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## Antihero: Jung and the Art of Storytelling

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*Burne "St George and the Dragon"*

## *ANTIHERO*

### **Jung and the Art of Storytelling**

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*“The contrast between Freud and myself goes back to essential differences in our basic assumptions...” (Jung 124).*

## INTRODUCTION

It was Sigmund Freud who first promoted the idea of universal symbols by observing the recurring symbols found in dreams. It was his belief that the interpretation of these symbols was a link to the subconscious and that they were the result of the expression or repression of sexual energy that was common to all individuals. Based upon this theory Karl Jung formulated his own theories about universal symbols stating the belief that they derived from a ‘collective unconscious’ that was inherent in the psyche of all individuals. Through the observation of dream symbolism and storytelling practices it became evident that there were ideas that remained constant regardless of history and culture. Jung especially noted the reappearance of different character types, which he called “archetypes”. Having made these observations, Jung was able to focus on how collective ideas were communicated through culture and society.

Though Freud and Jung both observed a collective element to human nature they disagreed upon its origins and as a result two parallel schools of thought were created: the one, promoted by Freud, based in the scientific world, and the other, promoted by Jung, based upon the spiritual world. In spite of the fact that Jungian ideas about psychology have been somewhat marginalized in favor of the Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis in the scientific world, they are not entirely without value for making observations about this spiritual world especially as it relates to storytelling. The observation of Jung’s archetypes and about universal patterns of storytelling show us that there are themes in

literature and entertainment that remain constant from culture to culture and from generation to generation. Using this knowledge, therefore, it is possible to create stories that have “universal” characteristics. Using the example of *Antihero* this paper will observe some of these archetypes and take a closer look at the relationship between good and evil as it is played out between archetypal characters such as the Hero, the Shadow, and the Antihero within the context of a fictional story.

### ARCHETYPES AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

Since we have already shown how the theories of Freud and those of Jung are closely related let us begin by making an important distinction between the two. Jung suggests that there is an inherent human nature, and as a result of this there are instinctive learning patterns that humans follow that form the basis for society and culture. He calls this intuitive foundation the “collective unconscious”. Jung is careful to make the distinction between the unconscious mind of the individual from this larger idea as he notes in his book *Four Archetypes*: “[the] personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious...this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal...” (Jung I 3).

There are numerous examples of common ideas that remain constant across cultures such as the idea of death and rebirth. Many of these ideas are most clearly manifested in dreams as symbolic interpretations. Jung suggests that there are symbols in all cultures that, because they are part of this collective unconscious, resonate with individuals throughout mankind. One of the chief examples of this use of universal



symbolism is the universal character types Jung calls the “archetypes”. “Out of this common ground have come what Jung calls the archetypes, which are the common ideas of myths” (Campbell 60). Jung himself describes archetypes as the remnants of earlier evolutionary stages of the psyche, an idea which he derives from Freud. In his book *Man and his Symbols* Jung attempts to explain this idea further by saying:

“These elements... are what Freud called “archaic remnants”- mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individuals own life, and which seem to be aboriginal, innate, and inherited shapes of the human mind... Just as the human body represents a whole museum of organs, each with a long evolutionary history behind it, so we should expect to find that the mind is organized in a similar way”

(Jung II 67)

Jung argues that the ideas of archaic man form an unconscious basis for the psyche of modern man and that reverberations of these ideas can be identified as archetypes. Though the archetype comes in many forms including the Mother, the Trickster, and the Shapeshifter, I will be focusing primarily upon the relationship between three archetypes: the Hero, the Shadow, and the Antihero. It is important to make the distinction that archetypes are not stock characters. Instead, an Archetype is descriptive of the *function* of a character- the role that one individual plays in relation to another that is consistent throughout culture and history.

### THE ARCHETYPE OF THE HERO

I will begin by taking a closer look at this idea by looking at the Archetype of the Hero. The Hero is representative of the self; it is the character through which the audience experiences the action of the story. The Hero is the character that sets off in search of truth even in the face of danger. This is also the character for whom the stakes

of the story are of life-or-death importance, and therefore must be willing to sacrifice himself, or some part of himself for the sake of truth. Arguably the most famous of all Hero figures is that of Christ, sacrificing himself for the salvation of all humanity. With this as our example we also come to realize the nature of the ordeal through which the Hero must pass. “The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light” (Campbell 44). Often the ordeal that the Hero must survive is a matter of literal or spiritual life, death, and rebirth. The Hero must often experience death in some way in order to be re-born and gain the enlightenment that he has been seeking. The truth that the Hero seeks is rarely easy to reach, and is usually found only in the darkest and most terrifying places. It is the journey into these dark places in search of a truth that make up the basis for many stories.

