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## Using myths, legends and fairy tales in counselling: Archetypal motifs underlying the mother complex

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This paper aims to show how re-familiarizing with the concept of archetypes and their manifestations in myths, legends and fairy tales can provide the therapist with a practical and helpful tool for working with clients. Jung did not leave a clear-cut clinical methodology for later generations to adopt and evolve. Instead, the curriculum for the aspiring analyst was (and continues to be) Jungian analysis itself tempered by reading key works of Jung and successors. Espousing an archetypal perspective, this paper refers to several examples of the negative mother archetype as it appears embodied in a myth, a legend and a Chinese filial piety exemplar. The analysis of this sampling of literary narratives from various cultures is used to illustrate the universal nature of archetypes and how they can be leveraged by the clinician to shed light on the modalities of symptomology presented by the client in the grip of a mother complex.

**Keywords:** archetype; myth; fairy tale; counselling; psychodynamic

In many cases in psychiatry, the patient who comes to us has a story that is not told, and which as a rule no one knows of. To my mind, therapy only really begins after the investigation of that wholly personal story. It is the patient's secret, the rock against which he is shattered. If I know his secret story, I have a key to the treatment. The doctor's task is to find out how to gain that knowledge. In most cases exploration of the conscious material is insufficient . . . In therapy the problem is always the whole person, never the symptom alone. (Jung, 1989, p. 117)

### Jung's gift to counselling

Carl Jung's legacy is arguably one of the most influential in psychology today. Although the general public may not have the access to the background information necessary to make such a connection, many counsellors and psychologists familiar with psychodynamic methodologies are aware that Jung conceptualized the psychological complex, first defined introverted and extraverted attitudes of consciousness and gave breadth and depth to the notions of persona and shadow. Perhaps his greatest yet least understood contribution to science was fleshing out the concept of the archetype.

This paper aims to show how re-familiarizing with the concept of archetypes and their myriad manifestations in myths, legends and fairy tales can provide the therapist with a practical and helpful tool for working with clients. The scope of counselling is understood

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here to address those issues constituting the presenting problem clearly in need of conscious attention in the therapeutic environment. These tend to include problems looming on the client's daily horizon in the form of relationship challenges, career choice, sense of self-worth, and so on.

Moreover, a depth psychological perspective informed by the invitation of unconscious content can aid counsellors in being attentive to aspects of the client's psyche that heretofore have been unconscious and may actually be responsible for setting in motion or providing a context for those very same principal issues constituting the client's presenting problem. Indeed, as Jonathan Shedler (2010a) documents, recent studies by Allan Abbass indicate that the pendulum seems to be swinging back to psychodynamic therapies as the intervention of choice for long-lasting positive outcomes in psychotherapy.

Abbass's meta-analysis [ . . . ] looked at patient assessments conducted nine months or more after therapy ended. The effect size grew from 0.97 to 1.51 . . . The continued improvement suggests that psychodynamic therapy sets in motion psychological processes that lead to ongoing change. (Shedler, 2010b)

As Jung indicates in the quote leading this article, his psychodynamic framework seeks to take into account both conscious and unconscious elements of psyche so that the practitioner can work effectively with the whole person.

### *No standard Jungian methodology*

Carl Jung was a kind of Renaissance man in that his erudition and intellectual pursuits covered a wide scope of the medical sciences and humanities, especially philosophy and history. Much like Sigmund Freud and other first-generation psychoanalysts, a solid grounding in classicism (which included the ability to read Latin, Greek, French and German, of course, in addition to a high degree of familiarity with Romanic and Hellenic histories, cultures and mythologies) was required of the analyst who hoped to be able to interpret symbols in clients' dreams against the backdrop of early twentieth-century European society writ large. Freud was quite enamoured with Egyptian artefacts and mythology, Otto Rank was a scholar who used biblical stories of the Old Testament to illustrate psychological theories and Jung could have added the appellation of mythologist to a list of his specialities as early as 1911. Not coincidentally, Freud directly referenced *Oedipus Rex*, the fifth century B.C.E. drama set down by Sophocles, when coining the name for what he held to be the most pervasive and influencing tenet of psychoanalytic theory: the oedipal complex.

