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Abstract

A Jungian interpretation of the Irish mythological cycle featuring the hero Cuchulainn, with particular attention to the prominent role of women.

Additional Keywords

Cuchulainn; Irish mythology—Red Branch cycle; Jungian analysis of Irish mythology; Women in Irish mythology

CUCHULAINN AND WOMEN

A JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE

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part from the poetry of Yeats and others associated with the "Celtic Twilight" movement, there are very few references to Irish mythology in modern literature, and little is known about it. Although the sagas are sophisticated and intricate, they seem to have been overshadowed by the Arthurian romances, a later development in Celtic mythology. The translation of the tales of Arthur and his court into French, and subsequently into English, made them infinitely more accessible and popular in the Middle Ages. English hostility to Irish language and culture and the systematic effort to deprive the native population of higher education prevented the study of the Irish myths for centuries, and resulted in their being virtually lost. Only in the past hundred years or so have the ancient stories been revived and studied. Consequently, these myths have been largely ignored in modern, international approaches to mythology and psychology.

The significance of mythology and its connection with psychology was established by Carl Jung, who viewed the characters of the myths as archetypes, images from the deepest part of the subconscious which possess a numinous character. These images can unconsciously influence the thought, emotion and behavior of the individual and thus have a shaping effect on his future (Gose 39-40). Jung suggests that each person has originally a feeling of wholeness, a strong, complete sense of self, and it is from this self, or totality of the psyche, that "the individualized ego-consciousness emerges as the individual grows up" (Henderson 128). This psychological process of individuation, of becoming one's mature self, begins at birth with the separation from the mother, and the consciousness is further developed by encounters with the world (Emma Jung 85). Emma Jung notes that the development and preservation of the ego-consciousness is such a difficult achievement that it is best represented by the hero myth, for it can be compared with the fight with the terrible adversary, such as a dragon, which calls for "almost superhuman strength" (43). These stories may vary in detail, but they have a basic structure and appeal on both the dramatic and psychological levels, and provide the young person with an ideal to encourage and support him in the battle for individuation (Henderson 110). It is not surprising, then, that the hero myth is the best-known of all the myths and recurs in the legends and dreams in all societies. It is the symbolic means by which the emerging ego separates itself from the parental images of early childhood, and may be seen as corresponding to the first stages in the

differentiation of the psyche (Henderson 128-129).

Just as the hero must do battle with fearsome monsters and must accept daunting challenges, the individual must confront two archetypal figures, the shadow and the anima, in his own subconscious. The shadow is often defined as being the dark, repressed, negative qualities of the unconscious mind, the hidden aspects of the ego which must be integrated into the personality. Not all aspects of the shadow are negative, however; qualities such as natural instincts and affections may be used in a positive way. The anima is generally viewed as being the contrasexual self. In the hero's case this is his lady-soul, the feminine aspect of his personality; it is the idealized male for the heroine, often with masculine aspects of aggression. In psychological terms the anima represents the female component which has usually been involuntarily repressed, but which must be recognized and acknowledged in the quest for wholeness (Gose 131). The hero's early battles might be seen to parallel the individual's confrontation with the shadow aspect of his personality, and the quest for the beautiful woman as representing his search for the anima. It should be noted that there is a good deal of ambivalence about the anima. Ideally it functions as a helper or guide, as in the case of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy* or of the princess who helps her rescuer, but it may also suggest the mother who nurtures, the beautiful *femme fatale*, or the witch who seeks the hero's downfall (Gose 131).

The Red Branch Cycle, the most significant of the Irish sagas, demonstrates the psychological parallels suggested by Jung in a particularly interesting way. Cuchulainn, the hero, is presented as having superior battle skills, great courage, loyalty, and honor, but the saga is exceptional in the prominence given to women throughout his life. Unlike the typical hero who is presented almost exclusively as a man among men, he is involved with women on various levels, and is significantly affected by them, both as warrior and lover. His interaction with them demonstrates the Jungian interpretation of the hero myth, but with a somewhat different slant. Cuchulainn performs the requisite quest in search of the desired woman, corresponding to the individual's search for the anima, but many of his martial exploits are confrontations with such aggressive, violent women that these encounters suggest the shadow aspect of the personality rather than that of the anima. On the historical level the negative presentation of powerful women may have had a cautionary function. Rank in Celtic society was determined by ownership of

cattle, and a woman who was wealthier than her husband was automatically his superior — a situation which is central in this saga, and which brings about the death of the hero.