*Antihero* is an allegorical story about the journey of a man into his inmost self and back again it is a story about the ordeal of spiritual death and rebirth. The story is symbolic of an archetypal rite of passage that an individual must undergo to grow and develop in the conscious world. In this way there is a unification of the unconscious world that provides us with various symbols and the conscious world that attempts to rationalize their significance. The Hero figure, known only as the Man, has turned his journey inward and in essence is seeking to learn the truth about himself. In the story the Man struggles to reconcile the archetypal themes that he encounters within the room with the ordinary or “real” world that he has come from and that has informed his personality. The plot revolves around a man struggling to grow and change, but refusing to let go of his past. In essence it is a story about the reconciliation of two parts of the psyche.

Though archetypes are useful tools for the process of storytelling, they are limited foundations upon which to build a character. However as theologian Bernard McGinn points out in his observations relating to apocalyptic stories: "What the players lack in psychological development is partially compensated for by their symbolic power . . . figures display aspects of the characteristic apocalyptic drive to finalize the struggle between good and evil" (22). As an allegory about the struggle between "good" and "evil" the story also has elements of mythic literature. "[In many] mythological traditions, [the] "combat myth", [is] the narrative of the struggle between a high god and a monster of chaos at the time of the creation or formation of the world." (McGinn 17). Though *Antihero* is built upon a number of myths it would be misleading to call it a myth in its own right. Be that as it may, the story does use many archetypal elements and expresses a universal theme about the internal struggle of the individual against himself. As Joseph Campbell points out: "The form is secondary. The message is what is important" (101).

Let us take a closer look at the message of *Antihero* as its story is played out by the Man. The film begins with a Man entering a basement room where appears to be lost and does not have any great drive guiding him; he does not so much act as react to the environment he encounters. The Man does not have any deep faith, and does not act with any great convictions. Here at the beginning the Man is a Hero suffering from stagnation. He no longer fits into the outside world and so he journeys inward to find a way to escape or "... to deaden... a tormenting, secret pain that is becoming unendurable, and to drive it out of consciousness at least for the moment... (Nietzsche II 127). Whatever world he has arrived from it is clear that he no longer belongs there. He is a man that Nietzsche

would describe as one of the: "...drugged and heedless men who fear only one thing: regaining consciousness" (Nietzsche II 148). In his effort to escape his pain the Man is driven into the lair of the Angel who will force him to recognize this fear of change and will cause him to face his fear and to evolve into a new individual.

Once the Man has entered the room and closed the door he has passed this point of no return. He begins to become aware of his position, and he begins to recognize the ordeal before him. As we have already seen with the example of Christ: change never comes easily. In a way, it is as if the character has already died but has not yet come to realize it. By leaving behind the outside world the Man has symbolically died, but has not yet determined what must happen next.

Since the action of the story revolves around the Hero's journey it is set in a place that is reflective of the Hero's mindset. In *Antihero* it takes place in a kind of limbo, an indecisive place in between worlds. The room where the action is set someplace between the rising and setting of the Man's life. The place itself becomes reflective of the Man's life that is held in tension. The Man has ventured away from the beaten path and has wandered into a dark, ambiguous place where the answers to his problems are not always clear. It is here in this dark place that the Man will find enlightenment if it is to be found. What we can deduce from this is that the Hero can only grow once he has faced all the fears that limited him in the past. By venturing beyond the well-lit world of everyday the Hero is no longer able to ignore his fears and weaknesses. To succeed, the Hero must have full command of his resources and to do so he must recognize his fears and to face them head-on. "[Man's] enlightenment is born of fear; in the daytime he believes in an ordered cosmos, and he tries to maintain this faith against the fear of chaos that besets

him by night. What if there were some living force whose sphere of action lies beyond our world of every day?" (Jung 162). In *Antihero* this idea is fundamental to the story. The room that the Man enters is unfamiliar and within it dwells the ambiguous and elusive Angel; it is she that will bring about this change and it is here that he will be forced to recognize his fears and weaknesses.

This idea is reflective of the death-rebirth theme that permeates much of storytelling. The Hero must journey into the unknown and face death and fear before he can return to the known world with new knowledge. Even if the journey is unfamiliar to the Hero it is not entirely new to us. "We have not even to risk the adventure alone, or the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path..." (Campbell 151). Just as there appear to be universal archetypes there also appears to be consistent patterns in storytelling. This theme of death and rebirth can be seen as an underlying theme in nearly any story because another main element of the Hero archetype is the ability to change. For this to happen the Hero's original personality or mindset must "die" in order for the Hero himself to transcend to the next level of existence.

