

1995

Writing Ritual and the Cultural Unconscious: The Great Mother Archetype in the Composition Classroom

Cramer Cauthen
University of Louisville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cauthen, Cramer (1995) "Writing Ritual and the Cultural Unconscious: The Great Mother Archetype in the Composition Classroom," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 1 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl19wym>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol1/iss1/10>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Writing Ritual and the Cultural Unconscious: The Great Mother Archetype in the Composition Classroom

Cover Page Footnote

Cramer R. Cauthen is a doctoral fellow in Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Louisville. His interests lie in legal rhetoric and feminist composition theory. He wishes to thank Hildy Miller; Cindy Moore, and the anonymous reviewers of the JAEPL for their insights.

Writing Ritual and the Cultural Unconscious: The Great Mother Archetype in the Composition Classroom

Cramer Cauthen

Re-vision and the Cultural Unconscious

When an archetypal motif is activated by experience in the social world, it is filled in with the contents present in the society. The form that the [motif] takes in any given culture, then, is the bridge between the universal and the historical; it is the point at which the archetype becomes particularized into its social manifestations. (Progoff, as cited in Rushing & Frentz, 1991, p. 390)

Feminist scholars contest the hegemony of “objective reason” in Western epistemology, noting that this Apollonian tradition leads to hierarchical binary oppositions, inflexible judgments, and a separation of the knower and the known (Wilshire, 1989). Although feminist practices—most notably collaboration—have become increasingly prevalent in composition classes, lacking is fundamental change toward a feminist epistemology that welcomes affective and metaphoric ways of making knowledge as well as “logical” ones. One path for this change uses myth and archetype, which make and convey knowledge in intrinsically affective, metaphoric, and communal ways. Yet, Jungian archetypal theory has thus far had very little influence on feminist composition pedagogy. My attempt here is to ground Jung’s theories more fully within feminist composition practices, and, in particular, to demonstrate that the Great Mother archetype, given its frequency and extraordinary allusiveness, is an empowering and practical resource for teachers looking for alternatives to Apollonian, objectivist pedagogies.

Two common arguments arise against using Jungian archetypes in a feminist context. The first is an *ad hominem* protest against Jung’s social ideas about women, which seem to have reflected “the general prejudices of his time, his views often being no different than those of any other Swiss “burgher” (Samuels, 1985, p. 215). The second is that the archetypes are essentialized, ahistorical and apolitical, and thus unresponsive to the cultural needs of contemporary society.

We may, I think, safely dismiss the first argument, for although we cannot absolve Jung of his prejudices, we can read through them and can use in feminist inquiries those aspects of his theories that are appropriate. Thus psychologist Jean S. Bolen (1984) says that Jungian and feminist perspectives, when taken

Cramer R. Cauthen is a doctoral fellow in Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Louisville. His interests lie in legal rhetoric and feminist composition theory. He wishes to thank Hildy Miller, Cindy Moore, and the anonymous reviewers of the JAEPL for their insights.

together, "provide binocular vision into the psychology of women" (p. 4).

We can find a response to the second argument in the work of rhetoricians Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz (1991), who, like Bolen, advocate reading Jung in synthesis. Their central assertion is that "the external world of historical conditions and the internal world of psychological processes are separate, but interrelated, domains of human experience" (p. 386). Therefore, they postulate a psychic structure that they call "the cultural unconscious," which is comprised of Jung's collective archetypes "and the repressed contradictions from oppressive social formations" (p. 391). One of our tasks as writers and teachers is to identify these contradictions and work against the forces promulgating them. So accessing this cultural unconscious, learning an alternative history of human spirituality, and finding this history reflected within us, in our personal stories, in dreams, and in our relation to the natural world once seen as the body of the Great Mother, seems to me essential. The benefits of studying the cultural unconscious in the composition classroom lie in what Adrienne Rich (1979) called "writing as re-vision...the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new cultural direction" (p. 35).

