

## Humanity Remembers: On Jung, Mythological Criticism and Archetypes

Carolina Gimenez<sup>5</sup>

Novel researcher

✉ macaro1999@hotmail.com

Recibido: 20/5/2020

Aprobado: 5/9/2020

**Abstract:** The influence of mythological criticism can still be felt in such popular contemporary works such as the *Star Wars* saga, but the scope of its influence is not limited only to science-fiction movies. As a result of a strong connection between mythological criticism, anthropology and psychology, certain authors from all of these fields have introduced key concepts relevant to the analysis of a variety of literary genres. In this article, some of these concepts will be explored, including Jung's "collective unconscious", "archetypes" and "individuation", Frye's "archetypes", "mythoi" and "monomyth", and Campbell's "Hero's Journey". Thanks to the analysis of these notions, it is clear that, although not necessarily present in every work of fiction created, mythological criticism constitutes a valuable field that may serve as a theoretical framework for literary and media analysis.

**Key words:** myth, collective unconscious, archetype, Hero's Journey, psychology, Jung, Frye, anthropology.

**Resumen:** Todavía se puede apreciar la influencia de la crítica mitológica en obras contemporáneas y populares tales como la saga de películas de *Star Wars*. Sin embargo, su campo de influencia no se limita a películas de ciencia ficción. Como consecuencia de una fuerte conexión entre crítica mitológica, antropología y psicología, ciertos autores de estas disciplinas han introducido conceptos clave que son relevantes para el análisis de una amplia gama de géneros literarios. En este artículo, algunos de estos conceptos van a ser explorados, incluyendo el "inconsciente colectivo", la "individuación" y los "arquetipos" de Jung, los "arquetipos", el "mythoi" y el "monomito" de Frye, y el "Viaje del Héroe" de Campbell. Gracias al análisis de estas nociones, se evidencia que, aunque no necesariamente esté presente en todas las obras ficticias, la crítica mitológica constituye una disciplina valorable que puede funcionar como marco teórico para el análisis de literatura y medios audiovisuales.

**Palabras clave:** mito, inconsciente colectivo, arquetipo, Viaje del Héroe, psicología, Jung, Frye, antropología.

---

<sup>5</sup> **Carolina Gimenez** is a last-year student of the BA in English (*Licenciatura en Inglés*) at Universidad Católica Argentina. She has taken courses at the Department for Continuing Education of Oxford University, including: Writing Fiction for Young Adults (2018); Advanced Creative Writing (2019); Greek Mythology (2020).

## **Introduction**

Myths have always been a part of our lives: they are present sometimes in movies, in television shows, in the books we read. They are introduced to us during our schooling, generally when we study the Classical cultures of Greece and Rome. If one happens to study psychology even in its most basic form, *Oedipus Rex* will likely be mentioned. One need not look further than the *Star Wars* saga to find examples of how mythical structure has influenced our society.

However, it is not common for those who consume these products to understand where they come from, much less to comprehend that there is a wealth of critical analyses of literature that, conjoined with other disciplines like anthropology and psychology, sets out to acquire a deep understanding of why and how mythological stories are such an enormous part of our culture.

This article will narrate briefly the journey that mythological or archetypal criticism has embarked on, focusing particularly on two of its pioneering authors: Carl Jung and Northrop Frye. Although they belong to different branches of the humanities, both have provided important accounts of this type of criticism, aided by their specific brand of knowledge; Jung, for instance, was deeply influenced by his experience as a psychiatrist and as a pupil of Freud (Dobie, 2012).

In the first place, what myth criticism actually is will be established, so as to give a theoretical framework to this article, followed by a description of the main elements that comprise the theory of Jung and Frye. In the case of the former, special attention will be given to his concepts of ‘collective unconscious,’ archetypes, individuation and to the tripartite idea of ‘shadow, anima, and persona.’ On the other hand, Frye will serve as an introduction not only to another way of conceiving archetypes, but also to the mythoi that will give rise to the idea of a monomyth.