Another consistent element in storytelling is a need for conflict between the Hero and some force. In many cases this is simplified to tension between positive and negative ideas under the labels of "good" and "evil." Whether the labels are accurate descriptions of the ideas that they represent is of less importance than the fact that they are in conflict and as a result they are causing dramatic tension. As we have mentioned before, the story of *Antihero* attempts to communicate the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Friedrich Nietzsche recognized this idea of the mind in conflict with

itself and theorizes: “There is perhaps no more decisive mark of a “higher nature” a mere spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values” (Nietzsche I 52). In other words, the ability to recognize this conflict abstractly indicates that we as humans are aware that we exist on a spiritual or theoretical level as well as on a physical and material level.

Returning to the example of *Antihero*, let me be clear in noting that though the Man is ready for the change to occur he is not yet prepared to accept that change without a struggle. The Man enters the room from a life that is no longer genuine to him; he has outgrown his old ideals and has not yet found a new system of beliefs. This poses an obstacle for the man since he is still trapped in the mentality of this outside world. There are several instances in the early stages of this story where the Angel asks the Man “What do you believe?” but each time she does so he avoids answering her. It is the Angel’s role to force him to take note of this reluctance and to force him to face it. She is the one who causes him to realize the effects of his old beliefs have had on him and to compel him to recognize his own instincts and his own strength.

With the appearance of the Angel character the tension between the two characters is solidified. As the Man’s adversary throughout the ordeal the Angel plays a very specific archetypal role within the action of the story. In *Antihero* the Angel takes on the role of representing all of the Man’s repressed personality traits. He has forced them into the back of his mind and imprisoned them in a secret room. It is only when the Man himself is trapped in the room with the Angel that he begins to reconsider his choices. The Man’s life has been distilled to its essence and the Angel forces the Man to look critically at it. The Man can no longer deny the existence of the Angel and of all the

Shadow characteristics that she represents. The more he struggles to push her away the more he begins to see what it is that they have in common.

The function of the Angel is to act as a catalyst. She intimidates him, mocks him, and finally challenges him to make the changes in his life that he needs to make. She dredges up old memories he would rather have forgotten. She brings out his worst qualities, his aggression, his weaknesses, and his cowardice. She reveals his old scars and she forces him to heal them, and nearly destroys him in the process. The Angel prevents the Hero from stagnating by keeping him in a constant state of tension and adaptation.

The Angel makes it clear, in word and action, that the Man must be willing to fight in order to make progress. The Angel forces the Man to use his aggression. If he wants to learn who he is then he must fight for the knowledge because it will not be given to him. Evidence of this trial comes when the Man struggles to hold on to the key to his escape back into the world he came from. The key is representative of the Man's decision. On one hand it is his way to freedom though it is causing him pain to hold on to, and on the other hand it is a link to his old life that is familiar, but no longer constructive. The Man longs to return to the familiar world but that in itself would be a kind of death. When the Man lets go of the key he also lets go of his old personality. The doubtful, reactive, and uncertain Man has died and been reborn as a new individual. Now that he has grown and changed he is ready to re-emerge into the world and finds he is able to leave the room he has been trapped in.

## THE ARCHETYPE OF THE SHADOW

Now that we have established the basis for a Hero figure and we have analyzed the ordeal that the Hero must endure, let us take a closer look at the character of the Angel who brings this ordeal about. The Angel represents a different type of archetype: the Shadow. She is not a typical angel figure. She is not a benevolent guide and protector. She is instead a fallen angel; a sly and cunning challenger that questions the Man's every move. The Angel functions as an antagonist to the man and to oppose him. "The verb "satan" meaning "to oppose" which in its noun form is used in the Hebrew Bible both for human and angelic opposers. . . Satan is a powerful angel deputed to be God's accuser against the human world." (McGinn 24). Thus, the Angel is not a benevolent guide but a treacherous opponent. Just as the Man is roughly equivalent to the Christ figure, so is the Angel roughly equivalent to the figure of the Antichrist, the fallen angel.

