A Jungian Reading of *The Kalevala* 500-1300?: Finnish Shamanism - The Patriarchal Senex Figure Part 1: Introduction

Bettina Knapp

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol8/iss3/10

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Abstract
Jungian interpretation of the *Kalevala*, focusing on the character of Väinämöinen and his role as Shaman. Part 1 gives an introduction to the *Kalevala* and to shamanism, then analyzes the creation myth in the *Kalevala*.

Additional Keywords
Creation in The Kalevala; Jungian analysis of The Kalevala; The Kalevala—Jungian analysis; Shamanism
The Kalevala, the national epic of Finland, is based on collections of ancient poems and ballads gathered together by Elias Lonnrot (1802-1884), physician, philologist, and scholar. Comparable to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, and to Firdausi's Shah-Nama, in that it transports its readers to a mythic age where purity of thought and feeling cohabited with whirlpools of evil energies. The Kalevala sings of primordial times when Gods and heroes roamed the earth.

Lonnrot gathered his material from every corner of Finland, traveling from the humblest villages to the most prosperous cities, talking with old and young, and thus gaining access to cellars and attics, anywhere and everywhere, for all possible information concerning his native land’s literary and poetic heritage. The runes (rune) or songs comprising The Kalevala were usually handed down from one generation to another often by wandering kantele players (a five or seven string zither-like instrument plucked by hand).

The Kalevala or Old Karelian Songs was published in 1835 (I) and 1836 (II); a new edition appeared in 1849. It has been suggested that Lonnrot was overly subjective in his approach to The Kalevala. Yet Homer and Firdausi, who gathered the material—so it has been stated in the same way, may likewise be accused of a similar charge. Such is the poet and the scholar’s prerogative. The mythology of every land at any and every time is subject to innumerable variations. Lonnrot, who heard and read multiple versions of one song and varied plot delineations of hero’s life, chose the one he felt best suited his endeavor, the one he felt most representative of Finland. His selection, based on a lifetime of study and meticulous scholarship, is reflective of his own deep feeling for his nation and its people.

Whether ancient or modern, fact or fiction, the events delineated in The Kalevala as well as those recounted in the other national epics, reveal archetypal patterns in their peoples; they are like those psychic images that expose both conscious and unconscious impulses, needs, desires, in a living culture. In that archetypes lie at the base of all religions, myths, and legends, they dramatize dimensions of understanding and feeling contained in the collective unconscious that are eternal, dating back to archaic times yet still powerful in this instance in the Finnish psyche.

Ectypal Analysis

The Roman historian Tacitus in his Germania, who first mentioned the Finns, was in reality referring to the Lapps, the country’s first inhabitants. The actual Finns began migrating to the land named after them from the Baltic areas in small tribes and clans. By the eighth century they had taken the land away from the Lapps, who were driven northward. By the year 1000, their settlements had solidified, and the national culture, which would be reflected in The Kalevala had begun to grow.

The adventures and events dramatized in The Kalevala date from 500-1300, according to Lonnrot. Other scholars, such as Julius Krohn, suggested somewhat earlier period, 400-1000. The nineteenth century romantic poets fired with feelings of national pride were convinced that The Kalevala was drawn from some remote nebulous time, probably from the Creation period.

Whatever the actual date, the situations, dramatic personas, feelings, and atmosphere possess a mythical quality, reflecting a culture and a time in history that was difficult and rigorous. Those farmers living in remote areas, spent all their lives barely eking out a living for themselves and their families; fishermen, loggers, hunters, combed the northern areas for food. Epidemics of cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, dysentery, were the rule more than the exception. During the winter, particularly in the northern regions near the Arctic Circle, long periods of darkness enveloped the land. Travel in those isolated regions when the waterways were ice-covered, was possible only by sleighs or carriages, pulled by reindeer. Fear of evil spirits haunted the people always during those darkened and depressing months. When spring came and the sun reappeared, seemingly reborn, jubilation was felt in the hearts of all, hope was renewed. Winter in the more southern regions of Finland was, of course, less harsh and extreme. Nevertheless, here, too, blinding snowstorms, frozen lakes, rivers, and canals, made communication and travel difficult.