The aim is to give the reader a sense of how this type of analysis works, and why it exists. Furthermore, this analysis attempts to explain succinctly how fundamental it is to understand the incidence of myth in literature, for without that knowledge we may never

be able to fully grasp the message or the main thematic concerns that are part of so many of our most iconic stories.

### **Myth Theory and Criticism: What is it?**

As Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) state, myth (from Greek *mythos*, which means ‘tale,’ ‘story’) criticism encompasses several forms of inquiry about the relationship between myth and literature, and as these inquiries are oftentimes quite varied it may be easier to think of myth criticism in terms of a series of possible questions we can ask ourselves: “Is all literature susceptible of myth criticism? (...) Does a single governing myth, a ‘monomyth,’ organise disparate mythic narratives and dominate literary form? (...) [W]hat does ‘myth’ mean in the context of literary criticism?” (Groden and Kreiswirth, 1997, p. 1). The answers to these questions are the main criteria for understanding what type of mythological criticism we are dealing with.

For example, Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) explain that a Romantic and post-Romantic tendency is to deny euhemerism, which is the theory that myths can be explained through history or by “identifying their special objects or motives” (Groden and Kreiswirth, 1997, p. 2). In response to this reductionist claim, philosopher Ernst Cassirer proposed that “myth is a form of thought” (Groden and Kreiswirth, 1997, p. 2). What Cassirer means, according to the aforementioned authors, is that myth is a “symbolic form” very similar to language as a means of responding and, in a manner, creating our world. However, unlike language, myth is generally imagistic and non-discursive, since it is the honest, unmediated language of experience.

There are two other non-reductionist theories that come from the fields of anthropology and psychology which are introduced by Groden and Kreiswirth (1997). The former belongs to Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (Groden and Kreiswirth, 1997, p. 4), a claim that leads Lévi-Strauss to the notion that the structure of myths is akin to that of the human mind. Consequently, Groden and Kreiswirth claim (1997), the mythopoeic (mythmaking) imagination finds its mirror image in the structure of actual myths.

Unfortunately, the very nature of his argument has made it difficult for literary critics to use his concepts sustainably.

The other theorist, this time from the field of psychology, that was mentioned above is Carl Jung. His most influential idea for this type of criticism is that of the ‘collective unconscious’ (which will be further developed later on), a racial memory that consists of archetypes. In it, we can find several expressions of the idea of archetype: the wise old man, the divine child, the sacrificial death, the cross, the number four. All of these elements have, according to research carried out by Jung and others and analysed by Groden and Kreiswirth (1997), become a primordial part in the mythical constructions of different cultures.

According to Groden and Kreiswirth (1997), another relevant figure is Northrop Frye, a myth critic and literary critic who suggests a way to draw individual and seemingly unrelated archetypes into a hierarchical and coherent framework of what he calls *mythoi*, organising the entire system that is literature. Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) quote Frye so as to showcase that he attributes certain characteristics to the mythic mode such as being abstract and conventionalised. As Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) explain, Western literature has been founded on biblical and classical myths, and as a result of this, it can be thought of as preserving coherent structural principles. If one takes all this into account, the concept of a central myth, a ‘monomyth’ as Frye calls it, according to Groden and Kreiswirth (1997), is a logical conclusion, however disputed this idea may be. For this particular literary critic the central myth of literature is the ‘quest-myth,’ as Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) claim.

Finally, other authors have also put forward their own ideas. One such academic is C. L. Barber, who has “explored the ways Shakespearean comedy achieves a characteristic ‘release’ leading to social clarification; this release is related in turn to a (...) mythic conception of human life (...)” (Groden and Kreiswirth, 1997, p. 10). In recent times, meanwhile, René Girard is introduced by Groden and Kreiswirth (1997) as somebody who has started to investigate the meaningful cultural role of ritual sacrifice in relation to myths, especially those from Greek tragedy.