This brief sketch of the scholarship possessed by just a representative few of the first-generation analysts – in addition to the fact that most also held medical degrees – points to the inevitable aura of celebrity that was construed by the public regarding these pioneers of the psychological healing tradition. Seen from the perspective of outcomes-based learning which characterizes contemporary educational theory, the analyst of yesteryear personified the 'sage on the stage' instead of today's recommended 'guide on the side'.

These factors are partially responsible for the fact that Jung did not leave a clear-cut clinical methodology for later generations to adopt and evolve. Instead, the curriculum for the aspiring analyst was (and continues to be) Jungian analysis itself tempered by reading key works of Jung and successors. Working with clients in this atmosphere requires an

implicit scholarship to accompany the endeavour termed ‘the process of individuation’. It is no coincidence, then, that the bulk of Jungian scholarship that has followed since Jung’s death in 1961 has been devoted to unpacking, evolving, extrapolating and formulating much-needed methodologies that can be adopted by practitioners who may or may not be Jungian analysts (Beebe, 2005; Papadopoulous, 2006; Sharp, 1991; Stein, 1998, 2010).

### *An archetype by any other name . . .*

Archetypes are hard to define because they cannot be seen. Instead, apparent to the eye are manifestations of the archetype. One analogy I like to use involves the coins in your pocket. The penny, dollar or yen in your hand may look identical to its counterparts. Upon careful examination, however, no two coins are actually identical due to slight variations embossed at the time of forging and the wear and tear suffered in circulation. The coins, then, correspond to archetypal manifestations and the mould deep within your country’s mint, the archetype. In this example, the archetype (the mould) has a distinct form and is characterized by its negative space. When the molten metal amalgam is poured into the mould, a new coin is forged bearing a clear resemblance to the ‘archetypal’ form which birthed it.

John Sanford simplifies: ‘to say something is an archetype means it is an essential building block of the personality. Or, to use the word in its adjective form, to say that something is archetypal means that it is “typical” for all human beings’ (1991, p. 59). Steven Walker (1995) helps round out the definition of the archetype by saying it ‘designates an unconscious and unrepresentable element of the instinctual structure of the human psyche’ (p. 4). Finally, Anthony Stevens makes an excellent case for the existence of the archetypes in the social sciences under different names! He points out that all cultures contain universals that are distinctly human in expression. In fact,

no human culture is known that lacks laws about property, procedures for settling disputes, rules governing courtship, marriage, and adultery, taboos relating to food and incest, rules of etiquette . . . the performance of funeral rites, belief in the supernatural, religious rituals, the recital of myths . . . and so on’ (Stevens, 2009, p. 15).

All such universal patterns are evidence of archetypes at work. The point is that what any one of us experiences in life is not determined merely by our personal histories. It is also fundamentally guided by the collective history of the human species as a whole. This collective history is biologically encoded in the collective unconscious, and the code owes its origins to a past so remote as to be shrouded in the primordial mists of evolutionary time. (Stevens, 2009, p. 16)

In anthropology, these universally observed and documented patterns of human behavior referred to above are called ‘cultural universals’. In behavioral biology, the terms used to refer to what Jung calls archetypes are ‘innate releasing mechanisms’, ‘patterns of behavior’, ‘epigenetic rules’ and ‘epigenetic pathways’. In psychiatry, we see echoes of the archetype in this language: ‘psycho-biological response patterns’ and ‘deeply homologous neural structures’ (Stevens, 2009, pp. 25–26).

In positing the existence of the archetype, this paper refers to the rich manifestations of psyche and its myriad archetypal structures as they appear embodied in myths, legends and fairy tales. Walker (1995) connects myths and archetypes by stating that ‘*myths* are essentially culturally elaborated representations’ of these same elements which cannot otherwise be represented (p. 4). Later in this paper, brief examples of literary narratives from various cultures will be used to show how archetypes are represented in literature and how

they can be leveraged to attain positive outcomes in clinical practice by shedding light on causes and modalities of symptomology.