The Shadow is an indistinct figure because it represents many of the unpleasant or ambiguous characteristics that are found in the subconscious mind. At the same time these ambiguous traits are sometimes mistaken for negative qualities: "If [modern man] then turns his gaze inward upon the recesses of his own mind, he will discover a chaos and a darkness there which he would gladly ignore... and yet is almost a relief for us to come upon so much evil in the depths of our own minds." (Jung 205). What Jung is saying is that the potentials of the unconscious mind are terrifying when we first encounter them, but at the same time they are the resources that form the basis for our conscious thought. When these same potentials are united as a single entity they form the Shadow archetype. The qualities that make up the Shadow are generally ambiguous or negative drives within the psyche that have been repressed from the conscious mind and



yet are fundamental to the development of the Hero's concrete ideals. This character is usually the adversary to the Hero; the dark lord or wicked witch that rules in a shadowy kingdom where the Hero must go in his journey. This figure is a nemesis to the Hero and goes against the ideals that the Hero fights for. The Shadow represents:

...vulnerable points which we do not like to remember and still less like to be reminded of by others, but which frequently come back to mind unbidden and in the most unwelcome fashion. They always contain memories, wishes, fears, duties, needs, or views, with which we have never really come to terms, and for this reason they constantly interfere with our conscious life in a disturbing and usually harmful way.

(Jung 79)

Here we can see that the Shadow archetype derives from a widespread marginalization of these vulnerable points: the ideas, desires and hopes that man represses or denies. The Jungian Shadow, therefore, is a displacement of these negative values onto another figure. In this case, the villain is the *other*. "We still attribute to 'the other fellow' all the evil and inferior qualities that we do not like to recognize in ourselves...What we combat in him is our own inferior side" (Jung 142).

As a Shadow figure, the Angel represents the inverse of the Man's heroic qualities. If the Hero is based upon the individual's struggle to consciously control the direction of his life then the Shadow is made up of his subconscious thoughts and desires. It is important to remember that an archetype is the name for a character's function, not their personality. An archetypal character may show qualities of more than one archetype depending upon what role that character is playing at a given time. For instance, in the beginning the Angel appears as a Shapeshifter because her function is to cause the Man to question his perceptions. However, once the Man forces the Angel into the light she steps into the role of the Mentor, teaching and guiding the man, and when this is no longer effective she turns to the antagonistic archetype of the Shadow.

The Shadow is representative of the qualities of the unconscious mind, and though the Angel is a separate character from the Man the story is a symbolic illumination of his internal struggle. In this way the Shadow functions as the villain of the *other* and becomes an external adversary to the Hero. The Shadow archetype, insofar as it plays the role of the adversary to the Hero has the important function of keeping the Hero dynamic. By presenting the Hero with conflict, the Shadow forces him to constantly adapt and grow. Jung underlines the importance of this constant adaptation by saying: “The serious problems of life, however, are never fully solved. If it should for once appear that they are this is the sign that something has been lost. The meaning and design of a problem seem not to lie in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and petrification” (Jung 103). The plot then becomes an exploration of the possibility and even necessity of recognizing these negative traits within the self and in doing so learning to accept them in such a way that they become useful resources rather than debilitating weaknesses.

Another way of looking at the Shadow is to think of it as representing the Jungian unconscious; it is a dark figure that acts as a catalyst that changes the hero without changing itself. “Man has never yet been able single handedly to hold his own against the powers of darkness- that is of the unconscious... the opening up of the unconscious always means the outbreak of intense spiritual suffering... how thin are the walls which separate a well ordered world from lurking chaos.”(Jung 240). Therefore the Antihero represents the subconscious of the Hero himself and as a result can never truly be eradicated without destroying the Hero in the process. The Angel forces the Man to give in, to accept her existence and her terms for living, and it is the Man who benefits from

her victory. If we look at *Antihero* as an example of this we can see this in the struggle over the key that takes place between the Man and the Angel. The Angel eventually forces the man to let go of the key, but in doing so the key is lost. The Man is freed by his defeat and the Angel, though victorious, is left locked in the basement room. The Antihero is successful in attaining change but must once again stay in the shadows.

Another important distinction to make is that the Antihero, though a dark and negative character, is not necessarily representative of evil. The Antihero is simply the unknown potential of the Hero; it imposes no moral structure upon that potential and this ambiguity is sometimes misconstrued as evil. "Being evil is being "not moral"... resisting tradition, however reasonable or stupid tradition may be," (Nietzsche II 169). Thus, the Hero is what *is*: that which exists. The Shadow is this ambiguous potential; it is the future that has not yet been explored and the past paths that were not traveled. It becomes the Man's task to take a closer look at these potentialities and to recognize them as his own. "... to accept a quality which one does not like in oneself, and which one has chosen to repress for many years, is an act of great courage. But if one does not accept the quality, then it functions behind one's back. To see and admit the shadow is part of the problem... the great ethical problem begins when one makes up one's mind to express the Shadow consciously" (von Franz 5). The point that Marie Louise von Franz makes addresses the relationship between the Hero and the Shadow as well as the conscious and the unconscious mind. The Shadow, as representative of the unconscious, cannot be fully ignored or repressed, but neither can it be fully assimilated into the conscious mind without losing its very identity. A balance must therefore be struck allowing the unconscious mind to inform the conscious mind without being overtly expressed. Thus,

in the case of *Antihero* the Man learns to accept and even embrace the Angel, but she is not allowed to venture into the world outside of the room. Even if the Man is unable to accept the Angel outright it is important that she, as the Shadow, is not ignored as part of the Man's personality.