Although myth theory and criticism does not enjoy the same level of notoriety as it used to, its legacy is undeniable. And as long as its theorists can answer the questions posed at the beginning of this section and can form connections between this discipline and others, then myth criticism, much like myths themselves, cannot die. Currently, perhaps where it is seen most often is in discussions about certain fantastical works framed within the concept of ‘The Hero’s Journey,’ a concept that will be explained at the end of this article for it is the most widespread legacy that myth criticism has.

### **Carl Jung: Collective Unconscious and Individuation**

Carl Jung (1875-1961) began his career as a student of Freud, a revolutionary when it came to psychological and, eventually, psychoanalytical matters. In spite of this early apprenticeship, Jung went on to forge a separate path from his mentor and to build on the latter’s teachings in ways that made him as significant as Freud was.

Like Freud, Jung believed that our unconscious mind dictates much of our behaviour, but unlike Freud, he also asserted that a part of our unconscious is shared with other members of the human species. Thus, he described the human mind as composed of three parts: a personal conscious, “a state of awareness of the present moment that, once it is past, becomes part of the individual’s unique **personal unconscious**” (Dobie, 2012, p.62). Beneath them is the collective unconscious, one of the key concepts in Jungian theory. Dobie (2012) described the collective unconscious as a store of images, knowledge and experience belonging to the whole of the human race, which is often expressed through rituals and myths.

Another key idea that we have inherited from Jung (although he is not the only author to define this term) is that of the archetype, which Jung defines as “universal images that have existed since remotest times,” and as “a figure (...) that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested” (Dobie, 2012, p.62). These archetypes, Dobie (2012) clarifies, are not culturally acquired, but are an instinctual part of ourselves, which remains hidden in our biological, social and psychological natures. Myths, as defined by Jung are “the natural and indispensable intermediate stage between unconscious and conscious cognition” (Dobie, 2012, p.63). Dobie (2012) continues the

interpretation of this quotation to present the idea that when we mediate these two parts of our mind, we become complete; archetypes and myths enable us to do so, to transform what is unconscious into conscious. What is more, in order to live in true harmony, Jung believes we must face three powerful archetypes which form the self: the *shadow*, the *anima* and the *persona* (Dobie). The first is our dark side, those parts of our being that we try to hide and avoid because they are the sides of our self that we dislike. In literature, it is expressed through the figure of the villain. The *anima*, meanwhile, is the “soul-image, the life force that causes one to act” (Dobie, 2012, p.63). Lastly, the *persona* is the image that we present to the rest of the world, the mask we wear in front of others.

To become psychologically healthy people, Dobie (2012) explains while discussing Jungian theory, we ought to come to terms with all the parts of ourselves, even those we do not like so much. Only in this way can individuation occur. According to Jones and Kalsched (1986), this last term is one that Jung utilises to refer to stages of the life drama that are usually present in the Hero myth. The archetypal images that appear here go from “an initial state of unconsciousness before the ego has awakened, through various stages of heroic struggle, to a final state of ‘wholeness’ (...) when (...) a relationship between the human and divine has been reestablished” (Jones and Kalsched, 1986, p. 4). Basically, through the process of individuation, we become who we really are, who we are meant to be. As Jones and Kalsched state, this represents the archetype of order that Jung calls the Self. There are several symbols in literature that stand for this unity between the human and the divine, between life and death, light and darkness, as enumerated by Jones and Kalsched (1986): the promise, the Ring, the Flaming Rainbow Bridge, a marriage, the elixir of immortality, and the divine child. In addition to this, and according to these two authors who study Jung’s theory, the Hero is also a dual entity: he is human, but at the same time he is an outsider; sometimes the hero has two fathers –one normal, and another ‘higher’ or their conception was of divine origin. He also usually possesses special powers.