### **Clinical application**

Like Freud, Jung's schema of psyche is clearly oriented along a vertical, dimensional axis where ego-consciousness – one of several components of the individual's psychological makeup – is positioned aloft. Again, like Freud, Jung believes that integration into the ego of psychic content populating the various layers of unconsciousness is ultimately beneficial. Where their similarities end, however, is that Jung believes assimilating unconscious material of both personal and collective nature results in a transformation of the client's ego-consciousness position. This change in vantage point ultimately leads the individual away from ego-identification to a mid-point between conscious and unconscious perspectives. Rather than 'dressing down' the ego, Jung champions its strengthening so that it can withstand the integration of suppressed contents (the personal) and those primordial, archetypal contents common to humanity (the collective). One method that can be employed to set the context for the integration of contents from both streams of consciousness requires the familiarization and study of world myths, fairy tales and legends on the part of the therapist.

Although Jung does not mention fairy tales, legends or myths in the quote above, he often enlisted the support of literary and mythological narratives because he felt that such externally tangible products of culture were, much like our complexes and ego-consciousness, concretized manifestations of the archetypes residing at their core (Figure 1).

### **Manifestations of the mother archetype as complex**

Here follow three separate examples from world myth/literature that serve to show aspects of the nature of the mother archetype which, when constellated in the individual in a manner that elicits conflicting feelings, cognitions and affect, can be said to be symptomatic of a mother complex. Jung states that complexes

interfere with the intentions of the will and disturb the conscious performance; they produce disturbances of memory and blockages in the flow of associations; they appear and disappear according to their own laws; they can temporarily obsess consciousness, or influence speech and action in an unconscious way. In a word, complexes behave like independent beings. (Jung, 1954, vol. 8, par. 253)

In accordance with Jung's view that complexes operate with a large degree of autonomy, he uses the verb 'activate' or 'constellate' to indicate when the complex along with its inherent increase or decrease in affect emerges in such a way as to obstruct conscious intent. In each of the following narratives, the underlying essence of the mother archetype constellates as a complex in a unique way.

#### ***The legend of Parzival***

The legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table contain a multitude of themes but certainly the all-encompassing one is the quest for the Holy Grail. The Grail Legends that emerged in written form from the late eleventh century in Europe describe the trials, battles and victories experienced by those knights who had pledged their loyalty to