Before we can finish our observation of the relationship between the Hero and the Antihero we must take a look at the resolution of the story of *Antihero*. As we have already seen the Angel is victorious, but it is the Man that benefits from her victory. What is it that the Man learns that makes this possible? We begin to notice a pattern of reversal of ideals in the plot. Evidence of this reversal can be found also in the visual imagery of the film. The Angel, though representative of dark forces, is dressed in white while Michael, the symbol of the glory of heaven, wears black. The key is clearly symbolic of freedom, both for the Man and the Angel, yet it is only after the key is lost that the Man is able to leave the room. On the thematic level we begin to see that as the Man begins to accept his weaknesses such as aggression, and fear they become resources for his strengths instead. Instead of being passive and agreeable he becomes assertive and is willing to stand up for himself. These new virtues are founded on the basis of traits that the Man previously thought of as shortcomings. The Angel, though she represents the dark and negative forces within the Man, is the catalyst that brings about this change. It is because she challenges the Man that he is forced to recognize the hidden strength in his weaknesses. In this way the Angel is both the problem and the solution. When the Man struggles against her she is a source of resistance, yet once he embraces her she becomes a reluctant but powerful ally. In a way the Angel, as the Man's adversary, is of utmost importance in the plot as it is she that causes the Man to look critically at himself.

**The intent of this story is to express the importance of accepting the negative ideas and drives within us as humans as being natural functions of life. “What if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself- that these are within me... and that I myself am the enemy who must be loved- what then?” (Jung 235).**

In the end of *Antihero* the character of the Angel changes once again when she is addressed by name: Lucifer. Here the Angel takes on yet another level of the Shadow archetype: the Devil. However, as we have already seen the function of the devil, like the function of the Shadow is to oppose the Hero. As a result, though the character has been defined in terms of biblical mythology the function that she plays remains constant. By recognizing these darker drives within us we are able to adapt them to our internal world in a way that is not harmful to our external world. When put into terms of Man vs. the Devil it is easier to see how difficult it is to create and maintain this balance. As Jung points out: “... the acceptance of the shadow side of human nature verges on the impossible. Consider for a moment what it means to grant the right of existence to what is unreasonable, senseless, and evil!” (Jung 238). In the end, the Man must embrace the Angel, both figuratively as well as literally before he is truly ready to re-enter the outside world. *Antihero* is an example of a reversal of the traditional roles of good and evil. The qualities of the outside world that the Man brings with him into the room become his weaknesses, while the qualities that he once believed to be his weaknesses such as his aggression and his emotions become strengths that allow him to grow and change.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Antihero* provides us with an example of Archetypes and the collective unconscious as set forth in the writings of Karl Jung as well as an exploration of the relationship between the philosophical ideas of good and evil. By expressing the idea that good and evil are both part of an individual *Antihero* illustrates how positive and negative qualities must be accepted before an individual can grow and develop. Within this idea we also see the theme of an individual's need to embrace his or her own negative qualities or “Shadow” characteristics. As we have shown, the Shadow functions as a nemesis for the Hero to struggle against. The Shadow represents the negative ideas that permeate humankind as a whole as they relate to the Hero himself. In *Antihero* it is the Angel that plays the role of the Shadow by forcing the Man to recognize his strengths and weaknesses by going through the ordeal of a spiritual death and rebirth. It is only once the Man has embraced the Angel, physically as well as symbolically, that he is ready to return to the external world as a new person.

In spite of the fact that Jungian ideas are not in the forefront of modern psychology they provide us with useful information for making observations about this spiritual world as it is expressed in storytelling. The observation of Jung's archetypes and the subsequent observations made by Joseph Campbell about universal patterns of storytelling give us a basis of common themes that remain constant from culture to culture and from generation to generation. As we have seen, it is possible to create modern stories that use “universal” characteristics to express a fundamental truth. Using the example of *Antihero* it became evident that the struggle between the Man and the Angel was more than a conflict between two people, but was representative of the Man's

internal conflict as he struggled against the negative sides of his own personality. As this paper has shown, *Antihero* also provides an example of the ordeal of death and rebirth that is the basis for many story structures.

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