Life in Medieval Finland like that in Northern and Central Asia focused around the shaman: he was priest, magician, healer, educator, adjudicator, and demigurge. The virtual patriarch of the tribe or clan, wisdom, transmitted from extratemporal sources, resided in him. His power stemmed in large part from his ability to communicate with spirits in the other world and perform miracles. The most important figure in The Kalevala, Vainamoinen, --hero, musician, shaper of events--is a prototypical shaman.

Shamanism, an ancient animistic religion, dated back, according to some mythologists, to 3000 B.C., and continues in certain areas of Asia today, in a mitigated form along with Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The Finns were converted to Christianity in the eleventh century; at first they practiced Catholicism, but today the majority of them are Lutherans. It is understandable, therefore, that many Christian elements are interwoven in the happenings in The Kalevala.

Shamans are looked upon not only as "Masters of Fire" but also as "Masters of Spirits." Unlike those religious groups who address their prayers to God or Gods, or invoke the saints and other holy people asking them to act as intercessors, shamans have direct domination over extra-terrestrial forces. Their effectiveness resides in their skill and knowledge of a world that lies beyond the visible sphere; it is an animistic domain, where an invisible world tinges with
life and mysterious spirits make their feelings and intentions known through happy or sorrowful events. The shamans intercede when evil spirits seek to transform an individual person or a tribe; the art, it is said, aids them in rendering certain enemy forces ineffectual or in manipulating them as they wish. Shamans thus call up spirits or demons (or former shamans) from the other world to help them heal the sick, frighten off the wicked, or divine the secrets that lie hidden in the natural world that, if known, help them perform their magical feats even more effectively. Shamans employ a variety of fascinating techniques, which can be mastered only after long periods of ascetic, self-disciplined practice.

A shaman, for example, may sit in his yurt (dwelling), staring for hours or days at the wall until he enters into a deep trance; he may chant or meditate, hallucinate, trying to evict gods and ancestors from his being. So he separates himself from the world and cures the sick. During the shaman's trance, or other parapsychological conditions, his soul is said to be able to ascend to heavenly regions or descend into infernal ones. Communication between the living and the dead can be established by the shaman because he dominates these supernatural forces and is not possessed by them. He also is able to accomplish other miraculous deeds: he can transform himself into an animal, mineral, or vegetable. Should he decide to become a horse, a rock, a flower, an insect, or his own being and assume the personality of the other entity; thus he is able to act, speak, resemble whatever persons he has invoked. The intimacy he enjoys with the supernatural forces as a result of his metamorphoses takes him back to the primitive, primal condition, an archetypal being that reenables his psyche, reinvigorates and restores what would otherwise be delimited by the difficulties involved in his temporal experience.

Shamans, so it has been reported, have been known to accomplish other astounding feats as walking upon, lying upon, or even swallowing hot coals; enduring extreme cold, cutting their flesh deeply with knives without harming themselves; levitation. Such incredible activities require arduous isolation periods which usually correspond to the occasions where shamanism is practiced, but which seem to have in every case, produced men who possessed a high degree of intelligence and insight, as well as remarkable memories and great sensitivity.

A shaman may inherit or be elected to this religious vocation. Blood line, however, not sufficient to prove one's actual calling. The signs indicating a youth's propensity for such a religious life are frequently made manifest in a youth's behavior in the world of the gods, the ancestors, the environment, and the world of the soul. He may be seen in a dream or vision,Quite often, a young boy or girl is given an assignation by an ancestor, who tells him to find a suitable guru or teacher, a shaman, who accepts the task of teaching him the way. But it is not easy to find a shaman who is willing to take on the responsibility of teaching a young person, especially if the youth is not of the shaman's tribe or clan. The shaman, therefore, must be chosen carefully, and the selection process can be quite lengthy. He must be a person of high moral character, with a deep understanding of the spiritual world, and able to communicate with the spirits and deities. Once the shaman has been chosen, the young person must undergo a series of tests and trials to prove his worthiness to be a shaman. These may include fasting, meditation, and the ability to perform miracles. Only after proving himself in these ways can the young person become a shaman.