## C. G. Jung (1875-1961) - Founder of Analytical Psychology

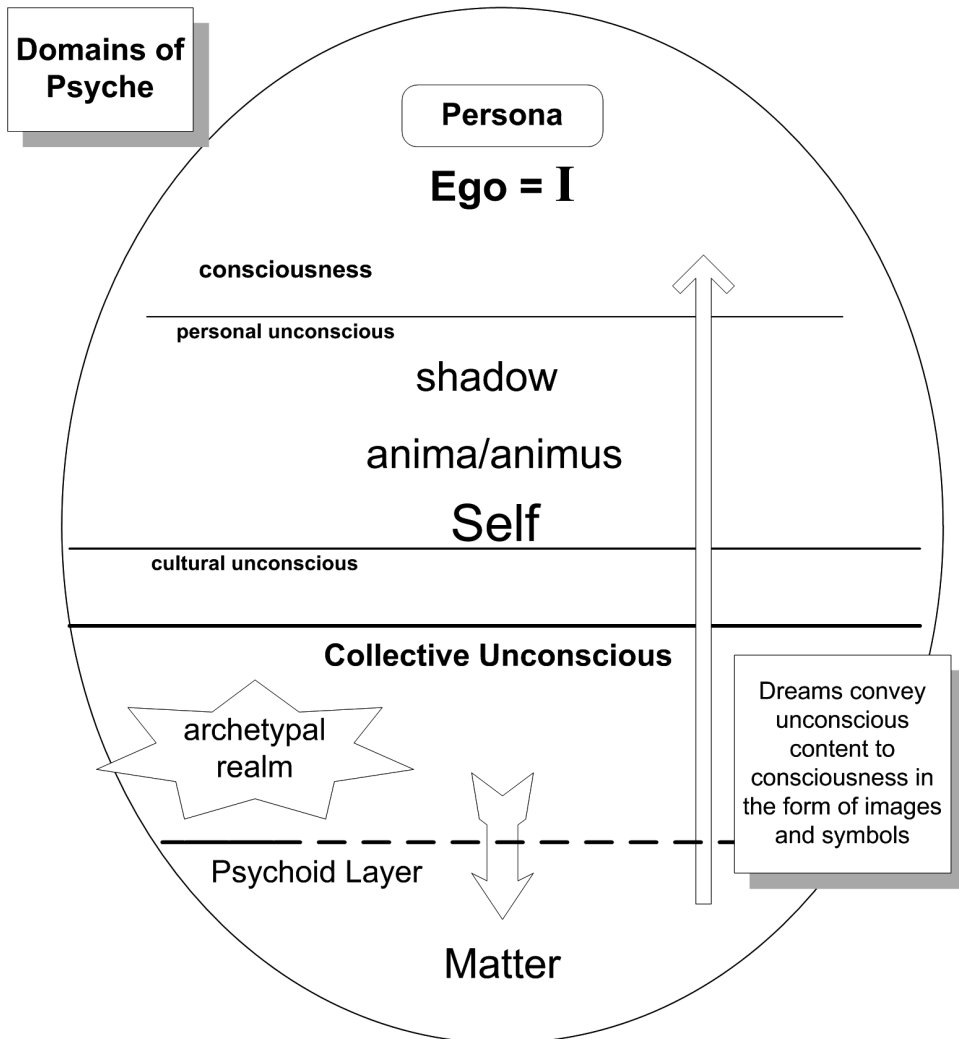


Figure 1. Jung, like Freud, believed in a vertically oriented structure of psyche where easily accessible ego consciousness was positioned above and the substrata of less easily accessible unconscious realms below. Overlaying Freud's conceptualization of consciousness on Jung's shows that Freud believed the lower limits of the unconscious ended at the personal level.

the legendary King Arthur. Rich in character development and great in number, these legends have inspired Western historians and poets for over 1000 years. The many versions of the legend of Parzival (one of King Arthur's knights, also known as Perceval and Parsifal) have captured the imagination of Jungian psychologists due to the main character's progression from an extremely naïve teenager to a young man wiser for his tribulations. Such a narrative arc taken by an individual from *beginning to end* is ripe for juxtaposition with the maturation process Jung refers to as the process of individuation. Jung conceived

of individuation as an person's lifelong journey of psychological growth and differentiation resulting from the integration of unconscious contents into consciousness described above.

Robert A. Johnson (1989) uses Chrétien de Troyes' rendition of the medieval legend of Parzival as a convincing model to illustrate the process of individuation in a fictional character. Here is how Parzival's story begins:

A worthy knight is killed in battle. His wife, whose name is Heart's Sorrow, is stricken with grief by the loss of her husband. She takes their surviving son, Parzival, to the remote forests of Wales to raise him completely removed from society. One day, when Parzival is 15 years old, he hears the clatter of horses approaching and is nearly blinded by the radiance sparkling from the armor of five knights mounted on their steeds. All are gloriously adorned with 'impressive equipment: the scarlet and gold trappings, the armor, the shields, the lances, all the accouterments of the knighthood' (Johnson, 1989, p. 16). Convinced that they are gods, Parzival asks the strangers who they are and is told they are Knights of the Round Table and have pledged their loyalty to serve King Arthur.

Parzival runs home to his mother, the only other person he has ever known, to tell her there exist people in this world called knights and that he wants to be one of them! His mind is made up to leave immediately and attempt to join them on their quest. Clearly pained by this news, Heart's Sorrow knows there is nothing she can do to stop him from following his father's career despite her best efforts to prevent this day from ever having arrived. Before he goes, she tells him of his father and the fact that he had two older brothers as well who had all been knights and were killed in various acts of chivalry. Parzival's mother gives him two pieces of advice in addition to her blessing: 'Respect fair maidens' and 'Do not ask too many questions'. She also gives him the gift of 'a single homespun garment she had woven for him' (p. 17). And so, the young hero leaves home with his mother's blessing.

