remaining in form. In accepting myth as an expression of culture, they could also find myth in "films, music, education, religion, politics, art, literature..., advertising, fashion, child-rearing practices, [and] sexual behaviors" (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 5). Moreover, readers could appreciate how myth lives or dies as a function of both cultural and personal belief and why a culture or person may outgrow and abandon or modify myth. In turn, they could find instances in which myth expressed a character's images, hopes, ideals, and values and motivated action. To understand myth on this level, we talked about how personal crises mark transitions when one archetypal approach or pattern no longer serves and another has yet to be developed.

Although I could offer more examples of the engaging remarks that archetypal study has elicited from L101 readers, those presented illustrate the power of archetypes to anchor the mental with the emotional and the spiritual. I know from my own experience how motivating this can be. Consequently, I would like to close with a few final excerpts, the first four taken from anonymous course evaluations. Their effect on me has sealed the likelihood that I will continue to use archetypes to recruit student hearts for the humanities.

1. "I don't normally like literature, but [this course] showed me a new side of it and how to see it in my own relations."

2. "I like how this course made [clear] the relation to my own life. I have a deeper understanding of myself because of it."

3. "I learned much more in an era of literature that usually interests me little. The emphasis on the mythical hero was extremely enriching."

4. "This course was unbelievably meaningful to me. It was exactly what I needed at this point in my life."

Accordingly, archetypal study gifted L101 students, and they, in turn, gifted me. Their *languaged understandings* reflected their own developmental path in the course. They moved past a fear for their security in studying ancient literature, through an ability to identify with its themes and characters, to take responsibility for their reading, to find power in their writing. From an *ego* perspective, they examined how the ancients made their way in the world as *warriors* and *caregivers*, trying to balance the obligations to *others* with needs of *self* (innocent, orphan) to be loved and protected. In *soul* terms, they dramatized life's greatest mysteries: death (*destroyer*), passion (*lover*, *seeker*), and rebirth (*creator*). In *self* terms, they experienced myth on a personal level, their *ruler*, *magician*, *fool*, and *sage* bringing them safely home. One reader response on Odysseus' homecoming captured what *home* meant to her:

> I have always wanted to come home. When I was young I never seemed to be content at summer camp. Even if I found a hundred new friends to write, and even more mosquito bites to scratch, I wanted home. [Later], I had the time of my life on vacation in Texas, but somehow the comfort of a clothes covered floor and rumpled sheets kept calling me back. [Even now at the end of a work day] when the clock ticks midnight, I am already on my

way to the car with keys in hand. My bed, my dog, my Mom, my Dad, the full refrigerator, and the empty dirty clothes hamper in my room all speak of home. *They warm my soul*.

Part of homecoming is not only coming back to what you left, but to realize where you have been [-to look at the-] gutwrenching, sometimes heart-breaking decisions we make that shape our future paths. Mine is made of memories, my hopes and my dreams . . . that have molded me into the path I now take.

Speaking then of Odysseus, the writer also speculated on the drive that kept alive his dream of returning to Ithaca and his Penelope:

Maybe Odysseus did not know what he was to find at home, but ... he knew what he left behind. In never forgetting where he has been, Odysseus has shaped his character into what he will become after his journey is over. The calm that is home is a sanctuary to the hero. (Kristy W.)

Sanctuary seems a desirable place to end a journey: a room of one's own that replenishes for the next leaving. Archetypal study made L101 a kind of sanctuary. It was a place to take comfort in the privacy of one's own thoughts about the good life and to catch the *heroic vision* for a time. As the following response perhaps says best, it was a place to set aside the *ego's* concern with life's insignificance to answer the *soul*'s call to live life *large*.

I am beginning to learn the value of the human spirit. It takes awhile to get over the childishness of needing to possess material things to realize that a life filled with passion, empathy, and heart is better. As I get further along in life, the holes in my soul that were never filled by clothes or cars are made whole again by the experience of sharing my life with others... The secret of [the human condition] is not only to live, but to have something to live for." (Allison L.)

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