Like that of most heroes, Cúchulainn's birth is surrounded by mystery: he is apparently the son of the powerful god Lugh Lamhfada and Dechtire, the king's sister. From birth he seems destined to be a great warrior, and as a child of seven he succeeds in defeating the entire boy corps of the king. His name, Setanta, is changed to Cúchulainn (the hound of Culann) because he kills the fierce hound (cu) of Culann, then takes the place of the animal in guarding the blacksmith's stronghold until a substitute can be trained. His initiation proper, however, begins on the day on which he takes up arms. When he hears the druid, Cathbad, tell the older boys that one who becomes a warrior on that particular day will have a glorious career, but a short one, he promptly asks the king to invest him, not telling him of the prophecy. His first exploit is suitably spectacular, as he kills all three of the sons of Nechta, sworn enemies of the king, and ties their heads to his chariot. He further adorns his chariot for his triumphal return by tying two live deer behind it and having a flock of captured swans flying overhead. In most stories the hero is simply received with acclaim following his first feat of arms, but there is a unique twist to this account which seems particularly Jungian. Initiation rites, which confer the status of maturity, frequently have a sexual component, and this awareness of sexuality seems to be a necessary part of the individual's encounter with the shadow. As Cúchulainn approaches the king's encampment the people realize that he is in a battle fury and is unable to distinguish friend from foe, so all are in danger of being slaughtered by the invincible hero. The resourceful queen, knowing of the boy's modesty, tells her women to go out naked to greet him. His momentary confusion allows the warriors to capture him and to restrain him until a succession of cold baths brings him to a calmer state. The necessity of controlling arbitrary violence seems to suggest a negative aspect of the shadow, the danger of uncontrolled instinct over reason. Unless the hero can channel this energy he is as dangerous as the enemies from whom he wishes to protect his people. The hero's encounter with the naked ladies — and his apparent evasion of it — suggests the initial inability of the young person to deal with sexuality.

Cúchulainn's training continues in Scotland under the tutelage of some warrior women, and again it seems clear that they represent the shadow rather than the anima. At the suggestion of Forgall the Wily, who wishes to separate Cúchulainn from Emer, his daughter, the king sends Cúchulainn to study with Scathach, the famous woman warrior. The arduous journey to the north of Scotland symbolizes the journey into the unconscious, and, significantly, the name "Scathach" itself means "shadow." Entering Scathach's stronghold is no mean feat, but Cúchulainn succeeds in killing the guard and winning the confidence of Uathach, Scathach's daughter. She tells him he must

take her mother by surprise and threaten to kill her unless she complies with three requests: she must train him, prophesy his future, and give him Uathach in marriage. Using his "great salmon leap" the hero captures Scathach in the tree from which she is supervising the training of young warriors and she agrees to his demands. By this time he has apparently overcome his earlier shyness, and the saga records that eventually she gave him "the friendship of her thighs." This account of the union of the hero and the female warrior in the course of his initiation suggests the relationship of the warrior with his weapons, a kind of marriage relationship. The subduing of the female warrior and sexual consummation seems to symbolize the individual's control of the sexual aspects of his shadow on the psychological level.

Although most hero stories present the encounter with the shadow in descriptions of battle with enemies of the same sex, it seems clear that the Scathach episode fits in the this category. Cúchulainn's initial danger from Scathach and her warriors, and his subsequent benefit from her tutelage, parallels the idea that positive aspects may be found in the shadow dimension of the unconscious, and that becoming aware of these and learning to channel them appropriately enriches the individual. The connection of strife and sex is continued in the account of Cúchulainn's battle with the warrior princess, Aoife, who must not only surrender to him sexually, but must promise that the son born of their union will be sent to Ireland when he is old enough. Again, rather than demonstrating a negative anima, this account seems to suggest an immature fear of sexuality, a part of the shadow, which must be overcome in the quest for wholeness.

Having proved himself in battle Cúchulainn returns to Ireland to claim Emer as his bride. According to the convention he must face great peril to accomplish this, and this challenge is generally seen to parallel the individual's search for his woman-soul, the feminine aspect of his personality. When he had approached Emer initially she has teased him about his youth, his short stature, and his lack of reputation. This suggests that the young person in search of self may also be mocked, and may expect scorn for his ambition. Even the great Cúchulainn is not always successful: in an exploit early in his career he had suffered the ignominy of having his head shaved and smeared with dung by an opponent.