In my case, the 'homespun garment' caught my attention while reading Parzival's narrative. In this legend, Heart's Sorrow purposefully gives her son a homespun piece of clothing, a garment that would be suitable for a five-year-old peasant boy, for the purpose of eliciting ridicule from those who see the gangly and maturing boy wearing it. Her objective is to have her son be rebuffed in his quest to join King Arthur's knights. If he gives up his personal quest, it is hoped he will return home as quickly as possible to remain by her side. Although her love for him is genuine, she acts in this way to prevent Parzival from following in the dangerous career of knighthood taken up by her late husband. Johnson correctly infers that the mother's motives are based upon her fear of losing her son as she lost her husband (Greene, 1999).

In this 'one-piece homespun garment', Johnson sees a symbol of the young man's mother complex:

It is this remnant, under his knight's armor, which prevents him from appreciating the Grail when he sees it. So long as a man is encased in his mother complex he cannot appreciate the Grail, or worse, ask the right question to heal the Fisher King wound. (p. 48)

Johnson argues well that in this particular image can be found an expression of every son's eventual need to eschew the protective psychological clothing given him by his mother. Such a move is necessary if he is ever to become an individual capable of recognizing and pursuing his own destiny (Greene, 1999). In the introduction to this same book, Johnson stresses that the male gender of this particular myth's protagonist does not necessarily preclude a female audience because 'a woman participates in her own inner masculinity' (which can have a mother complex) and '[a] woman's masculinity or a man's femininity is closer than one realizes' (pp. x-xi).



The analysis of the single image of the 'homespun garment' that Johnson makes from the snippet of narrative shown above is an example of reading a narrative archetypally. If your client has conflicting emotions, memories and demonstrable affect around the topic of *mother* then such an archetypal examination is worthwhile. Whether a client's reactions occur around the topic of his or her biological mother or other forms of the mother archetype, listening to a story in this way and sharing with a client can provide a referent reality (although fictional, it is informed by the same archetypes) that parallels the client's, thus offering objectivity to an individual who may feel mired in subjectivity. It is hoped that such a process can lead to a confrontation with the mother complex and catharsis of those contents negatively permeating the client's ego-consciousness.

At this point, it should be noted that using myths, legends and fairy tales to illustrate psychological concepts is not intended to act as a substitute for working with case studies of actual clients. Instead, working with narrative in therapy can be viewed as sharing case studies of the archetypes themselves as they manifest in the form of protagonists within stories. Moreover, just as it often conducive to healing to share with a client specifics of past successful outcomes, so is it to do so with archetypal referents which may resonate in their poignancy with the epicenter of the client's suffering.

### *A Chinese filial piety exemplar*

Son feels pain when mother is hurt. (adapted from Goh, 1999, p. 7).

During the Zhou Dynasty there lived a man called Zeng Shen, who was known for his moral character and fine scholarship. He was also known as a very devoted son. Zeng Shen was one of the best pupils of Confucius and was well-liked by his master. As his family was poor, Zeng Shen went home immediately after classes were over to help his mother with household chores.

'Leave that to me, Mom. Don't tire yourself', he said. 'It's OK, I can manage', replied his mother. 'You should concentrate on your studies'. Every day Zeng Shen chopped wood in the forest and then took it to sell at the market. With the money he earned in this way he helped to support the family. One day, when Zeng Shen had gone to gather firewood, two visitors came to his home. His mother asked them to wait a little while for Zeng Shen to return.

When Zeng Shen did not return after quite some time, the visitors wanted to leave. Zeng Shen's mother was reluctant to let them go away disappointed, so she thought of a way to call her son back. 'It is said that mother and son are related by blood'. Thus thinking, she bit her finger hard. At that very moment, Zeng Shen felt a sharp pain in his chest.