Some of the most useful revisions of Jung's theories appear in a 1985 collection edited by Estella Lauter and Carol S. Rupprecht, *Feminist Archetypal Theory*. In their introduction to the book, Lauter and Rupprecht summarize the feminist objections to the Platonic, ahistorical aspects of Jung's theories. They then ask the central question of how the concept of archetype remains useful to feminist theory. Their answer is that archetype works when it is validated by women's lived experiences:

We need a theory that will allow us to take seriously the patterns we find in women's thoughts and images while preventing exaltation of any detected patterns. In such a theory the archetype cannot be defined as an image whose content is frozen but must be thought of as a process, a tendency to form and re-form images in relation to certain kinds of repeated experiences. (p. 16)

In search of these processes Lauter (1985) examined visualizations of the mother by women artists' to see if there was a viable archetypal pattern in them. She noted that women artists prior to the twentieth century were almost wholly restricted by patriarchal conventions in their depictions of mother figures. But more recent artists have been relatively free "to explore the internal stresses of mothering in the modern world" (p. 53). This stresses what we might define as manifestations of the repressed contradictions in the cultural unconscious. Citing among others the highly varied works of Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, and Camille Billop, Lauter concluded that the Great Mother archetype may be both artistically and politically useful if properly contextualized, and that "[t]he concept of the archetype could be, in the hands of feminists, a way of recovering and revaluing women's experiences, of discovering nodal points in women's history" (p. 80). Adrienne Rich's 1976 book, *Of Woman Born*, is a lengthy meditation on these "nodal points" and on the contradictions in our culture's view of motherhood (Christ, 1980).

Composition students, I believe, can isolate similar ways in which the Great

Mother archetype is culturally manifested in their lives. These ways may be inspired by previous artistic or literary works, but they need not be. What is essential is to maintain a balance between the cultural and the archetypal. As Naomi Goldenberg (1979a) pointed out, we must not deny the necessity for myth, although we are free to reject any *particular manifestation*:

[W]hat binds us together as human beings is not, in fact, the *contents* of our religious and psychic imagery but rather the continual *process* of producing and reflecting on imagery. It is not necessary to cling to past documents of the imaginal process to maintain religious communities. Instead, we could build communities around the observing and sharing of the imaginal process alive in all of us. (p. 65)

The composition classroom is, of course, precisely where such communities can be built. The advantages of the Great Mother archetype in building them lies in the paradox of its ubiquity and its relative unfamiliarity: To many modern students, it would not be a "past document" and thus static and fetishized; but all students might be shown how to recognize it within their own imaginal processes.

Dualism, Difference, and Mythopoetic Language

Because we have separated humanity from nature, subject from object, values from analysis, knowledge from myth, and universities from the universe, it is enormously difficult for anyone but a poet or a mystic to understand what is going on in the holistic and mythopoeic [sic] thought of Ice Age humanity. (Thompson, as cited in Sjoog & Mor, 1991, p. 79)

The history and attributes of the Great Mother archetype may be a particularly valuable means of bringing feminist concerns into the classroom and using them newly to engage student writers. By studying the archetype, they can become poets and mystics and therefore begin to collapse the hierarchical binaries that Thompson described. The first step in doing so is simply to realize that the power of patriarchy is based in Western dualism; as Christ and Plaskow (1979) pointed out, any dualism immediately becomes a hierarchy and "a model for domination" (p. 5).

The Great Mother Goddess originally combined within herself the attributes of what we now call "good" and "evil"; these attributes were later separated into the defining characteristics of two opposing deities (Neumann, 1955, p. 12). It would be valuable for students to trace the beginnings of Western dualism to the transformation from one deity to two. But it is most important to see, as Rich (1979) did, that dualism begins in the subjugation of woman to man, which becomes a prototype for further oppression.