Archetypal Analysis

1. The Creation Archetype

Creation, whether referring to the cosmogonic process, to the birth of a child or an idea, or a new psychological attitude, is both a solemn and sacred moment in life experience: when the primordial condition of wholeness or oneness is transformed into differentiated zones. In psychological terms, it may be described as the ego breaking away from the collective unconscious.
In *The Kalevala*, the creative process ushers in an archaic mode of thinking and feeling. Earth, mountains, trees, springs, seas, and land masses are personified; they vibrate with elemental life and personality, as if participating in a giant awakening. Each entity, paradoxically, experiences itself as part of the cosmos, yet retains its own energetic (manna) personality. The dual nature of this relationship arouses a sense of wonderment and excitement, and the *nunomogu*.

At the opening of *The Kalevala* an amorphous condition prevails. The Virgin of the Air, Ilmatar, a disembodied spirit of the natural world, a transhuman presence, an invisible force, has grown weary of her solitary existence. The cold and the wind of the barren region she inhabits pains her, and so do her vanity and voicelessness. A psychic image, a kind of World Soul, reminiscent of Plotinus's "un-ending All of life," seven experiences in her loneliness a painful sensation of disorientation, of a lack of identity, as though she were wasting and losing herself perpetually, irretrievably. She is deprived of some expansive force that will put an end to the stillness of her static spiritual condition. Metaphysically solitude permeates her identity-less being; it stirs feelings of dissatisfaction as well as fear.

There was a virgin, maiden of the air, lovely woman, a spirit of nature.

Long she kept her purity, ever her virginity in the spacious farmyards, on the smooth fields of the air.

In time she got bored, her life seemed strange in always being alone, living as a virgin

In the spacious farmyards, on the smooth fields of the air.

Now indeed she comes lower down, settled down on the billows, on the broad expanse of sea, on the wide open sea (p. 4).

Ilmatar's sense of alienation increases, causing her a kind of overwhelming panic. Her inability to alter her condition, to transform her barren state into a fecund one, causes chaos within her, a condition that manifests itself as a catalytic force. Such tumult is important in that it fosters in the Virgin of the Air, a climate conducive to the creative process.

Virginity, such as Ilmatar's, has a negative connotation. Not yet a *spiritus creator*, the Virgin of the Air is but a wandering disembodied spirit; she longs to become incarnate, to leave the infinite and solitary expanse which is her home. To find another being would, she feels, transform her abstract formless spirit into a living reality. As an idea or vision seeks incarnation in the work of art, as a solitary persona yearns for companionship and communication, so does the Virgin of the Air decide to mingle with the moisture of life—the sea beneath her. She slips into the water, so many poets have crept into some responsive space/time continuum and that Thales of Miletus, considered the first original substance on which the earth rests and of which all else is made, and psychologists identify with the amniotic fluid which surrounds and protects the fetus in its mother's womb and can become a "living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Analogous was written of a "whirlwind" that created the world from itself. It is the wind/spirit that injects energy into inert matter, that fomenters movement. Similarly, we may say that an idea, when activated, propels the mind, injecting thought and also as with increased momentum, allowing an idea to snowball, to acquire density and force, as it makes its way into existence.

There came a great blast of wind, a severe weather from the east... The wind kept rocking the girl... The wind blew her pregnant... She carried a hard wind, a stiff bellyful for her seventeen years" (p. 5). Wind, frequently regarded as divine spirit (*nous, pneuma*) is looked upon in Genesis as a creative force: when God "breathed into his (Adam) nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Anaxagoras wrote of a "whirlwind" that created the world from itself. It is the wind/spirit that injects energy into inert matter, that fomenters movement. Similarly, we may say that an idea, when activated, propels the mind, injecting thought and also as with increased momentum, allowing an idea to snowball, to acquire density and force, as it makes its way into existence.

A tempest rages. Its fury turns the Virgin of the Air around and around in the waves, causing foam to whiten the horizon. Such an image is not only reminiscent once again of the Creation story in Genesis, when the Spirit of God covered the waters, but also of Aphrodite born from the foam of the sea as related by Hesiod in his *Theogony* of the Ved hymn, when Yavu moved over the waters inspiring cosmic creativity with each of his breaths. Such an event, symbolized in *The Kalevala*, by the storm of divine, psychic, and poetic origin, disturbs the established cosmic rhythm and balance, preparing the way for a new center of gravity, impelling fresh attitudes and orientations.