A typical heroine of mythology, Emer has laid down three specific tasks which must be accomplished by Cúchulainn if he wishes to win her. Alwyn Rees comments on the fact that the bride in hero tales is the embodiment of all that is good, beautiful, and feminine in women, but she is other-worldly, and the hero must negotiate the gulf that separates her from him (Rees 265). Emer is the most beautiful and highly-skilled girl in Ireland, and thus personifies the feminine aspect or anima of Cúchulainn's personality, but the conditions she sets indicate the dark, masculine structure of her animus, her masculine self. She

is willing to help her beloved in overcoming obstacles, but she stubbornly refuses to be abducted until all of her conditions have been met. This is certainly not out of loyalty to her father, who objects to Cuchulainn as a suitor, for she views Forgall's death in the course of the conflict with a remarkable lack of concern.

Another personification of the anima is that of the otherworldly mistress who entices the hero to return with her to the land beyond the sea or underneath the earth, thus abandoning his ambitions as a warrior. In Irish mythology the other world, the land of the Si (she) is historically and predominantly feminine. The dwellings of these fairy people are often surrounded by water, swamps, or damp forests, suggesting the feminine. The hero's making love to the beautiful woman is significant, for the sex act "represents both birth in reverse and an unconscious enactment of the desire to return to dampness...so the desire of the hero who rushes into the quest for the submerged princess reflects the desire to return to the womb" (Markhale 72). This also suggests a return to the unconscious, for this journey and the exploring of the contents of the unconscious "is often depicted in dreams and fantasies as a descent into the underworld, and this motif also frequently recurs as one of the typical deeds or tasks of the hero" (Emma Jung 68). Jung tends to be negative about the longing for the unconscious, seeing it as a regression, but others note that there may be positive aspects, as it can "point to an abundance of symbolic material which indicates a concealed urge to rebirth and transformation of personality" (Emma Jung 40-41). This ambivalence is strikingly demonstrated in the account of Cuchulainn and Fand, his other-worldly mistress. Despite her love for him, there is no doubt about Fand's power over Cuchulainn, even before he becomes aware of her. He inadvertently provokes her wrath by attempting to capture two bright birds for Emer, not knowing that Fand and her sister-in-law, Li-Ban, have assumed these shapes in order to approach him and ask for help against enemies beneath the lake. When he injures one of the birds they both fly into the lake, and Cuchulainn sits by a pillar to rest. He dreams that two beautiful women beat him with whips, and when he awakes he is so debilitated that he must be carried to bed, where he remains for a year. On the anniversary of his encounter he receives a message to return to the lake, and there he meets Li-Ban. She explains to him that he has been punished for his violence, but that Fand still loves him and wishes him to aid her brother in fighting their enemies beneath the lake. He consents, and after he is victorious he is so besotted by Fand that he promises to remain with her forever. He returns to earth with the intention of bidding his people farewell, telling Fand he will meet her at the end of one month, but Emer intervenes and Cuchulainn, torn by his love for Fand and his loyalty to Emer, elects to stay on earth. The heart-broken Fand returns to the underworld and the disconsolate Cuchulainn wanders around in a daze. The druids finally intervene and mix up a potion which will make him forget Fand

and will enable Emer to overcome her jealousy and bitterness. In psychological terms Cuchulainn's desire to remain with Fand is a regressive tendency, a renunciation of his destiny. To become immersed in the anima is dangerous, as it prevents the person from engaging in further struggle for individuation.

Queen Maeve, who ultimately brings about the death of Cuchulainn, is the most powerful, aggressive — and sexy — woman in Irish mythology. She is also the impetus for his most heroic deeds, challenging him to such ventures that he is assured him of lasting fame. It might be argued that Maeve represents aspects of the shadow rather than the anima, for the qualities which she projects, such as the urge to wanton violence and an inflexible will to dominate, are qualities which Cuchulainn had learned to control during his initiation period, but which surface again in his defense of Ulster against Maeve. 10 On the historical level the account of Maeve's campaign and its disastrous results might be interpreted as a criticism of Celtic society, demonstrating the danger of allowing women to be in control. On the psychological level the victory of the hero symbolizes the successful completion of individuation.