Studying the history of the Great Mother reveals these derivative oppressions as well as the aboriginal one. For instance, Pamela Berger (1985) showed repeatedly that the struggle in Europe between the Goddess religion and Christianity was as much a class struggle as a theological one, with the rural poor hanging

on to parts of the old beliefs despite the legal and financial power of the Church. Patriarchal dualism can also be found when we examine racism and European colonialism. Not only is there considerable evidence that the worship of the Great Mother began in Africa (Sjoo & Mor, 1991, pp. 21-32) but, as Neumann (1955) demonstrated, our "natural" fear of darkness, encoded later into racial prejudice, was unknown to goddess worshippers (p. 212).

Given the position that contemporary culture takes on the poor, people of color and women, and Earth itself, one of the most important opposites to collapse is that between the present and the past—that past rendered to us by historian Stone (1990) and Sjoo and Mor (1991). As these authors envisioned, the very idea of a goddess, a unifying cultural symbol, subsumes polar opposites and unites very different ideas and experiences. Ena Campbell (1982) noted a contemporary example of this unifying power of the Great Mother in her study of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who combines the Christian Virgin and Aztec earth goddess, Tonantsi. The Virgin of Guadalupe therefore mitigates class differences and "integrates the folk and mainstream cultures of Mexico" (p. 5). She has become a politically-motivating symbol of the entire Mexican people, as Campbell showed by citing the cry with which Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla began the revolution against Spain: "Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe and down with bad government!" (p. 9).

Students may find an analogous synthesis in their own lives; the very experience of motherhood, and, if we can but recall it, our infancy, discharges the illusion of dualism by the intermingling of mother and child. The best way to recall these experiences and to generate further meanings from the present and historical constructions of motherhood is through archetypal knowledge, which, Jung (1969) stated

leads to a restoration or *apocatastasis* of the lives of [a woman's] ancestors, who now, through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future. An experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her. At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. All ritual preoccupation with archetypes ultimately has this aim and this result. (p. 188)

One of my hopes as a student of the Great Mother archetype and a teacher is that archetypal knowledge lead us to *enantiodramia*. In turn, *enantiodramia*, by which Jung meant that everything eventually becomes its opposite, returns us to the mythopoetic language that Nelle Morton (1979) characterized as one of the casualties of the patriarchal culture. Sjoo and Mor (1991), reading Robert Graves' description in *The White Goddess* of the original, matrifocal language of poetry, describe it as nondualistic.

Paradox and ambiguity are not exorcised as "illogical demons," but are felt and synthesized....Subjective and objective merge into an experience of cosmic oneness. Such a thought mode, of course, does

not build huge political and corporate empires like Rome or General Motors. For these purposes men have devised a language of logical precision, in which words can be used like knives to chop up one continuous life into mechanically unrelated parts; in which the visible—i.e., the intellectually possessible—dimension is stressed at the expense of the aural, tactile, affective, and mystic dimensions. (p. 41)

Practical Applications

To expect a mythopoetic language of college writers may seem implausible. However, various methods based on both Jungian and feminist practices provide a beginning. All these methods have in common Rich's (1979) concept of "re-vision."

Most initial exercises in description emphasize the visual dimension that Sjoog and Mor (1991) noted. An exercise in affective description presents students with a number of symbols of the Great Mother: the moon, fire, all bodies of water, volcanoes, wells, blood, lions, sows, stones, mares, cats, cranes, apples, seeds, the cycle of the seasons (Starhawk, 1969, p. 263), chrysanthemums, shells, chalices, and roses (Spretnak, 1991). Students are asked to select particular symbols from the list and describe their feelings about them. The writers are able to find parallels among these feelings by keeping in mind the fact that the symbols—and the beings who observe them—are interdependent subjects within a larger unity.

I have adapted another beginning exercise from the work of Graves and Becker (1994) who use the river archetype. They begin by dealing with the physical source of the archetype, asking students to brainstorm a list of words describing the river near their college. The students brainstorm a list descriptive of "the inner...abstract" river, listen to music and poetry about rivers, and begin an extended text (pp. 58–59). This procedure works equally well with the mother archetype because a class full of students embodies a variety of attitudes toward mothering. For brainstorming, variations on this procedure might include particular images of the mother—possibly contrasting "traditional" representations with some of Lauter's (1985) examples—and examinations of the motherly aspects of the self.