Finally, here is a brief list of the main archetypes and symbolic images that Jung identified in literature, as classified in Dobie (2012), subdivided according to category. These evoke similar psychological responses across a range of widely diverse cultures:

- Characters
  - The Hero: He is usually set apart by a birth filled with strange circumstances, an early escape from murder attempts, “(...) or a return to his homeland where, after a victory over some antagonist, he marries a princess, assumes the throne, and only later falls victim to a fate” (Dobie, 2012, p. 64) that may include banishment, a mysterious death and an ambiguous burial. The Hero’s story may also involve a quest in search of a powerful artefact, or the goal of solving a complex riddle.
  - The Outcast: “a character who is thrown out of the community as punishment for a crime against it” (Dobie, 2012, p.64). His fate is “(...) to wander throughout eternity” (Dobie, 2012, p.64).
  - The Devil: Personifies the evil that encroaches on a character’s life so as to tempt him and cause his destruction, often by promising wealth, knowledge or fame in exchange for his soul.
  - The Trickster: A mischievous, amoral figure frequent in American Indian and African American narratives. “He disrupts the rigidity of rule-bound cultures” (Dobie, 2012, p.65), reminding them of their less strict origins.
  - Female Figures: One can include here several different archetypes, such as the good mother, associated with fertility and nurturance; the temptress that destroys men who are sexually attracted to her; the unfaithful wife; the female who inspires and guides her male counterpart in a spiritual ideal.
  
- Images
  - Colours: They are usually associated with diverse things. Red, for instance, tends to suggest passion, violence or sacrifice. Green, in contrast, elicits images of hope and life.
  - Numbers: The number three indicates spiritual things, starting with the Holy Trinity; four is associated with the four elements and the four seasons; thus, with the cycle of life. When they are combined and form seven the union creates something that is whole and perfect.

- Water: Often used to symbolise creation, birth or rebirth. “Flowing water can refer to the passage of time” (Dobie, 2012, p.65), whereas the lack of water is associated with a state of spiritual absence.
- Gardens: They often point to a state of innocence or to paradise, something evident as regards the Garden of Eden.
- Circles: As they have neither beginning nor end, circles suggest a state of union and completeness.
- Situations
  - The Quest: As mentioned above, it is a complicated search for a holy or magical item pursued by the hero, so as to return fertility to a desolate state. Another possible pattern is having to “perform a nearly impossible task so that all will be well” (Dobie, 2012, p.66). Often found alongside these situations is the physical journey, suggesting a psychological one as well. The journey “may involve a descent into hell” (Dobie, 2012, p.66).
  - Death and Rebirth: These are the most common archetypes in literature. “Rebirth may take the form of natural regeneration, (...), or of escape from this troubled life to an endless paradise (...)” (Dobie, 2012, p.66).
  - Initiation: These types of stories “(...) deal with the progression from one stage of life to another, usually that of an adolescent moving from childhood to maturity, from innocence to understanding” (Dobie, 2012, p.66). The transformation is usually plagued by problems, although it may be comical. In its classic form, the protagonist goes through this process alone, overcoming trials and tribulations that change him so that his return to the group from which he originated is as an adult.

### **Northrop Frye: Archetypes and Monomyth**

Northrop Frye (1912-1991) was a literary critic best known for enlarging the study of archetypes. In 1957, he published *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he presented, as Dobie (2012) explains, a model of how myths are at the basis of all texts. According to Dobie (2012), he did not accept Jungian theory in its entirety, but he did use quite a lot of it in

order to understand the functions of archetypes in literature. As stated in the paper *The Archetypes of Literature*, “he relates narrative to the creation of rituals, imagery to moments of instantaneous insights, rhythm to natural cycle, and so forth” (Frye, 1951, pp.500-501). As Frye (1951) claims, his approach was criticised because the archetypal approach tends to erase the specifics of individual works for the universals of the larger patterns.