The story of the Táin Bo Cuailgne, or cattle raid of Cooley, begins innocuously enough with some playful pillow talk between Maeve and Ailill, her husband. Much to her chagrin he claims authority over her, on the legal ground that he has more wealth. She disputes this, and they engage in a lengthy inventory which shows that they are almost equal in possessions. Much to his delight, Ailill is shown to possess a prize bull which is superior to any of Maeve's beasts. Unwilling to accept a subordinate position, the imperious Maeve demands to borrow the brown bull of Cooley, in Ulster, for breeding purposes. When this request is refused she determines to take the bull by force. She is confident of victory, for it is well known that the Ulster warriors are cursed, and are afflicted with labor pains in any time of crisis. An interesting role reversal is described in this passage, for Maeve is the warrior, and her opponents are engaged in the most womanly of debilities. Unfortunately for Maeve, Cuchulainn does not share in the general affliction, possibly because of his father's other-worldly origin. Since he alone is responsible for defending the territory until his compatriots recover, he convinces Maeve to allow him to engage in single combat with the best of her warriors. She watches in rage and regret as they are handily despatched, one after the other. The most poignant account, and the one which reflects badly on Cuchulainn, is that of the battle with his childhood friend and foster brother, Ferdia. They fight fiercely, albeit reluctantly, each day, and at sunset renew their friendship and share their food and medicine. Finally, wearied of the combat, Cuchulainn releases the dreaded *gae bolga*, a magical weapon which unerringly destroys its victim. Ferdia dies in excruciating pain, and the grieving Cuchulainn is humiliated by his use of an unfair stratagem. This incident suggests that he has reverted to the

wanton violence and the dishonorable desire to win at any cost typical of his shadow, or it may be interpreted as his giving in to his negative anima, as projected by Maeve. Since time is running out and reinforcements will soon arrive to assist Cuchulainn, Maeve enlists the aid of the witch-like daughters of Calatin, his sworn enemies. Through their machinations and magic he is lured into battle, despite a series of bad omens, and is finally left unarmed, mortally wounded. There is a tragic nobility in the account of the death of Cuchulainn, for he knows going into battle that this is the day of his death, and his only concern is for his honor. A warrior to the end, he refuses to lie down to die, but lashes himself to a pillar and expires standing. Even in death he is so fearsome that no one dare approach until one of the daughters of Calatin, in the form of a raven, perches on his shoulder. When the Ulster men arrive and find their hero in this condition they honor him and they avenge him by routing the forces of Queen Maeve.

Despite his early death Cuchulainn has attained his life's ambition in winning a name for himself as a great hero. Jung sees the early death of the hero as being appropriate, since he represents the early part of man's life. The struggle of the ego to become separate from the unconscious is expressed by the battle of the archetypal hero against all the challenges he encounters:

In the struggle of primitive man to achieve consciousness, this conflict is expressed by the contest between the archetypal hero and the cosmic powers of evil, personified by dragons and other monsters. In the developing consciousness of the individual the hero-figure is the symbolic means by which the emerging ego overcomes the inertia of the unconscious and liberates the mature man from the regressive longing to return to the blissful state of infancy in a world dominated by the mother. (Henderson 118)

Once the individual has accomplished the early stages of individuation by symbolically confronting the shadow and recognizing the anima aspect of his unconscious, he can enter the mature phase. At this point the hero myth loses relevance for him, and "the hero's symbolic death becomes, as it were, the achievement of maturity" (Henderson 172).

The Jungian interpretation of the hero sagas helps to explain their popularity. Apart from the obvious dramatic appeal, they are of profound psychological importance in providing a model for psychic development, and thus have an attraction for women as well as men. The exploits of the hero correspond to the first stage in the differentiation of the psyche, the integration of aspects of the shadow and of the anima. Unless the individual succeeds in achieving some degree of autonomy at this point he will be unable to relate to his adult environment (Henderson 129). Unlike the typical pattern in which women characters are presented as either the damsel in distress or the aged helper, the Red Branch Cycle presents strong, independent women. Their prominence and atypical behavior

raises some tantalizing questions in regard to Jung's concept of the archetypes of shadow and anima, and demonstrates the difficulty of seeing neat parallels between the stages in the process of individuation and the adventures of a particular hero. ♀

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