The fetus just conceived, remains within the Virgin of the Air for seven hundred years. It must be noted that in myths time is not measured by historical, chronological, or, at times, even by eternal concepts. There is time, therefore, no beginning or end; time bathes in a limitless and spaceless sphere. Such an expanse is impossible to measure or experience in an intellectual frame of reference. That the Virgin of the Air does not give birth for so long indicates that the child she would bear still needs to be protected and was not yet ready to withstand the rigors of the outside world. Nevertheless, dangers beset all phases of life. Should her pregnancy continue too long, the fetus could experience a condition of stasis; worse, it could rot, disintegrate and then fall back into the primal matrix. As long as the womb/unconscious does not communicate the fruit of its inner processes to the outside/conscious world, the living being does not emerge; the idea remains water-logged, the psyche, egoless.

The Virgin of the Air is assailed with torment. She regrets ever having allowed herself to be impregnated, longing for her lonely airborne state to the freedom and sameness of her present condition. As she roams about in the endless waters, a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy overwhelms her. She fears a stillbirth in the same way an artist does an unfinished or imperfect work. Depression is not known in the individual who brings forth the new and untried. Frequently, when on the verge of completing a magnum opus, a dull descends upon the artist or writer, a sense of depression permeates the creative individual, just prior to the moment when creative energy is kindled in the active fields, when the idea is about to erupt into consciousness. It is as if the unconscious senses the future loss of what has belonged to it alone.

In desperation, the Virgin of the Air calls to Ukko, the heavenly God, the luminous father. This living being, considered a universal fructifier—because he is the source of unlimited energy, radiates through and in every particle of nature. As Omniscient and omnipotent, he may be looked upon as that Creative Breath, that sustaining breath which gives impetus to life. The representative of infinite wisdom, he is empowered to regulate, order, and guide unlimited and inaccessible expanses. He hears the supplications of the Virgin of the Air as they resound in soundless waves through the universe.

Time passes. A goldeneye, a type of wild duck, flies above the waters, seeking a place to nest. The Virgin of the Air raises her knee from beneath the sea. When the bird sees this smooth surface, he decides it is the perfect place to incubate his young. He alights on it, the eggs are then formed and warmed.

Like the Paraclete, the intercessor for the Virgin Mary, so the bird—a psychic soul force, a bridge between Ukko and water, a messenger aiding in the transformation process—is instrumental in giving body to spirit, material form to the amorphous condition. Symbolic of a superior state in the hierarchy of being, the bird—a totem—is a paradigm for spiritual realization, as can be seen in the drawings of birds as soul bearers in the Lascaux caves; and as mystical soul forces in Parid al-din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*.

That the bird should have chosen the knee—a part of the body that is referred to a number of times in *The Kalevala* as its resting place, is also significant. A connecting physical link between the upper and lower parts of the leg, it is the leg that enables us to get to our feet and walk, to carry out a willed idea. Insofar as the Virgin of the Air is concerned, the knee makes it possible for her to
realize her potential, to nurture a new element both passively and actively.

As the eggs take on warmth, the Virgin of the Air suddenly feels herself burning, her "sinews" melting, "her skin scorched" (p. 6). The fire of creation has heightened the intensity of her emotions. Love begins flaming within her; motion takes on energy. She has vanished and is giving way to multiplicity, diversity—the future earthborn state. The birth process in general has often been compared to an ordeal by fire; Siva created the world with fire; Brahma is identified with fire; the phoenix is reborn from its ashes; the Holy Ghost appeared to the Apostles as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3-4). Since shamans experience the flame of mystical heat during their moments of magical ecstasy, it is not surprising that the Virgin of the Air should also feel burning sensations. As life grows within her, she is involved in the transformative process: the child as an earth/water. While she continues to swim in the vast expanses of water, she forms coasts, bays, reefs, islands, and mountains, giving birth, so to speak, to myriad facets in the form of earthly configurations.