Collaboration is also important in the feminist archetypal classroom; not only can it decenter individual authority, but it can also give rise to shared archetypal images. Goldenberg (1979b) described a women's dream workshop in which the dreamer first relates as much of her dream as she can remember. Then she closes her eyes and is questioned about it, extending the dream landscape spatially and/or imagining herself as other characters in her dream (p. 224).

This technique works well in the classroom, and demonstrates to students how the cultural unconscious as a whole can be revisioned in a concrete example of the combination of social and archetypal knowledge-making (Hillman, 1975). Another collaborative exercise asks students to revision an earlier religious or mythic text, paying particular attention to how binaries might be

avoided, and to write a reflection on how the process has involved them. Students might be advised here that many myths and religious stories have previously been revisioned, most notably the Eden myth, in which, as Spretnak (1991) pointed out, tree, serpent, and Eve herself have seen their original, celebratory meanings inverted (p. 140).

This last example raises the problem of student resistance, which can be minimized sometimes by using avatars of the Great Mother that do not directly challenge conventional Western belief. Jean Bolen's work (1984) is useful here, and is one of the most powerful ways for writing students to use the archetype to contemplate their own lives. Bolen used the qualities of Greek goddesses: the assertiveness of Hera, the creativity of Aphrodite, the wisdom of Athena, to examine both the interior and temporal lives of women. Furthermore, she encouraged her readers to use these goddesses as models, saying that, for instance, the continued practice of meditation can bring on the influence of Hestia, the most "spiritual" of the Olympian goddesses, or that excursions in the wilderness may evoke Artemis, the Huntress (pp. 31–32). She also warned that abdicating the choice of models allows "an instinctual or an archetypal pattern [to] take over" (p. 285). All told, she saw the knowledge of goddesses as a means of becoming more aware of our choices and our freedoms; writing students can use this knowledge to evaluate their previous decisions, to rewrite them, and to focus their future choices.

Another challenging project asks students to do in writing the same thing that Lauter (1985) described woman artists as doing, imaging the mother as numinous and frighteningly bound by society at the same time. A somewhat similar attempt could be made to examine, perhaps in consultation with Stone (1990), how the Great Mother has been (disastrously) revisioned in the past, and how she may yet be revisioned to redress the balance. This could inculcate the idea that revision is a continuing process.

It also seems important to study a particular goddess in depth. My focus for such a study would be Inanna, the Sumerian Queen of Heaven, because, as Sylvia Brinton Perera (1981) characterized her, she "provides a many-faceted symbolic image, a wholeness pattern, of the feminine beyond the merely maternal" (p. 16). Inanna is extraordinarily allusive; she is goddess of the harvest, of rain, of borders, of war, of sexual love; she is the evening star, healer and songwriter. Suitably, the main story focusing on her, "The Descent of Inanna" (Perera, 1981), is also extremely rich in symbolism.

As do the more familiar stories of Orpheus, and Demeter and Kore, Inanna's story is that of a journey into the world of the dead, and thus serves as "a paradigm for the life-enhancing descent into the abyss of the dark goddess and out again" (Perera, 1981, p. 13). My own interpretations use this paradigm for purposes of writerly introspection. Certainly we may see the myth of descent into the underworld as a metaphor not only for psychological insight and health, but for *any* difficult attempt at making knowledge, and, specifically, during the writing process. This process, in my experience and the experiences I have observed in my students, begins with straightforward expectations which are complicated by the gates (and gatekeepers) we must pass. There is confusion and pain in the process, but only when the seed dies can it grow.