'Why is that I suddenly feel a grinding pain in my heart? Could it be something happening at home?' thought Zeng Shen. He hurriedly ran home. When he arrived, he asked his mother what had happened. His mother replied, 'When the two visitors had waited a long time, I bit my finger in the hope that you would feel pain and hurry back. So here you are, my son'. So, that's how it was Zeng Shen was indeed a very devoted son.

This text gives symbolic expression to the connection that exists between mother and child by amplifying it to the degree where a tangible dynamic with physical consequences is observable in the world. In this case, the bond between the two is employed by the mother to call her son home. Ironically, the activating sensation is not a thought, but physical pain. Although ripe for multiple layers of interpretation surrounding the cultural implications of what it means to be a mother and a son in traditional Chinese culture, it also touches upon another archetypal reality: separation from the mother can be feared for the loss of comfort, sustenance and security that is implied. In the physical separation between mother and son in the adult world, archetypal referent is made to the pain of separation experienced when



their symbiotic union ended in the birth of the child. In this text, pain is used to re-establish the connection.

The paradox of the mother–child relationship is clear from the outset. From the flesh of the mother is born the child, yet what two entities could be more connected in this world? From the moment of birth, however, it is separation that defines the relationship with our mothers. What comes to mind is the image of Parzival from the preceding text where it is stated that he ‘runs home to his mother, the only other person he has ever known’. This appears to be another symbolic expression of the archetypal reality affecting all children. *In utero*, it is indeed only our mother that we have ‘ever known’ for our first nine months of existence. By way of analogy, both the Parzival and Chinese texts express the intense psychological bond that endures between mother and child for the duration of their respective lives.

Although the symbiosis characterizing the fetus’s first nine months of gestation abruptly ceases upon birth, it is what occurs afterward that contributes equally to the relationship with the physical mother and the individual’s mother complex. For the child, birth marks the unfolding potential for a healthy psychological separation that eventually parallels the physical sundering that occurred at birth.

On the negative end of the spectrum representing the mother archetype can be found pitfalls and temptations to ‘return to the mother’. These may appear in both mother and child in the form of psychological regression or avoidance of reality by refusing to mature. In sum, the subordination of the individual’s growth within the sphere of the mother’s individuation is tantamount to the psychological death of the child. In cases like this, the mother views the child as an extension of her physical body and psychological will. In this relationship, absolute loyalty and submission to the will of the mother is assumed at the outset and maintained throughout the child’s adulthood. In this way, an unconscious attempt is made to artificially recreate and maintain the unique physical bond that existed between the two prior to the child’s birth.

At the other end of the spectrum, the mother identifies with the sustaining, life-giving aspects of the archetype by encouraging the child to seek out his or her true independence. For this to happen effectively, the mother must be willing for the child to mature by preparing him or her for the socialization process that begins at a young age in the form of playing with other children and eventually attending school. As should be clear by now, stories reflecting the archetype of the mother and those that shed light on the nature of the mother complex not only help clients relating to their complexes but may also be helpful for clients who want to effectively ‘mother’ their children. Conversely, many mothers unconsciously take advantage of the archetypal bond that exists with their children and use it to keep them artificially near. Perhaps motivated to avoid their fear of abandonment, mothers who employ this tactic risk stunting their children’s psychological growth.

### ***Demeter and Persephone – a mythological representation of the mother archetype***

When viewed as occupying a spectrum of qualities, the mother archetype contains all instincts seen to be nourishing and life-providing on one end and devouring on the other. The Greek goddess Demeter embodies a balance of both ends of this spectrum in that her province includes providing humanity with nature’s bounty in its agricultural forms (in Roman mythology, she is Ceres, the same root for the word ‘cereal’). When her daughter, Persephone, however, is spirited off to the underworld by the dark ruler, Hades, Demeter reveals the overprotective and murderous aspects of the mother archetype.