Humankind has yet to come into existence; it remains an illusion, a spiritual force buried deeply within the womb of the Virgin of the Air. For another thirty summers and thirty winters, the gestation period will pursue its course. The Virgin of the Air swells here and there, always hoping that the treasure contained within her will emerge. Not until the fascia sun ends, however, not until the fruit of the womb has grown sufficiently strong to become weary of its inner existence will it emerge from the dark of cosmic existence.

The archetype of emerge in The Kalevala may be considered a paradigm of exogamy: the ego can no longer be repressed and seeks as best it can to free itself from the unconscious, to sever itself from the uterine waters—what metaphorically speaking is an incestuous existence. Within the mother's womb, Vainamoinen, the prototypical man of wisdom, begins to reflect upon his condition. He wonders how long he can endure this "dark hiding place," this "cramped dwelling where I never saw the moon nor spilled the sun" (p. 7). He grows impatient and longs for the outer world for the freedom to live and grow independently. He beseeches the moon and the sun to set his free, to "Escort the traveler to land" (p. 7). No outside force, however, comes to his aid. He alone must strive, seek, fight, and gain his own freedom. To struggle for the birth of self-government is a lonely affair. Life death, it is a voyage a rite de passage that must be undertaken singlehanded. It is in the very provoked by the ordeal itself, that inner strength is gained, that fortitude comes into being.

Vainamoinen has been already been endowed with a certain cast of character: he ponders, he reflects, he thinks before he acts. To extricate himself from his imprisonment, he uses his four fingers of his right hand regarded by the ancients as an important factor in divinification—his left toe to move "the gate of the fort," to turn "the bony lock." The metaphor of the Virgin of the Air's womb being a "fort" and "lock" indicates the force with which Vainamoinen must struggle. He will stop at nothing. Should his finger and toe not help him, his nails will serve him. He will use them to cut his way out of the "threshold" and his knees to give him leverage. He cuts, rips, tears at the flesh, using every instrument at his disposal to create a large enough birth passage. An accumulation of energy enables him to propel himself outward in one final thrust.

Vainamoinen "plunged straight into the sea," then surfaces and makes his way to treeless land. In joy and ecstasy he gazes at the Moon, the Sun, the Great Bear and other constellations. The "stout-hearted singer" (p. 7), as he will be known, understands that his connection with the Virgin of the Air has ended. His mother gave him life. It is he alone who must heroically shape his own fate, his own essence, his individuality, thus becoming the prototype of future generations will look up to as leader and wise man. He felt the strength to fulfill what he already knew to be his mission.

Vainamoinen, primordial man and future shaman/poet is unique among culture heroes in that he is already born old. A senex figure who had lived for so many years within his mother's womb, he emerges as a patriarch in every sense of the word: magician and worker of miracles. Throughout The Kalevala he is alluded to as "steadfast," as "an eternal sage," as "reflective." He is logos, reason, the Word made flesh, verbalized thought, characterization that presuppose inner awareness. A reflective and meditative being, Vainamoinen will not act rashly as long as reason directs his way. A creative force, a poet and rune singer who accompanies himself on the kantele, he is reminiscent of Orpheus. Stones stir to his music, the grass, flowers, trees, bend to his harmonies. Filling the universe with song, Vainamoinen holds nature in thrall.

Vainamoinen possesses vast powers, as do many culture heroes. Through his mother has autonomy over the forces of the air (ancestral spirits, demons); the birds, instrumental in his birth, have endowed him with spiritual attributes, strength and courage; the sun and moon will free, to "Escort the traveler to land" (p. 7). No outside force, however, comes to his aid. He alone must strive, seek, fight, and gain his own freedom. To struggle for the birth of self-government is a lonely affair. Like death, it is a voyage a rite de passage that must be undertaken singlehanded. It is in the very provoked by the ordeal itself, that inner strength is gained, that fortitude comes into being.

Footnotes

2. Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries, pp. 42-44.
5. Ibid., p. 60.
8. Elias Lönnrot, The Kalevala. Translated by Francis P. Magoun, Jr. Because of the length of The Kalevala certain episodes have been omitted from this analysis.