Ritual and Writing

Teachers do not generally think of the composition classroom as a place for mythopoetic language and spirituality. Here again, however, the Great Mother archetype can act as an agent to synthesize apparent opposites. Sjoog and Mor (1991) affirm that for the women and men who knew the Great Mother even the most quotidian aspects of life were spiritual:

Religious rites were combined with industry. Women's religions were organic, a unity of daily life tasks and cosmic meaning. Among the women weavers of the matrifocal Navaho, for example, this is still so.

The women experience themselves as being directly inspired by the Great Spider Woman, the original weaver of the universe. They use no set patterns and feel no separation between art (sacred) and craft (secular, profane). (p. 51)

The craft of writing becomes energized by spirituality if we revision our ideas of subjectivity into a feminist archetypal model that does not separate the knower and the known, intellect and affect. The student who learns through the Great Mother archetype to observe herself and the external world as interdependent learns to observe clearly and lovingly, and to see even the simplest writing task as a path toward sacred knowledge. ☺

References

- Berger, P. (1985). *The goddess obscured*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bolen, J. S. (1984). *Goddesses in everywoman: A new psychology of women*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Campbell, E. (1982). The Virgin of Guadalupe and the female self image: A Mexican case history. In J. Preston (Ed.), *Mother worship: Theme and variations* (pp. 5-24). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Christ, C. P. (1980). *Diving deep and surfacing: Women writers on spiritualquest*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Christ, C. P., & Plaskow, J. (1979). Introduction. In C. P. Christ & J. Plaskow (Eds.), *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion* (pp. 1-17). San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Goldenberg, N. R. (1979a). *Changing of the gods: Feminism and the end of traditional religions*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Goldenberg, N. R. (1979b). Dreams and fantasies as sources of revelation: Feminist appropriations of Jung. In C. P. Christ & J. Plaskow (Eds.), *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader* (pp. 219-227). San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Graves, R. L., & Becker, S. M. (1994). Let the river run: Exploring personal archetypes through writing. In A. G. Brand & R. L. Graves (Eds.), *Presence of mind: Writing and the domain beyond the cognitive* (pp. 53-64). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Jung, C. G. (1969). Psychological aspects of the Kore. In *The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (pp. 182-203). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lauter, E. (1985). Visual images by women: A test case for the theory of archetypes. In E. Lauter & C. S. Rupprecht (Eds.), *Feminist archetypal theory: Interdisciplinary re-visions of Jungian thought* (pp. 46–83). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Lauter, E., & Rupprecht, C. S. (1985). Introduction. In E. Lauter & C. S. Rupprecht (Eds.), *Feminist archetypal theory: Interdisciplinary re-visions of Jungian thought* (pp. 1–44). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Morton, N. (1979). The dilemma of celebration. In C. P. Christ & J. Plaskow (Eds.), *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion* (pp. 159–166). San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Neumann, E. (1955). *The great mother: An analysis of the archetype* (R. Manheim, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Perera, S. B. (1981). *Descent to the Goddess: A way of initiation for women*. Toronto: Inner City Books.

Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born*. New York: Bantam Books.

Rich, A. (1979). When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision. In *On lies, secrets, and silence: Selected prose 1966–1978* (pp. 33–49). New York: W. W. Norton.

Rushing, J. H., & Frentz, T. S. (1991). Integrating ideology and archetype in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77, 385–406.

Samuels, A. (1985). *Jung and the post-Jungians*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sjoo, M., & Mor, B. (1991). *The great cosmic mother: Rediscovering the religion of the earth* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Spretnak, C. (1991). *States of grace: The recovery of meaning in the postmodern age*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Starhawk. (1979). Witchcraft and women's culture. In C. P. Christ & J. Plaskow (Eds.), *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion* (pp. 259–268). San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Stone, M. (1990). *When god was a woman*. New York: Dorset Press.

Wilshire, D. (1989). The uses of myth, image, and the female body in re-visioning knowledge. In A. M. Jaggar & S. R. Bordo (Eds.), *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing* (pp. 92–114). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.