At first, Demeter suspects her brother Zeus has had something to do with her daughter's kidnapping. In protest, she 'shuts down' those aspects of nature that sustain the bounty of the fields. With crops and vegetation withered, humanity begins to starve. Zeus, who has a predilection towards being worshipped by humans, is not about to watch humanity die so it is he who brokers the deal between Demeter and Hades.

The compromise that is reached in this myth has Persephone taking on the role of co-ruler and queen of the underworld as wife to Hades. These duties she must fulfill during the winter months (half the year) but she is allowed to rejoin Demeter in the upper world for the spring and summer. Nature's great cyclical awakening at spring is explained here as resulting from the joy Demeter feels at being reunited with her daughter Persephone for the remaining six summer months.

The moral of the story is that the 'mother' is capable of providing life, and taking it. At first, Demeter demands her daughter be returned to her in no uncertain terms. In this act can be seen one feature of the mother archetype which seeks to keep the daughter as a 'maiden consort' to the mother. The downfall is the limitation of growth and other possibilities for the daughter. In the brokered arrangement, Persephone does come into her own maturity as a queen in her own right. Of note is that this option would have been closed to her if her mother had had her way.

## How to work with myths, fairy tales and legends in counselling

### *Choosing a myth, legend or fairy tale*

Using the model illustrated in Figure 1 as a guide, the client's presenting problem is viewed as being delivered through all the channels and filters that make up his or her conscious or ego-oriented experience. To lay the framework for listening archetypally, it is up to the therapist to pay attention to the use of language and metaphor. Are there grand themes of struggle and strife? Is the client pitting himself or herself against the world? If so, the adjective *heroic* may come to mind and the narrative modality could be described as *mythic*. This is helpful to the therapist interested in contemplating introducing the client to a parallel story of heroism found in a myth. A heroic narrative might invite telling a Western hero's story such as that of Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey* or even an updated version of the hero's journey found in the characters of Luke Skywalker or Princess Leia Organa in the 1978 film *Star Wars*. Modern and ancient examples of the myth of the hero abound in all cultures.

In the fairy tale, however, the individual normally faces adversity in the form of singular challenges in the form of personified difficult-to-control external realities that may include witches, evil spells (enchantment) and monsters. A mythic modality tends 'toward differentiation and plural possibilities, the strategy of the fairy tale mode toward singular identifications and simplification' (Miller, 1997).

A fairy tale or legend mode of narrative may be more appropriate if the client is focusing on interpersonal struggles in relationships found amongst family members, colleagues or authority figures. Again, reaching from the Western gamut of fairy tales found in compendium format in the stories of the Brothers Grimm may provide the narrative context for making connections between the archetypes informing the client's current world view.

### *Telling the story*

In a clinical setting, I ask the client to relax and perhaps even to close his or her eyes. Asking the client to breathe regularly, I then say that I am about to read a short fable and that I want him or her to pay attention to the images in the story and his or her reactions

to them. Of note, I say, is where the client ‘gets stuck’ or fixates in the narrative. In other words, at what point in the narrative does the client get distracted and begin to focus on a particular image or series of thoughts in his or her mind?

In sharing this story in groups and individuals, I ask where their attention deviates from the narrative. I have received a variety of answers to this question over the years, regarding the Parzival text, for example, ranging from the moment when Parzival sees the knights to his finding out about his deceased father and brothers from his mother. Clearly, wherever the individual’s attention goes while listening to the story indicates that something of archetypal resonance has occurred for the individual.

In this paper I have argued that enhancing one’s counselling practice beyond the confines of the client’s personal history by integrating some of the themes and concepts into the clinical use of myths, legends and fairy tales can be a powerful tool.

### Notes on contributors

Mark Greene is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counselling and Psychology at Hong Kong Shue Yan University where he teaches a range of subjects including psychopathology and the psychology of consciousness. Informed by the tradition of depth psychology, especially as developed in Carl Jung’s analytical psychology, he also practices counselling and psychotherapy in Hong Kong. His research interests lie in the symbolism of images in dreams, myths and fairy tales as well as in the domain of consciousness studies. Other published areas of research include subjective-wellbeing studies.

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