In this paper, a very interesting concept is introduced: that of recurrence, “which is called rhythm when it is temporal, and pattern when it is spatial” (Frye, 1951, p.508). If all arts can be understood in temporal and spatial terms, then all of them contain a rhythm and a pattern. For instance, in the case of literature, Frye (1951) describes how the words form a certain musicality, a rhythm; but the words also form patterns close to the pictorial image. Moreover, one can call the rhythm of literature narrative, and its pattern, meaning; “an author’s narrative is his linear movement; his meaning is the integrity of his completed form” (Frye, 1951, p.508). If we wanted to relate this two terms, narrative and meaning, to music, Frye (1951) asserts that we could call them the melodic and harmonic sides of imagery, respectively.

The origin of narrative may be found in ritual, “a temporal sequence of acts in which the conscious meaning or significance is latent” (Frye, 1951, p.509). On the other hand, Frye (1951) affirms that significance is ocular in origin, and derives from a moment of epiphany, of sudden comprehension with no specific reference to time.

According to Frye (1951), myth is the “central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence, the myth *is* the archetype” (Frye, 1951, p.509).

Although all of these concepts are undeniably significant if one wishes to grasp the main theory proposed by Frye (1951), his main contribution to mythological criticism was his theory of genres, according to which all texts are part of a “central unifying myth,” as Dobie (2012) expresses, and these are exemplified in four types of literature, or as he calls them, four *mythoi*, that correspond to the seasons. Together, Dobie (2012) enunciates, they represent the whole of literature, or what he calls the *monomyth*.

The four mythoi are, as presented in Frye (1951):

- Spring, the dawn and birth phase: Included here are the myths of the birth of the hero, of resurrection and revival, of creation and of the defeat of darkness, death and winter. This phase corresponds to the archetype of romance, and the subordinate characters most relevant in this type of mythoi are the father and the mother.
- Summer, the zenith and marriage and triumph phase: Included here are myths of apotheosis (divinisation of a subject), of entrance to Paradise and the sacred marriage. It corresponds to the archetype of comedy and pastoral. Its subordinate characters are mainly the companion and the bride.
- Autumn, the sunset and death phase: Included here are the myths of the dying god, the isolation and sacrifice of the hero, and the violent death. It corresponds to the archetype of tragedy, and its principal subordinate characters are the traitor and the siren.
- Winter, the darkness and dissolution phase: Included here are “myths of the triumph of these powers; myths of floods and the return of chaos, of the defeat of the hero” (Frye, 1951, p.510). It corresponds to the archetype of satire, and its subordinate characters are the ogre and the witch.

There is another possible division that is found in Ann B. Dobie’s *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (2012). In her description of Frye’s theory, the archetype of romance corresponds to the summer mythoi; the archetype of comedy, to the mythoi of spring; the defeat of the hero is part of the autumn mythoi, not the winter one. This may reflect an evolution in Frye’s theory.

Finally, another classification that Frye (1951) provides is one that sets forth the pattern of the tragic and comic visions:

1. “In the comic vision the human world is a community, or a hero who represents the wish-fulfilment of the reader” (Frye, 1951, p.513). The archetype of images of communion, love, order and friendship belong here. In the tragic vision the human world is an anarchy or tyranny, an isolated man, the betrayed or abandoned hero. “Marriage (...) belongs to the comic vision; the harlot, witch and other varieties of Jung’s “terrible mother” belong to the tragic one” (Frye, 1951, p.513).

2. “In the comic vision the animal world is a community of domesticated animals, usually a flock of sheep, or a lamb, or one of the gentler birds. In the tragic vision the animal world is seen in terms of beasts and birds of prey, wolves, vultures, serpents, dragons and the like” (Frye, 1951, p.513).
3. In the comic vision the vegetable world is a tree of life, a park, a rose or a garden. In the tragic vision, it is a sinister forest, a tree of death, or a heath.
4. “In the comic vision the mineral world is a city, or one building or temple, or one stone, normally a (...) precious stone. The archetype of geometrical images: the “starlit dome” belongs here. In the tragic vision the mineral world is seen in terms of deserts, rocks and ruins (...)” (Frye, 1951, p.513).
5. In the comic vision the unformed world is a river, whereas in the tragic vision it generally becomes the sea, “as the narrative myth of dissolution is so often a flood myth” (Frye, 1951, p.513). From the combination of images of beasts and the sea, typical water-monsters such as the leviathan are created.

### **The Hero’s Journey**

Nowadays, the prevalent precept from mythological analysis is that of ‘The Hero’s Journey’ which was mentioned in the introduction. It is a concept first presented by Joseph Campbell in his famous book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* published in 1949. In this book, Campbell establishes the idea that many stories follow the hero on a journey that has several set stages. Of course, as can be seen from this article, Campbell was not the first to recognise these patterns and archetypes across literature, but he was the first to organise them and name them in an orderly fashion that has been repeated over and over again since then.

The stages that Campbell identified are the following, as they appear in Vogler (1998):

1. World of Common Day
2. Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Supernatural Aid
5. Crossing the First Threshold

6. Belly of the Whale
7. Road of Trials
8. Meeting with the Goddess
9. Woman as Temptress
10. Atonement with the Father
11. Apotheosis
12. The Ultimate Boon
13. Refusal of the Return
14. The Magic Flight
15. Rescue from Within
16. Crossing the Threshold
17. Return
18. Master of the Two Worlds
19. Freedom to Live

It goes without saying that not every writer follows these steps religiously, but rather may take inspiration from them and adapt them to the needs of his/her story. What one can take from this evolution of the Hero is that there is an underlying pattern to most of the tales we are told that most likely adheres at least partially to this model, and that occurs mostly because of one of the first concepts explained: the collective unconscious.

### **Conclusion**

Myths are a much larger part of our lives than we may realise. The mythological analysis of stories is one that has been overlooked for being too complex to comprehend, despite the fact that, as can be seen in the explanations given above, it is one of the most structured ways we have of analysing literature.

The stages of The Hero's Journey are not set in stone, of course, but they are strongly established nonetheless. There can be and there have been deviations from the norm, but in most cases one can trace the steps back to the beginning and see the evolution of this monomyth even in the most unlikely of tales. Admittedly, mythological criticism may not

be applicable to every single novel, novella or short story that has ever been created, but few literary theories can fulfil this task. However, this article does provide support for the belief that archetypal or mythological criticism can be useful in many circumstances, even if one cannot apply all the theoretical elements to the same story.

Regardless, the influence of myths themselves is undeniable. As explained above, archetypes and mythoi exist, and the rhythm of the stories sometimes repeats itself. Certain patterns, certain characters, quests, situations and symbols show up regularly throughout literature, in spite of cultural differences and the passage of time. The reasons might remain mysterious, but the overlapping of mythical elements is still evident.

If we have to find a reason, we may conclude that Jung was partly right, and that it is just a matter of humanity remembering, even unconsciously, what came before.

## References

- Dobie, A. (2012). *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (E-Reader version). Retrieved from [http://elibrary.bsu.az/books\\_400/N\\_152.pdf](http://elibrary.bsu.az/books_400/N_152.pdf) on April 16, 2019.
- Frye, N. (1951). *The Archetypes of Literature*. Retrieved on April 16, 2019 from <http://www.eacfaculty.org/pchidester/eng%20102f/archetypal%20criticism.pdf>
- Groden, M. and Kreiswirth, M. (1997). *Myth Theory and Criticism*. Retrieved on April 16, 2019 from <https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~cinichol/271/Myth%20Theory%20and%20Criticism.html>
- Jones, A. and Kalsched, D. (1986, November 15-December 19). *Myth and Psyche: The Evolution of Consciousness*. Companion to a photographic exhibition at The Hofstra Museum. Retrieved on April 16, 2019 from [http://www.cgjungny.org/d/d\\_mythpsyche.html](http://www.cgjungny.org/d/d_mythpsyche.html)
- Vogler, C. (1998). *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Michael Wiese Productions.